Introduction

At the end of the first century BCE, the freedman Gaius Caecilius Isidorus left at his death a patrimony consisting of 4,116 slaves, 3,600 oxen, 257,000 other livestock and 60 million sesterces (HS) in cash.[1] He further gave instructions that more than HS 1 million was to be spent on his funeral. This latter sum alone was enough to satisfy the legal minimum wealth requirement for a man to be eligible to stand for senatorial office. But Isidorus was certainly not a senator. His legal status as an ex-slave prevented him from holding political office and thus membership of the senatorial order.[2]

About a century later, Cornelia Severa pledged estates worth more than a million sesterces to the imperial *alimenta* scheme at Veleia (a small town on the northern slopes of the Apennines).[3] Severa's pledge shows that she also possessed the wealth required for entry into the Roman senate. But like Isidorus, Severa was not a senator, as political office was a male prerequisite in the Roman world.[4]

While Isidorus and Severa were excluded from political office on the grounds of their legal status and gender respectively, there is also evidence of wealthy freeborn men remaining outside the senatorial order. In the process of recommending a potential husband for the daughter of a friend, Pliny the Younger describes the father of the young man, Minicius Macrinus, who preferred to remain an *eques* even though Vespasian had offered him to become a senator with praetorian rank.[5] Vespasian's offer implies that Minicius owned more than the senatorial wealth minimum but nonetheless remained an equestrian.[6]

These three examples provide separate glimpses on how wealth and political officeholding did not always perfectly coincide in the Roman world. In this book, I will show that these are the isolated symptoms of a more

1 Plin. *HN* 33.135.
2 According to the *Lex Visellia* (*Cod. Iust.* 9.21.1). See also Mouritsen 2011: 73–75.
3 *TAV* 31, with Beigel 2015: 84–88. See also Appendix B.
4 Cohen 2023: 139–41.
5 Plin. *Ep.* 1.14 with Sherwin-White 1966: 117–20.
6 For other examples of equestrians refusing senatorial offices, see Bodel 2015. For Augustus forcing equestrians holding the senatorial census to take on senatorial tribuneships, see Cass. Dio 54.30.2 with Nicolet 1984: 104.

structural feature of Roman society. I argue that there was a systematic and significant surplus of people (which included not only women and freedmen but also freeborn adult men) with the requisite wealth for political office but who nonetheless did not hold the corresponding office and rank.

Wealth and politics were intimately connected in the Roman world.[7] The political system was explicitly timocratic in the sense that Aristotle gives to this term; minimum wealth requirements were legally stipulated for obtaining and holding political offices.[8] Only men whose wealth exceeded these census qualifications could stand for office. The value of the qualification depended on the office. For example, a higher qualification applied to the senatorial offices at Rome than to the municipal offices in the Italian towns.

The Roman timocratic system had a long history.[9] Both Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus ascribe the introduction of timocratic principles to the sixth-century-BCE king Servius Tullius, who subdivided the Roman adult male citizen population over five property classes.[10] The membership of these different classes invoked certain military and fiscal obligations as well as political privileges.

The later Imperial census qualifications for political offices might have been derived from these early property classes. For example, Dominic Rathbone proposes that the commonly assumed 'standard' property minimum of HS 100,000 required of Italian decurions in the Imperial period was ultimately derived from the census qualification of the first class of 100,000 asses in the Servian system.[11] Similarly, Claude Nicolet notes that the consuls of 214 BCE used an ad-hoc census threshold of 1 million asses to distinguish those members of the first class who had to provide additional slaves for the Roman fleet.[12] According to Nicolet, this ad-hoc threshold might be related to either the later senatorial census minimum of HS 1 million (as they were numerical equivalents) or the equestrian census qualification of HS 400,000 (as they were nominal equivalents). Even though these direct quantitative links between the different qualifications remain conjectural, it is very likely that they were related at least phenomenologically.

There were also practical reasons for the need to stipulate a minimum property for Roman political officeholders.[13] Roman magistracies were

7 Verboven 2007: 863, Alföldy 1988: 17–19.
8 Arist. *EN* 8.10, Jacques 1984: 329, Duncan-Jones 1982: 3–4.
9 Nicolet 1976a: 20–30.
10 Livy 1.42–43, Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 4.16–21, *cf.* Cic. *Rep.* 2.39.
11 Rathbone 1993: 130–31. Note however that the Servian census was in asses and not in sesterces.
12 Nicolet 1976a: 26, Liv. 24.11.7.
13 Mackie 1983: 55–56.

traditionally unpaid.[14] A candidate therefore needed an independent and sufficient source of income to sustain himself and his family during his term of office. Moreover, Roman magistracies were associated with many expenses, including, for example, entry fees (*summae*), the organisation of games, the construction of monuments and various other civic services (*munera*).[15] It was therefore in the interest of the community that a magistrate could bear all these financial burdens.

Another reason why Roman magistrates were required to possess wealth is that their property acted as a security against maladministration or misappropriation of public funds.[16] This becomes evident from the Caesarean charters of Tarentum (a *municipium* in southern Italy) and Urso (a *colonia* in Spain), as well as the Flavian charters of the *municipia* of Irni and Malaca in Spain. All these charters explicitly stipulate that candidate magistrates are to pledge a security for their handling of public funds.[17]

Finally, in Roman ideology, members of the elite were expected to excel in every dimension of status acquisition. Wealth was one of these dimensions. The census qualifications were thus a formalisation of an aspect of the Roman aristocratic value system.[18] This was also encoded in Roman morals. Even though wealth was no guarantee of a moral compass, the lack of wealth was seen as a serious threat to good morality.[19] As a result, wealth was a source of prestige. Restricting officeholding to the wealthy thus contributed to the prestige of the office and the authority of its holder.[20]

The census qualifications for holding political office in the Imperial period were substantial amounts. The 'typical' wealth requirement for an Italian municipal officer (decurion) was HS 100,000.[21] At an average annual rate of return of 6 per cent, such wealth would be able to cover the mean annual expenditure of about sixteen persons.[22] The minimum property of a Roman senator (who had to own at least HS 1 million) could provide for about 160 people.

14 Millar 1986: 303.
15 Talbert 1984: 54–66, Abbott and Johnson 1926: 62.
16 Garnsey 1970: 243–44.
17 *Lex Tar.* 2, *Lex Urs.* 13 (with Caballos Rufino 2006: 181–208) and 91 (with Caballos Rufino 2006: 208–23), *Lex Irn.* = *Lex Mal.* 60.
18 Morley 2019: 9, Tac. *Ann.* 2.33. For a discussion on the changing social aspects of (senatorial) wealth in the first centuries CE, see Maiuro 2019.
19 Mouritsen 2022: 87–94.
20 Mackie 1983: 55–56.
21 See, for further discussion, Chapter, 6.
22 Rate of return: Duncan-Jones 1982: 33 note 3. Mean annual *per-capita* expenditure of 620 kg wheat equivalent: Scheidel and Friesen 2009: 64–69. Average Italian wheat price of HS 4 per *modius* (= 6.55 kg of wheat): Duncan-Jones 1982: 145–46, de Ligt 2012: 197 note 13, Rathbone 2009: 307. But see also Mrozek 1975: 10–15.

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If a person satisfied the census qualification and several other formal criteria related to, among others, citizenship, gender and legal status, he could stand for office (the senatorial offices at Rome or the curial offices in the municipalities of Italy). If he was successful in obtaining one of the entry-level offices (at Rome the quaestorship, in the municipalities either the quaestorship or aedileship), he became after his term of office of typically one year a member for life of the corresponding council (the senate at Rome or the municipal council of one of the Italian towns).[23] An alternative route was to be admitted directly into these councils through adlection by the emperor or the municipal council, respectively. The latter route was probably more common on the curial level than on the senatorial.[24]

Membership of the Roman equestrian order (which fell in between the senatorial and curial orders with respect to wealth, status etc.) worked slightly differently.[25] Even though there are several strong indications that satisfying the equestrian census qualification of HS 400,000 might have sufficed for acquiring equestrian rank in the Imperial period, it is possible that some kind of approval of the emperor was also required. The *equites* (knights) did not form an officeholding elite as the senators and decurions. Equestrian offices did exist but were reserved for the men who already held equestrian rank. Things thus worked the other way around for the *equites* compared to senators and decurions; equestrian rank was required to be eligible for holding equestrian office, while senatorial and curial rank were obtained by filling the corresponding office. The result was a wider equestrian order (including all those who held equestrian wealth and thus rank) within which the officeholders formed a select status group.[26]

The Roman social-political ranks (senatorial, equestrian and curial) conferred both status and legal privileges to their holders.[27] In order to retain their rank, senators, equestrians and decurions had to ensure their property remained above the corresponding census threshold. This is indicated by the Early Imperial senators who lost their rank due to their inability to continue to meet the minimum property qualification.[28]

In sum, wealth, officeholding and socio-political rank were all intimately connected in the Roman world. At face value, this would imply a significant overlap between the Roman economic and socio-political elites.

23 Note that in Latin the word *senator* was also used for decurions.
24 Scheidel 1999: 259, Jongman 1988: 311–29.
25 Davenport 2019: 15–19 and, e.g., Pliny *HN* 33.32–33. See, for a more elaborated discussion with references, Section 9.4.
26 There were probably also other status groups within the equestrian order, e.g., the *equites* holding the *equus publicus*.
27 Garnsey 1970.
28 Talbert 1984: 27, Klingenberg 2011: 47–94.

In this book, I however show that these elites did not overlap very neatly. There were systematic and significant surpluses of persons with the requisite wealth for office but without the corresponding office or rank. In other words, the socio-political elite constituted a minority subset of a much wider economic elite.

In this book, I refer to various different elites. I use the terms 'political' and 'officeholding' elite interchangeably to denote all those who (had) held political office. This includes equestrian officeholders and the members of one of the deliberative councils (the senate and municipal councils). If I use the term 'socio-political' elite, I mean all those who held one of the three higher ranks (senatorial, equestrian and curial), also including the non-officeholding *equites*. The term 'economic' elite is reserved for denoting the top layer of society in terms of wealth only, thus also including wealthy women and freedmen. Finally, when I use the term 'elite' unqualified, I mean a vaguely delimited top layer of society who adhered to Roman elite norms.[29]

By clearly distinguishing economic from (socio-)political elites, I do not claim that stark differences in their power or influence existed.[30] The amount of actual power that officeholders derived from political offices was limited in the Roman world.[31] According to Ramsay MacMullen, private power (not based on officialdom), which joined smoothly together with public power (based on officialdom), was far more important.[32] Power and influence were shared within Roman social and political networks through patronage and friendship connections.[33] The freedmen of the early emperors are a case in point; although they were legally barred from holding political office, they could exert significant political influence thanks to their proximity to the emperor.[34] Equestrians could wield similar levels of power without holding office by acting as the emperor's advisor or confidant.[35]

In this book, I will use a quantitative approach to show the non-overlap between the officeholding and economic elites. My approach entails comparing the number of officeholders with the number of households whose wealth exceeded the census qualification for the corresponding office. To estimate the number of officeholders, I use conventional historical methodologies. To estimate the number of households with the requisite wealth

29 Cognate to the Roman concept of the *vir bonus* (a 'gentleman'), see Mouritsen 2022: 95–104.
30 MacMullen 1988.
31 See, e.g., Tacoma 2020 for the 'self-referentiality' of Roman Imperial politics. Alföldy 1988: 108–9.
32 MacMullen 1988: 58–121.
33 Verboven 2007: 866–67, Saller 1982.
34 Mouritsen 2011: 93–109.
35 Davenport 2019: 158–59.

for these offices, I use a model derived from the economic sciences to reconstruct the distribution of household wealth.

The term 'household' is used in this book in the Roman legal sense, referring to people *sui iuris* (i.e., persons who did not fall under the *patria potestas* (authority) of someone else). The oldest living male member of a Roman family (the *pater familias*) was traditionally the only person *sui iuris* in the family. As property ownership in the Roman world was restricted to persons *sui iuris*, the *pater familias* was also the only one who could own wealth, which then included the property of all of those under his *patria potestas*.[36] However, over the course of the Republican period, marriages *sine manu* (in which the bride did not move under the *patria potestas* of her husband but remained under the *patria potestas* of her father) became increasingly common.[37] As a result, most women in the Imperial period became *sui iuris* when all their male ancestors had passed away (just like their brothers). Once they were *sui iuris*, they could legally own property, even though they were restricted in the management of this property through the assigning of a guardian (in the same way minors were).[38] In this book, the term 'household' refers to all persons *sui iuris* (irrespective of their gender or age), but including their dependants (i.e., those under their *patria potestas*). Households thus refers to the Roman legal units which could own property independently.

In this book, I juxtapose the wealth of Italian households with the census qualifications for political offices. My definition of wealth is therefore based on the types of wealth included in the census assessments. In the Roman Republic, citizens had to declare (and evaluate) their landholdings, buildings, moveable goods (including slaves) and cash (including money on loan).[39] While the Republican tradition of regular censuses of citizens disappeared during the first century of the Imperial period, Roman citizens in Italy were probably still assessed in their local *civitas*.[40] The types of property assessed in these local censuses probably remained the same. The fragments of Ulpian's early-third-century-CE treatise on the census still refer to declarations of landholdings and slaves.[41] While relational and embodied wealth were thus not included in the Roman census assessments (and are also

36 Saller 1994: 155; 1999, Finley 1985: 18–19.
37 Treggiari 1991: 13–36.
38 For a recent discussion on the guardianship of Roman women, see Cohen 2023: 127–63.
39 Northwood 2008: 260.
40 *Cf.* the Late Republican *Tab. Her.* 142–56.
41 Dig. 50.15.4 (Watson 2009a: 446), probably referring to provincial censuses.

disregarded here), the material wealth assessed consisted of a wide variety of assets, including both moveable and immoveable goods.[42]

The scope of this study is Roman Italy in the Early Imperial period. The 'Early Empire' is loosely defined as the period between the ascension of the first emperor, Augustus, and the tribulations of the mid third century. I will use terms 'the Early Empire', 'the first two centuries CE' or 'the first three centuries of the Imperial period' interchangeably to denote this period. The boundaries of my time period are deliberately fuzzy; some valuable sources from just outside it, predominantly from the Late Republic, will be occasionally used as well.

Italy is understood as comprising the eleven Augustan *Regiones* (regions), which roughly span the Italian Peninsula south of the Alps.[43] Compared to modern-day Italy, this includes Istria but excludes Sicily and Sardinia. The denominations 'Italy' and 'Italian' accordingly refer to this geographical space.

Roman Italy was a heterogeneous region. Due to its diverse geography and climate, the peninsula was a mosaic of different micro-regions. Varying levels of interconnectedness of these micro-regions led to a fragmented socio-economic landscape.[44] My choice of geographical scope is therefore not to claim that there was no regional or local variability within Italy. On the contrary, it is my contention that any study of a region as complex as Italy should take this internal heterogeneity explicitly into account. I therefore use a 'bottom-up' approach to reconstruct the Italian wealth distribution. I call this a 'tessellated' approach, in which I first reconstruct the wealth distribution for each of the Italian *civitates* separately (with *civitas* denoting any type of self-governing community, irrespective of its civic status as a *municipium*, *colonia* etc.). I then combine the results of all the different *civitates* (the tessera) to form the complete Italian wealth distribution (the mosaic). Variations between the local wealth distributions will also feature prominently in the analysis of the results.

Despite its internal diversity, approaching Italy as a single socio-economic unit is still meaningful as Italian economic and political institutions were highly standardised and integrated from the Late Republic onwards.[45] First, most free Italians were Roman citizens. After the Social War in the early first century BCE, practically the entire free

[42] For a recent theoretical discussion on wealth in a pre-industrial context, see Alfani 2023: 18–22.
[43] Plin. *HN* 3.38–74 and 95–132.
[44] Horden and Purcell 2000.
[45] Roselaar 2019.

population south of the Apennines became Roman citizens.[46] Cisalpine Gaul (the plain between the Apennines and the Alps) was enfranchised half a century later.[47] This uniformity in citizenship meant that Italians shared various duties (e.g., indirect taxes) and privileges (e.g., access to Roman law). Second, the exemption from *tributum* (both the land and poll tax) was also applied to the whole of Italy.[48] Third, Roman coinage and other measures were increasingly used throughout the peninsula, which enhanced economic integration by lowering institutional barriers for economic exchange.[49] Finally, the fact that the size distribution of the Italian towns follows certain predictable patterns also implies that there was a high degree of interdependence between them. They exchanged goods, information and/or people, as well as shared in a joint network of political power.[50]

Some of these points also emphasise the exceptionality of Italy within the Roman Empire at large. This is further elaborated in the next chapter, in which I show that Italy was exceptionally wealthy (both in real and nominal terms). I will discuss different ways in which the Italians were able to draw in riches from around the Mediterranean and conclude that the peninsula remained a highly privileged part of the empire during the entirety of the Early Imperial period.

This conclusion is however not to claim that the Italian economy was static during this period; several diachronic developments are clearly discernible. Chapter 2 addresses two major developments which are most pertinent to a study of the Italian wealth distribution: changes in the overall performance of the Italian economy (which is generally assumed to have declined) and in the level of material inequality (which is generally assumed to have increased). Based on a reappraisal of the primary evidence, I concur that Italian economic performance fell and material inequality rose in this period, however with two important qualifications. Both developments were much less drastic than previous studies imply and they varied significantly across the Italian *civitates*.

In Chapter 3, I review previous attempts to reconstruct Roman wealth distributions. I show that the so-called social-table models, which are often used to reconstruct Roman (and other historical) wealth distributions, are inadequate. I propose to use an economic model instead. This model is based on the assumption that top wealth in any society roughly follows

46 Sherwin-White 1973: 150–73, Roselaar 2019: 230–36.
47 Ewins 1955.
48 Neesen 1980.
49 Roselaar 2019: 138–49.
50 Morley 1997: 44–49, de Ligt 2016: 47–49.

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the same mathematical function (a power law). While this model has already been applied to the Roman Empire as a whole, I apply the model to Italy alone, which allows me to anchor the model more firmly in ancient quantitative evidence.[51]

Chapter 4 applies the power-law model to the Pompeian evidence, which thus serves as a methodological case study. I use the ground-floor area of the intramural residences of Pompeii to reconstruct the top of the local wealth distribution. Based on this reconstruction, I estimate the number of Pompeian households with either curial or senatorial wealth. Even though firm estimates of the number of decurions and senators from Pompeii are lacking, the estimated numbers of Pompeian households with curial or senatorial wealth are so high that it is hard to avoid the conclusion that there were significant surpluses of households with sufficient wealth for these offices.

In the subsequent five chapters, I apply the same model to Italy as a whole. The main challenge for the application of the model to the entire peninsula is its huge internal heterogeneity. Chapter 5 therefore introduces a new variation model to represent the heterogeneity of the Italian *civitates*. This model is based on a recent catalogue of the inhabited areas of the administrative centres of the Italian *civitates*.

In Chapter 6, the variation in both the number of decurions and the curial census qualification between the Italian *civitates* is assessed. There seems to have been a 'canonical' council of a hundred decurions who possessed at least HS 100,000. Smaller *civitates* probably deviated from this canon due to local economic constraints, while larger *civitates* must have had substantial surpluses of households with curial wealth outside their councils.

Chapter 7 investigates the prevalence of wealthy Italian households who lacked curial rank due to requirements other than wealth. I focus on three groups of households which remained (largely) outside the decurionate: the *Augustales* (who were mostly freedmen), minors *sui iuris* (here understood as men aged under twenty-one) and women *sui iuris*. The results suggest that minors and women *sui iuris* constituted a fixed proportion of the freeborn population, while the number of wealthy *Augustales* probably varied with the size of the *civitas*.

Finally, the variation in wealth inequality between the Italian *civitates* is assessed in Chapter 8 using a series of wealth proxy datasets. The inequalities implied by these datasets confirm that there was significant variation between different *civitates* in the level of local wealth inequality.

[51] For previous applications, see Scheidel and Friesen 2009, Kay 2014.

Chapter 9 presents the reconstruction of the top of the Italian wealth distribution, taking all the variations discussed in the previous four chapters into account. The final model is 'tessellated', that is, based on the amalgamation of reconstructed wealth distributions for all the Italian *civitates* individually. The results suggest that Early Imperial Italy housed large numbers of households who held curial, equestrian or senatorial wealth but who did not have an officeholder at these respective ranks.

The existence of wealthy people outside the socio-political orders has of course been well known for a long time.[52] The current analysis nonetheless adds an important new dimension to this knowledge: the scale and structure of the surplus. Two important implications for our understanding of the political economy of Roman Italy are discussed in the last two chapters of the book.

The large surplus of sufficiently wealthy persons outside the socio-political orders implies that competition for junior political offices might have been fierce. Chapter 10 shows that – even accounting for wealthy women, minors, freedmen and freedmen's descendants – there were many more formally eligible Italian senatorial candidates than there were positions in the Roman senate. The number of eligible candidates swelled even more over the first two centuries CE with increasing numbers of non-Italians (provincials) being allowed to compete as well. Considerable competition for the offices which gave entry into the Roman senate must have been the result.

While a high level of competition for office might lead to tensions or even elite infighting, I argue in Chapter 11 that the surplus of wealthy households outside the political elite also contributed to the stability of the Roman political system. The reason is that this system was timocratic (stipulating minimum wealth for obtaining political office). An inherent weakness of such a system is that it can fail if there are too few sufficiently wealthy candidates. The households with the requisite wealth outside the socio-political orders constituted the pool of candidates who had to replace the failing households within the orders. They thus form the buffers of the Roman political system.

The size of the buffers determined the level of resilience of the political system. Larger buffers lead to a system which is more resilient to exogenous pressures and shocks. For example, the pool of Italian and provincial candidates the Roman senate could draw on was very large. Accordingly, there is little evidence of a lack of candidates for most of the Imperial period. The

52 For example, Pleket 1998: 208.

large buffers might also help explain the exceptional longevity of the Roman senate, which persisted well into the sixth century CE.[53] The reserves in the Italian *civitates* were however much smaller and divided very unevenly between the *civitates*. As a result, the political bodies in many (smaller) *civitates* must have been at risk of failing to find enough eligible members if there were any local pressures or shocks on the system. This is what constituted the 'curial crisis' of the third century, a series of local political failures which ultimately contributed to the profound collapse and the political and administrative reforms of the later third century.

53 Tacoma 2020, Salzman 2021.