11 Timocracy, Wealth and Resilience

At the start of this book, we met Gaius Caecilius Isidorus, Cornelia Severa and Minicius Macrinus. While they all possessed more than the senatorial census minimum, none of them was a senator. Their situation is what Keith Hopkins termed 'status dissonance', that is, the situation in which a person rates highly on one status criterion (wealth, in this case) but low on another (socio-political rank).[1] Status dissonance is often seen as a potential source of social instability. It is both the cause and result of social mobility and the upwardly mobile generally cause tension among their new peers.[2] Status dissonance can even lead to violence. For example, people feeling entitled to a higher rank in the socio-political hierarchy based on their high ranking in one or several status criteria, when faced with rejection, might turn to violence to achieve their goals.[3]

The potential friction caused by the status dissonance of wealthy socio-political outsiders was assuaged in the Roman world by a complex system of 'pseudo-political' institutions. For example, a wealthy freedman could become an *Augustalis*, a semi-religious official who held high socio-political standing despite having no political role.[4] Similarly, women could convert their wealth into status by acting as a benefactress, priestess or patroness.[5]

In this chapter, I argue that the wealthy households outside the orders also contributed to the stability of Roman society. My argument is based on the system resilience paradigm as presented by Kyle Harper. Harper conceives the Roman Empire as a complex of different systems (e.g., agricultural, demographic, political, fiscal and so on).[6] The proper functioning

1 Hopkins 1965, *cf.* Ando 2012: 180–82, Verboven 2007.
2 Hopkins 1965: 24–26.
3 North et al. 2009: 18–21.
4 Duthoy 1978, Bruun 2014: 70, Mouritsen 2006.
5 Hemelrijk 2015, MacMullen 1986.
6 Harper 2017, esp. 55. For different uses of the concept of resilience in the social sciences, see Izdebski et al. 2018. Salzman 2021 uses resilience to indicate the willingness of the senatorial elite in Late Antiquity to rebuild the city of Rome after political and military shocks.

of these systems was permanently imperilled by stresses and shocks. In order to mitigate the impact of these perturbations, the systems had buffers (making them resilient). I argue that the wealthy households outside the socio-political orders constituted the buffers of the Roman political system.[7]

The Roman political system was expressly timocratic; a minimum amount of wealth was legally stipulated for all political offices.[8] As most of these offices were unpaid and required substantial financial outlays, recruitment relied on wealthy landowners filling them voluntarily in exchange for the prestige that was associated with them.[9] An inherent risk of this system was that if insufficient candidates were available and/or willing to fill the available positions the system would stop functioning properly.

A shortage of councillors could pose serious problems for a *civitas*.[10] Most importantly, too few councillors resulted in financial shortfalls in the civic budget. Newly elected decurions paid a *summa honoraria* (entry fee) to the *civitas* upon entry to the council. Once in the council, they became responsible for a variety of financial obligations (the so-called *munera*), such as paying for embassies to the imperial court or hosting travelling imperial officials and armies. Councillors were also responsible for the organisation of local spectacles and celebrations. And they oversaw the collection of local taxes. All these responsibilities were extensive; their personal property stood guarantee for filling in any potential shortfalls. Finally, they were expected, as any wealthy person, to regularly present gifts to the community (munificence). In sum, councillors provided a considerable chunk of the income of their *civitas*.[11] A shortfall in their number thus meant that either the burdens became higher for the remaining councillors or that gaps emerged in the civic budget.[12]

A shortage of councillors was probably also undesirable from a prestige point of view. This is in line with the argument presented in Chapter 6 that the Italian *civitates* would generally aim to have a council of 100 decurions to measure up to the 'canonical' picture.

[7] Mouritsen 1996 and Bodel 2015 similarly argue for the stabilising effect of a high rate of renewal at the fringes of the Roman curial councils.

[8] Duncan-Jones 1982: 3–4, Alföldy 1988: 17–19. See also the Introduction.

[9] Millar 1986: 303.

[10] Weisweiler 2020: 51–52, Patterson 2006: 184–88, MacMullen 1988: 44.

[11] Millar 1983, Eck 2022: 456–64. For a minimalist view on the financial contribution of local decurions to the public income of a medium-sized Roman town in the East, see Zuiderhoek 2009b: 37–52.

[12] Note the relief of the decurions of mid-second-century Tergeste who can now share their *munera* with local *attributi* (*CIL* 5.532).

The Romans themselves also thought that a dearth of decurions was problematic. In one of his letters, Pliny the Younger asks Trajan whether a Pompeian law, forbidding Bithynian *civitates* to appoint to their council citizens of other Bithynian *civitates*, also meant that existing decurions who are citizens from other towns in the same province should be expelled.[13] Pliny suggests that it should not (later also confirmed by the emperor), because many decurions in the Bithynian towns were citizens of other towns and expelling them would 'impair' the *civitates*.[14]

The surplus households outside the socio-political orders provided the replacements for the failing households within the councils. They were the only households outside the orders who satisfied the census qualification. The commonplace that the Roman orders 'were replenished from below' paints an incomplete and misleading picture (at least in economic terms), unless one is prepared to assume that all new entrants into the councils were systematically poorer than the existing members.[15] But this is not born out by the evidence. In Section 4.4, I showed that the residences of Pompeian magistrates were not necessarily the very largest residences in town but that they were evenly spread among the 200-odd largest residences, implying that Pompeian decurions were recruited from the entire economic top layer.[16] The Roman municipal orders were thus (in economic terms) for a large part replenished laterally, that is, from households with similar wealth as those within the councils.

The idea of the existence of reservoirs of potential candidates for the Roman political bodies has been put forward by other scholars as well. For example, Claude Nicolet argues that the equestrian order was a 'reservoir' of potential candidates for the Roman senate.[17] Steven Ostrow and Christer Bruun similarly construe the *Augustales* as an important pool of candidates for the local curial orders.[18]

Not all persons *sui iuris* with the requisite wealth outside the orders would have personally been eligible to enter the council.[19] Wealthy freedmen and women are a case in point. However, freedmen and women could still contribute to the resilience of the timocratic system by supporting others to step in. Their wealth was not immobile. For example, Numerius Popidius Celsinus became a Pompeian decurion at the age of six (!) as a

[13] Plin. *Ep.* 114 (with Trajan's reply in 115).
[14] Pliny uses the verb *concutio* (to shatter, cause to waver, impair).
[15] *Cf.* Patterson 2006: 221, Tacoma 2006: 258–61.
[16] See in particular Figure 4.6.
[17] Nicolet 1984.
[18] Bruun 2015, Ostrow 1990.
[19] See also Section 10.1.

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result of the lavish gifts of his freedman father.[20] Similarly, the mother of Voconius Romanus made a gift to her son to support his bid for promotion to the Roman senate.[21]

In this chapter, I will substantiate the hypothesis that the wealthy households outside the Roman socio-political orders contributed to the resilience of the political system by analysing the stability of the political system at its three different levels (senatorial, equestrian and curial) during the Early Imperial period.

The Italian political system came under increasing pressure during the Early Empire. In Chapter 2, I argued that in this period elite incomes (and thus the number of wealthy households) declined first modestly but then in a more pronounced way towards the end of the second century CE. An increase in wealth inequality might have offset the decrease in the number of wealthy elite households to some extent. The most important conclusion however was the high local variability in these developments. The Italian economy was a mosaic of (loosely interconnected) local economies, which was punctuated by a series of mostly local economic reverses (e.g., a decline in local commercial agriculture, demographic contractions and so on).[22] These local economic and demographic reverses led to a thinning of the buffers of the local political systems. Each *civitas* followed its own idiosyncratic trajectory.

To gauge to what extent the Roman political system was able to resist this complex of stresses and shocks, I compare the level of resilience of the system (proxied by the number of surplus households) with the evidence for its failure (proxied by shortages of candidates). I assume that the number of households with sufficient wealth for curial, equestrian and senatorial office outside these orders (as estimated in Chapter 9) reflects the size of the buffers and thus the level of resilience of the timocratic system at these respective levels. These estimates are then compared with evidence for shortages of candidates for the junior offices which I interpret as a sign of failure of the timocratic system at these levels. In the subsequent discussion, the political system at the senatorial and equestrian level on the one hand and the curial level on the other will be treated separately, as things ran a distinctly different course at these different levels.

[20] *CIL* 10.846–48. On the freed status of Numerius Popidius Ampliatus (the father), see Franklin 2001: 169 note 56 and Petersen 2011: 48–56. For the participation of freedmen's sons in municipal politics, see Garnsey 1975, Gordon 1931.

[21] Plin. *Ep.* 10.4. See also van Bremen 1996.

[22] *Cf.* Woolf 1992, Finley 1985.

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11.1 Resilience: Senators and Equestrians

There is some evidence of shortages of candidates at the senatorial level.[23] Cassius Dio records various occasions when too few candidates were available to fill in all vigintivirates, tribunates of the plebs and aedileships.[24] However, all this evidence is Augustan implying that these recruitment problems were probably connected to the triumviral proscriptions and/or the recent increase of the senatorial census requirement.[25] It is also worth mentioning that all three offices for which Dio records shortages were not yet obligatory steps in the senatorial *cursus honorum* at the time.[26] These offices might therefore have been relatively unpopular. The shortages therefore do not necessarily imply a general lack of candidates for senatorial positions.

There is also some evidence of existing senators and equestrians resigning from their rank due to financial problems, which might point to more general financial troubles at the top of the wealth distribution. Andreas Klingenberg catalogues seventeen examples for the Early Imperial period.[27] This number of course does not say much on the prevalence of this phenomenon, as most of these cases would be hushed up. It is more important to note that all of the known cases are again overwhelmingly concentrated in the Julio-Claudian period, implying that the financial problems of these senators and equestrians might again be related to the tribulations of the last century BCE.

The more widely attested subventions of emperors to impoverished senators (and a few *equites*) has also been adduced to attest to the financial difficulties of members of the imperial elite.[28] While these examples are more evenly spread over the Early Imperial period, they were made to *existing* senators, and more specifically to 'deserving' senators, for example, due to their high rank or their family ties to the old Republican aristocracy. They therefore do not necessarily point to a shortage of eligible candidates for senatorial positions.

[23] For an overview, see Stein-Hölkeskamp 2011: 180–83.

[24] The vigintivirate in 13 BCE (Cass. Dio 54.26 and possibly *CIL* 6.1501 and 9.2845), the tribunate of the plebs in 13 and 12 BCE and 12 CE (Cass. Dio 54.26 and 30 and 56.27) and the aedileship in 5 CE (Cass. Dio 55.24; for earlier problems of filling the aedileship, see Cass. Dio 49.16 and 53.2).

[25] Klingenberg 2011: 48, Jones 1968: 32–33.

[26] Jones 1968: 32–33.

[27] Klingenberg 2011: 191–92 (with a discussion at pp. 47–94). See also: (senators) Duncan-Jones 2016: 61, Talbert 1984: 10–11 and 27, Hopkins 1983: 75–76 and (equestrians) Duncan-Jones 2016: 97–98.

[28] Klingenberg 2011: 86–89 (in tabulated form at 192–93), Saller 1982: 55, Millar 1977: 297–99.

In sum, there were no structural shortages of candidates for senatorial and equestrian positions during most of the Early Imperial period.[29] I hypothesise that this can be explained by the fact that the buffers of the timocratic system at these levels were very large. The reconstructed wealth distribution in Chapter 9, in combination with the analysis in Chapter 10, suggests that Italy alone could supply enough eligible candidates for all senatorial and equestrian offices. The gradual opening of these offices to the provincial elites enlarged these buffers even further.[30]

The resilience of the political system at the senatorial and equestrian level was also further enhanced by the fact that the Early Imperial Roman government employed an exceptionally small number of central administrators.[31] In the middle of the second century CE, there was only about one Roman administrator of either senatorial or equestrian rank for every 400,000 subjects. By contrast, in twelfth-century China (an empire of approximately the same size as the Roman) there was one administrator for every 15,000 people.[32] The relatively small number of Roman imperial officeholders *per capita* of the population in part explains why there were so many wealthy non-officeholders.

I conclude that the timocratic system at the equestrian and senatorial level was very resilient. The households with senatorial wealth from Italy and the provinces together constituted a very large pool of potential candidates for a political body of only 600 members. An even larger pool of candidates existed for the 1,000 or so equestrian offices. This high resilience might also help explain the exceptional longevity of the imperial orders. The Roman senate (including the equestrian officers who merged into the senatorial order during the fourth century CE) continued functioning for another six centuries after the reign of Augustus.[33]

11.2 Resilience: Decurions

On the municipal level, things ran a different course. The Roman government could do with a small number of central imperial administrators as it relied on the devolution of power to the around 2,000 self-governing communities (the 'load-bearing' units of the empire).[34] These

[29] *Cf.* Maiuro 2019: 88.
[30] For more details, see Sections 9.3 and 10.2.
[31] Scheidel 2017: 76, Hopkins 1983: 186.
[32] Hopkins 2009: 184.
[33] Salzman 2021: 300–36, Tacoma 2020: 1–23. For the incorporation of all imperial officeholders into the senate, see Weisweiler 2013.
[34] Citation from Shaw 2000: 362. See also Garnsey and Saller 2014: 35–54, Harper 2017: 10, Scheidel 2015: 234–42.

communities (*civitates*) were led by councils of (ex-)magistrates, who constituted relatively large proportions of the local population, especially in the less populous *civitates*.[35] Richard Duncan-Jones, for example, estimates that roughly one in every twenty adult men had to be a decurion at second-century Petelia.[36] These high proportions made the timocratic system at the municipal level much frailer.

First signs of shortages of sufficiently wealthy municipal officeholders start to appear around the middle of the second century CE.[37] Two Hadrianic rescripts (one of which was directed at the Asian city of Clazomenai) suggest that some municipal councillors were financially unable to bear local magistracies and *munera*.[38] Just after the middle of the second century, the co-emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus promulgated a rescript stating that decurions would be responsible for the financial obligations that came with their rank only if they held sufficient resources to do so.[39] A shortage of dignitaries is also implied by a later rescript of Marcus Aurelius alone, in which he relaxes the requirement of three generations of free birth for the Athenian Areopagus.[40] Half a century later, Septimius Severus makes a distinction between 'willing' and 'unwilling' decurions in a ruling on the repetition of curial offices.[41] From the third century, the evidence becomes much thicker, with imperial rescripts limiting the number of exemptions and having recourse to compulsion to have all municipal offices filled and *munera* performed.[42] This so-called 'crisis of the curial system' has even been proffered as one of the causes of 'the fall' of the Roman Empire.[43]

It is worth noting that the evidence of shortages of curial candidates builds up towards the later second century. This is the same period in which demographic and economic shocks exacerbated, providing a first indication of a potential relationship between the two.

Caution is however in place. Most of the evidence discussed here is juristic. A main limitation of this type of evidence is that it is geographically very unspecific. Even though imperial rescripts mostly took the form of responses to local queries, many of them are nonetheless understood as

35 See, e.g., Saller 2000: 123, Duncan-Jones 1964: 134, Abramenko 1993: 66–67.
36 Duncan-Jones 1982: 286–87.
37 Garnsey 1974: 232–33.
38 Dig. 50.7.4.5 and 50.4.14.6.
39 Dig. 50.4.6 with Garnsey 1974: 229–41 and a similar rescript in Dig. 50.4.11.
40 *SEG* 29.127 with Jones 1971 and Follet 1979. This incidence is explicitly connected to the Antonine Plague.
41 Dig. 50.1.18.
42 Garnsey 1974: 233–41, Millar 1983.
43 MacMullen 1988: 1–57, esp. 44–51.

applying to the empire as a whole.[44] It is therefore hard to determine how widespread the problems attested in these rescripts were in Italy in particular. Also, imperial rescripts describe how the emperor would like to have seen things, but it remains unclear how accurately the stipulated rules were followed.

Many different explanations have been proposed for the increasing inability of the *civitates* to find enough men to take on municipal obligations. The cost of membership of the municipal elite might have increased because promises of benefactions became legally binding and/or adlected decurions were increasingly obliged to also pay an entry fee (as elected magistrates already did).[45] The social advancement of the richest individuals of the *civitates* into the imperial elite (which rendered them immune for local *munera*) might also have drawn away a lot of wealth from the *civitates*, further increasing the burden on the remaining decurions.[46] The income of the *civitates* might also have decreased when inflation in the later Imperial period obliterated the value of their financial reserves set out in loans, shifting more of the onus onto the generosity of the decurions.[47] Finally, the gradual transformation of the decurionate into a closed hereditary caste might have prevented the inflow of new wealth from outside the council.[48]

My contribution to this list would be the exiguity of the buffers of the timocratic system at the curial level. The buffers of households with curial wealth outside the municipal councils were relatively small. In Section 9.1, I estimated that there were in the Italian *civitates* on average only three households with curial wealth outside the council for every four decurions in the council. Even though this is a minimum estimate, it is clear that the average surplus was significantly smaller than those at the equestrian and senatorial level. Pressure on the timocratic system at the curial level due to the demographic and economic downturns of the Early Imperial period could thus relatively easily translate into problems of finding sufficient candidates.

While all these explanations are by themselves plausible contributors to the overall demise of the curial system, they invariably approach both the crisis and its causes as systemic. This seems to miss one important point made by all the evidence, that is, local variability.[49] On the one hand, the economic shocks destabilising the timocratic system were mostly local, as the discussion in Section 2.1 has made very clear. On the other hand, the

[44] Millar 1983: 76–77, Lavan 2018.
[45] Garnsey 1974: 238–40.
[46] Patterson 2006: 184–264, Garnsey 1974: 236–38, Jones 1964: 740–47.
[47] Jones 1964: 732–34.
[48] Jones 1964: 739, Garnsey 1968: 241–50.
[49] *Cf.* MacMullen 1988: 1–57.

surpluses of households with curial wealth also varied considerably across the *civitates* (possibly by a factor of fifteen; see Figure 9.1). As a result, both the pressure on and the resilience of the timocratic system varied greatly between the Italian *civitates*. The outcomes must therefore have been highly idiosyncratic. An outburst of violence, a lethal epidemic or a series of major crop failures could have led to an acute shortage of candidates in certain *civitates*, while similar events in other *civitates* would have left the system relatively unscathed.

The narrative of the development of the Roman timocratic political system at the curial level during the Early Imperial period should therefore favour local pathways of boom and bust rather than a linear development.[50] It could be imagined as follows.[51] In the period up to the middle of the second century CE, local economic reverses put only light pressure on the timocratic system at the curial level. It seems that the system remained intact in most *civitates* and only sporadic problems emerged. The Antonine Plague constituted a major shock (or more precisely a major cluster of local shocks). Accordingly, the buffers were depleted in at least some *civitates*. As a result, the number of communities that were short of curial candidates increased notably towards the end of the second century CE. However, the reserves seem to have been sufficient in the majority of the *civitates* to absorb the shocks and the system even appears to revitalise during the Severan period. The municipal timocratic system was however weakened and the challenges of the third century (ultimately caused by incessant imperial usurpations and renewed pressures on the external borders of the empire) toppled the timocratic system in a much larger number of *civitates*. This plethora of local failures undergirded the profound dislocations and transformation of the imperial system in this period, even though the curial system seems to have endured in adapted form until the fifth century CE.[52]

11.3 Conclusions

The new reconstruction of the distribution of Italian elite wealth presented in this book suggests that there were many Italian households who held the requisite wealth for political office but whose members did not hold these

[50] For a discussion on 'crisis' as a model, see, e.g., Liebeschuetz 2007.

[51] *Cf.* Harper 2017.

[52] For the relationship between the Antonine Plague and the crisis of the third century, see Erdkamp 2016, Bruun 2007, de Blois 2002. For the tribulations of the third century, see, e.g., Ando 2012, Potter 2004, Rostovtzeff 1957: 393–501. For the longevity and protracted 'end' of the Roman curial system, see Zuiderhoek 2017: 167–76, Liebeschuetz 2001, Liebeschuetz and Rich 1992, Tacoma 2020.

offices. In this chapter, I argued that these surplus households constituted the buffers, and thus resilience, of the Roman timocratic system.

This resilience was however distributed very unevenly. At the senatorial and equestrian level, the system was very resilient because the surpluses of Italian and provincial households with senatorial and equestrian wealth were very large. Accordingly, for most of the Early Imperial period, no shortages of candidates for the senatorial or equestrian offices are attested. This resilience probably contributed to the exceptional longevity of this part of the political system, which persisted (with some alterations) until the early seventh century CE.

The political system at the municipal level followed a different trajectory. From the middle of the second century CE, the first signs of shortages of candidates for the curial offices and *munera* appear in the juristic evidence (roughly the same period in which demographic and economic dislocations intensified in Italy). The smaller average surplus of Italian households with curial wealth made the timocratic system less resilient at this level. The uneven distribution of these buffers across the Italian *civitates* made matters even worse. While some of the larger *civitates* would have had reassuringly large buffers, in the smaller ones the reserves would have been dangerously small. The mostly localised economic dislocations of the later second and third centuries caused the failure of the timocratic system in an increasing number of *civitates*. The decline of the Roman curial system should therefore be seen not as a universal 'crisis' but rather as a complex of local failures.