Lucy Grig: Popular Culture and the End of Antiquity in Southern Gaul, c. 400–550. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press 2024. XI, 260 pp., 7 ill., 6 maps. £ 85.00/$ 110.00. ISBN: 978-1-108-49144-0.

In this meticulous and briskly written book, Lucy Grig conducts a close regional and temporal study of cultural dynamics and change that were at work across the late antique Mediterranean world more broadly. She explores the interactions between, on the one hand, the clearly visible, heavily-imposed, 'official' cultural dictates of the late- and post-Roman state and the imperially-supported Christian church, and, on the other, the near-invisible, non-official (but not necessarily anti-official) practices of people who were constituents but not agents of these institutions – in other words, dominant versus popular culture, in an age of totalising ecclesiastical cultural ambition and rapidly revolving military-political control.

In her choice of topic, Grig builds upon several healthy fields of research. Analytically, she constructs her model for discussion on the now substantial bibliography of studies of popular culture as an element of subaltern studies in history, from Mikhail Bakhtin through to more recent works within the Classics discipline, informed by models of major Anthropologists and Sociologists including Claude Lévi-Strauss and Pierre Bourdieu, and with particular attention to the 1980s work of Stuart Hall. These models are used informatively, not dogmatically; one can see how earlier discussions have sparked curiosity and questions in the author, rather than create a restrictive template to reproduce. As her object of research, Grig examines southern Gaul (roughly modern Provence and part of eastern Occitanie), with inevitable attention to the leading city of Arles, for the century and a half during which the region moved from direct Roman imperial rule to incorporation into the post-imperial states, first Visigothic Aquitania, then Ostrogothic Italy, and finally Frankish Gaul. The last two to three decades have seen considerable research centred on or overlapping with this region, which Grig uses fruitfully: William Klingshirn on the Gallic episcopate, Lisa Bailey on Gallic sermon literature, Kim Bowes and Cam Grey on the late Roman peasantry and countryside, and the extensive French- and English-language archaeological literature, among others.

Late antique southern Gaul ('Late Antiquity' is used here in its general UK and European sense as 'late- and immediately post-Roman' rather than its

wider North American sense) is a time and place for which there is, if not an abundance, at least an adequacy of source material, both literary and archaeological. The literary sources come almost entirely from the growth of the church there and elsewhere in Gaul, with its attendant production of functional texts (letters, council records, hagiography used to complement liturgy for institutional commemoration). These sources, in turn, are part of a wider epiphenomenon of the fragmentation of the western half of the Roman empire, namely the first appearance of texts written in the former Roman western provinces, all of which (except parts of Gaul) are virtually silent to us prior to the withdrawal of imperial rule (it should give us pause that the best, indeed the only, substantial contemporary narrative source of the major events of the Roman west in the fifth-century comes from Gallaecia, in the *Chronicle* of Hydatius). The archaeological sources, several decades of digs and reports on both cities and countryside in southern France (some of it courtesy of TGV expansion rescue digs), inform the early background chapters where they are usefully surveyed (Chapter 2, "Urban Contexts for Popular Culture in an Age of Transformation," pp. 36–72, and Chapter 3, "Popular Culture, Society and Economy: The Countryside in Transition in Late Antiquity," pp. 73–109) and help build a fuller picture of economic life and change in the period. Although, in the main argument of the book, Archaeology primarily serves its once-traditional role as handmaid to History, the discussion is fuller for being well anchored to the *realia* of growth and contraction of urban sites, accumulating household detritus, and the size of shepherds' housing. Holding the textual and material evidence in mind simultaneously is valuable; for example, the well-worn military-political narrative of rule (imperial, Gothic, Frankish) can be seen as a function of the underlying geography of the region, a crossroad between northern Italy, Atlantic Gaul, and northern Gaul; while the casual appearance of lacustrine and pastoral industries in hagiographic texts similarly reflects the region's underlying geography of Mediterranean coastal river delta with relative proximity to the Alps.

Grig's choice of temporal and geographical focus, however, is not dictated by the limited availability of evidence, but is motivated by awareness that the period is one of significant transition, and the desire to investigate whether popular culture played a part in directing that mutation, alongside the well-known military and religious drivers of change. It's an ambitious question. For all the (relative) availability of evidence, the topic of popular culture

in antiquity itself generally presents what weaker souls might consider a wretched dearth of material. Popular culture has been a white whale for some historians since the middle of last century; the idea that subaltern beliefs and behaviour can be excavated offers the prospect of seeing a history of Europe other than the familiar one dominated by statist institutions. There is an inherent social force in pursuing the topic. Grig is to be praised for her insistence on discussing her topic as a class phenomenon, a reality, as she notes, often and ingenuously omitted from much recent scholarship. Widely-adopted concepts of genuine analytical value, such as 'agency,' too often serve to elide the fact that the late and post-Roman world presents a class-defined society as red in tooth and claw as there has ever been (Grig is similarly prudent to give short shrift to the scholarship of ethnicity in the post-Roman west, wisely citing Guy Halsall; p. 53).

There are few source-types that we may consider as documentary materials or artefacts produced by popular practices in antiquity, independent from one or another official and institutional agent; the obvious exception, graffiti, is abundant in Rome but rare or missing from the provinces. Accommodating this absence, Grig's discussion focuses on communal entertainment as a discernible venue for the display of popular culture, in particular the rise of communal, "bottom-up" (p. 71) celebrations that, she argues, took the place of the officially-approved and managed public entertainments of theatre, circus, and amphitheatre. These entertainments are seen by us entirely from 'outside,' largely through the medium of episcopal sermons. The climax of the book is Chapter 6 ("The Kalends of January: The Persistence of Popular Culture," pp. 173–218), a study of the annual Kalends festivities as described and denounced in the sermons of bishop Caesarius of Arles (469/470–542), a figure perhaps even more commanding in recent scholarship than he was in the Gallic church of his time (the "villain rather than [the] hero" [p. 223] of Grig's discussion). The description of Kalends activities by Caesarius and in other comparanda (Augustine and his contemporary Cappadocian bishop Asterius of Amaseia) comprises both outright condemnation and, as an argumentative device, dramatic representation of revellers, "ventriloquism" (p. 211) as Grig puts it.

Such a source clearly has many pitfalls; it also has some specific virtues, well exploited by Grig, for the sermon was a live performance in which the local church leader interacted with his congregation, which we can imagine largely consisting of his secular peers, that is, the elite, landowning class. In some

of the most interesting pages of the book, Grig analyses the push and pull between Caesarius and his elite audience, as he sought to disengage his peers from what he constructed as the lower-class, rural, crass fun (*scurrilitas*, pp. 129–131) of the annual misbehaviour. The Kalends events included the invasion of the urban space by some of the rural population, and were a public festivity of inversions, such as animal costumes and cross-dressing, "practices and behaviours [that] made noisily visible real-life fissures of social and economic inequality" (p. 212). Just what these revels achieved is the obscure grail. Grig considers them in a variety of anthropological interpretations ranging from ritualised performance of social order to means of social healing (p. 203); an earlier observation, quoting Leslie Dossey's study of North African social relations,[1] is worth emphasising: "'what really disrupted power structures in the countryside was not opposition movements against the Roman government [...] but rather a desire by rural populations to participate in the same material culture, community structures, and intellectual currents as were affecting urban society'" (p. 77; the same is true for the relationship between the empire and its economically underdeveloped northern neighbours). What offended Caesarius and other bishops was partly the apparent breach of moral boundaries, but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, of social and class boundaries; revellers, for example, expected to enter the homes of the wealthy and demand hospitality or gifts, including money. Texts refer to elite homeowners, including high officials, tossing out money as gifts, in a show of bonhomie to the partygoers barely concealing anxiety at the risk of violence, the dynamics of trick or treat. Caesarius, Grig argues, condemned the *rusticitas* of the lower-class revellers as much to dissuade elite landowners from sanctioning the activities, by apparent good-natured tolerance of the 'fun,' as from concern for the moral turpitude of the participants themselves. Grig describes this as a triangularization between ecclesiastical elites, secular elites, and non-elites; as both the church and secular elites were large landowners, this dynamic may also be seen as one half of the elite trying to induce the other to present a common front to the underclass.

Grig's discussion of sources is fastidious. Texts are considered with an open-eyed and frank acknowledgement of the limitations posed by their genres and functions (e.g. the 'cut and paste' construction of sermons, preserving rhetorically useful but historically misleading anachronisms), and analysed

1 L. Dossey: Peasant and Empire in Christian North Africa. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2010 (The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 47), p. 174.

simultaneously against historical and anthropological models for the function of popular culture and textual comparanda from other regions of Late Antiquity (with side trips to earlier Roman and Greek antiquity and to medieval and early modern Europe). The limits of comparison are transparently noted (e.g. several aspects of Kalends behaviour mentioned in comparison texts lack confirmation for southern Gaul in Caesarius' sermons: specific Kalends songs, p. 210; outright violence, p. 211; explicit civic participation, p. 214; demands for gifts, p. 215). The most fundamental tool of analysis, however, is "reading against the grain" (p. 34 and passim), the inversion (ironically) of bishops' critiques in an attempt to reconstruct the actions and motivations both of their declassé *bêtes noires* and of their audiences. It is an approach that rests upon the author's historical judgement and instinct, and requires, as here, sensitivity, wide reading, restraint, and transparency.

For a somewhat different sort of study, a more organic analysis of individual passages within the literary context of their texts might, perhaps, render additional insights. An example (noted solely because of the reviewer's personal interests) appears, more or less as a framing device, in Chapter 3, the useful and typically thorough survey of social and economic changes in the rural environment of southern Gaul during Late Antiquity. Grig cites, as a 'case study,' a brief passage of the *Vita* of Hilary, one of Caesarius' predecessors as bishop of Arles (401–449). In it, Hilary visits shepherds on La Crau plateau, in the northern hinterland of Arles, an area exploited for centuries for extensive winter pasturing of sheep and goats (as also in modern times). Hilary visited while traversing the region, before Easter, and performed baptisms and gave instruction to the *pastores*. It is one of three, fleeting passages Grig discusses in which we see the bishop interacting with the primary industries that formed the economic support for the Arles region. The other two passages show, first, the bishop multitasking by working fishing nets while dictating texts to a scribe, an indication of the nutritional importance of the lakes and coastal lagoons to the south of Arles (and reminiscent perhaps of the widespread practice, in later centuries, of knitting as a profitable use of hands while engaged in other activities); and, secondly, Hilary's inspection of the 'machinery' of saltworks, another important, ancient industry arising from Arles placement near sea coast, river delta, and plain.

The fishing net and salt-work incidents occur in a short section in the middle of the *Vita* outlining the bishop's manner of life and conduct of his office, where they underscore Hilary's busyness and humility. The account of his

visit to the sheep pastures would seem to fit naturally into this section as a third example, but it is placed instead in a quite different context: in the peroration of the text, after the narrative conclusion of Hilary's death, burial, and (presumed) entry into heaven. The incident interrupts, both thematically and grammatically, a series of vocative, rhetorical, and conventional Christian praises of Hilary, leading up to a plea to the saint in heaven to pray for his congregation; the anecdote, with its abrupt change in register, intrudes between the praises and the plea. Rather jarringly, this unusually specific incident (dated, at least by the liturgical calendar, and broadly localised both geographically and socially) briefly brings the discussion back to gritty earth before returning to salvific heaven. The passage is tantalising to a modern economic historian but would surely have been bemusing to a contemporary audience (especially if the text was orally performed, as may have been the case with late antique *vitae*). Why? Is the passage an awkward, late interpolation? A clunky play on the bishop's role as spiritual *pastor*, clumsily drawing on the everyday reality that his see lay in a sheep-rearing area (the conventional image appears earlier in the text once, with no subtlety, in the account of Hilary's episcopal elevation)? Or was the wool industry still so important to the region (archaeological indications of retraction notwithstanding) that a strategically-placed 'shout out' to the owners of the flocks and their bergeries was prudent? What was the purpose of the trip? One suggestion is that it was part of a regular pastoral visit to rural parishes ("au cours de tournées pastorales dans les campagnes"[2]), but the passage assumes a unique incident. The timing, before Easter Sunday, was of course liturgically significant as the customary time for baptism to be performed (and so perhaps an unusual time for the bishop to be absent from his see). The date range of Easter, however, also falls between winter, when the Mistral makes the open plain of La Crau potentially deadly, and early summer, when transhumance to the southern Alps (now thought to have been practiced during antiquity) was undertaken; pre-Easter was a likely time to find owners of the flocks and bergeries, not only their hired labourers, in situ. The oddity of the passage suggests we are missing something significant, perhaps another shard of evidence for the relationship of bishop and rural areas.

2 L. Pietri/M. Heijmans (eds.): Prosopographie chrétienne du Bas-Empire. Vol. 4.1: La Gaule chrétienne (314–614), A–H. Paris 2013, pp. 998–1007, Hilarius 3, at p. 1006.

So much for the aside. What is clear is that Grig's study is characterised by attentiveness, honesty, and good sense. What it has to say about the social life of the period is carefully weighed and precise, and therefore valuable.

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Andrew Gillett: Rezension zu: Lucy Grig: Popular Culture and the End of Antiquity in Southern Gaul, c. 400–550. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press 2024. In: Plekos 27, 2025, S. 463–469 (URL: https://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2025/r-grig.pdf).
