Concluding Remarks

One of the main aims of this book has been to debunk the simplistic equation of wealth, officeholding and socio-political rank in the Roman world. Such a view still underpins many approaches to the study of the Roman economy. Most exemplary, Roman wealth distributions are often reconstructed using socio-political groups instead of economic groups. In this book, I use an economic model (a power law) to reconstruct the top of the wealth distribution of Early Imperial Italy. This reconstruction reveals that wealth was spread much more widely among the Italian elite than office or rank. Even though isolated examples of this discordance between wealth, office and rank have been known to historians for a long time, the present study emphasises the significant scale and systemic nature of this phenomenon.

A first case study was done on Pompeii. An analysis of the intramural housing stock suggested that there were significantly more Pompeian households with curial wealth than there were decurions. Moreover, a wealth distribution reconstructed on the basis of this evidence further showed that there were at least a few households with senatorial wealth at Early Imperial Pompeii, which stands in stark contrast to the lack of any securely attested Imperial senators from the Vesuvian town. The Pompeian case study thus provided a first glimpse of the systematic presence of households with sufficient wealth outside the socio-political orders.

Next, I reconstructed the top of the wealth distribution for the entire Italian peninsula taking the heterogeneity of the Italian self-governing communities (*civitates*) formally into account. I used a recent catalogue of the inhabited area of their administrative centres as a proxy for the scale of their economic and socio-political institutions, tracking in particular the variation in the number of decurions, the curial census qualification, the number of households with curial wealth outside the council and the level of local wealth inequality. All these variations are taken formally into account in the reconstruction of the Italian wealth distribution by employing a bottom-up ('tessellated') approach; the Italian wealth distribution is constructed by amalgamating the wealth distributions reconstructed separately for all Italian *civitates*.

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The results of the Italian model confirm the conclusions of the Pompeian case study. There were large surpluses of Italian households with the requisite wealth for office but without holding these offices. The large scale and systematic nature of this surplus revealed by the results opens up various new perspectives on the social demography and political economy of Early Imperial Italy. I elaborated two of these implications.

First, the large number of Italian households with senatorial wealth outside the senate implies that competition for the junior senatorial offices might have been intense. Early Imperial Italy alone could provide sufficient formally eligible candidates for all the positions of the Roman senate. Provincial candidates, who over the first two centuries CE became in increasing numbers successful in obtaining senatorial offices, exacerbated this competition. Potential conflict arising from this competition was assuaged by a multi-staged selection procedure.

Second, the households with the requisite wealth for political office but outside the orders contributed positively to the stability of the Roman timocratic political system. They constituted the buffers and thus resilience of the system by providing the replacements for the failing households within the orders. During the Early Imperial period, the economies of the Italian *civitates* were punctuated by a series of setbacks. These (mostly local) economic reverses put pressure on the political system by decreasing the number of households satisfying the local census threshold (and thus the total number of potential candidates).

Correspondences between the evidence for shortages of candidates and the estimated size of the surpluses at the three different levels (senatorial, equestrian, curial) of the timocratic system corroborate this theory. There are few attestations of shortages of candidates for senatorial and equestrian offices while the buffers at these levels were very large. Evidence for shortages of curial candidates start to appear around the middle of the second century CE, notably the same period in which economic and demographic decline started to intensify in Italy. In the third century, the attestations of shortages of curial candidates become more frequent. This different trajectory at the curial level is not only due to the smaller *average* surplus of Italian households with curial wealth, but also to its uneven distribution over the *civitates*.

These conclusions encourage a reconsideration of the nature of the 'curial crisis' in the third century CE. Economic and demographic reverses were mostly localised events while the resilience of the timocratic system to absorb these shocks also varied a great deal between the *civitates*. Failure of the political system was therefore the result of a combination of local

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circumstances. There was no universal 'crisis' of the Roman curial system, but rather a complex of local failures varying in both time and space.

It is worth stressing that the results of this study relate to the Italian *civitates* in particular. They might be applicable to the *civitates* in the western provinces as well. But the situation in the eastern part of the empire was very different. The councils of the eastern *civitates* were typically much larger than their western counterparts. If the eastern *bouletai* were also subject to Roman timocratic arrangements, this would imply that eastern communities were able to incorporate a much larger portion of the local economic elite into their councils (unless the eastern *civitates* were systematically much richer than their western/Italian counterparts, which seems unlikely).

A similar picture of the Roman elite is drawn by Henrik Mouritsen.[1] Based on a lexicographic-semantic study of the writings of Cicero, Mouritsen asserts that there existed a group of *boni* at Late Republican Rome who were financially independent (rentiers) but who had no active role in politics (they were neither senators nor equestrians). Their main involvement in politics was the role they played in the recurrent election of a small group of *nobiles* as magistrates. This small political elite from amid the *boni* was then expected to defend the interests of all *boni*. Interestingly, even though Mouritsen employs completely different evidence and methodologies from this study, he comes to a very similar picture of the Roman elite.

The results of this study also shed light on the structure of the Roman political economy if considered within the theoretical framework of 'oligarchy' as developed by the political scientist Jeffrey Winters.[2] Winters argues that 'oligarchs' (i.e., the richest people in a society) have mainly one interest, that is, the defence of their wealth. Accordingly, they set up a political system (an 'oligarchy') that has wealth defence as its primary task.[3] These 'oligarchies' can however take many different forms depending on the types of threats that exist to the wealth of the oligarchs. For example, the level of cooperation between 'oligarchs' is related to the threat they experience from each other. Roman 'oligarchs' achieved an impressive level of cooperation (institutionalised, e.g., in sophisticated systems of magistracies, deliberative councils and laws), suggesting that peer-to-peer threats had been greatly reduced. Only a minority of Roman 'oligarchs' were involved in politics further underlining the high level of cooperation. The fact that Roman 'oligarchs' who were involved in politics (as magistrates, councillors and judges) did so

1 Mouritsen 2022.
2 Winters 2011: 1–39 (introduction to the theory) and 90–121 (application to Republican Rome).
3 *Cf.* Cic. *Off.* 2.73–74 and Smith 1776: chapter 5, part II.

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personally (and not by hiring someone else) indicates that property rights were probably relatively insecure.[4]

The large surplus of wealthy households outside the socio-political orders also calls for a reassessment of the importance of different forms of social power in Roman society. Three power sources are often distinguished in sociological theory: political (based on political and military officeholding), ideological (based on honour, status, prestige etc.) and economic (based on material resources).[5] My results imply that economic power might have been much more prevalent than political power in Roman society. This is in line with the conclusions of Ramsay MacMullen, who asserts that 'private' power (i.e., power not derived from public officeholding) was the most important form of power in the Roman Empire.[6] This idea is further reinforced by Rens Tacoma's recent argument for the limited purview of Roman politics in the Early Imperial period.[7]

This study has taken the economic stratification of Italian society as the starting point for the analysis. Even though this approach might appear to be Marxist, I do not claim that the economy preceded over other (social, cultural, religious, political etc.) dimensions of society.[8] One of the main lessons from the work of Moses Finley, and the scholarly debates that followed in its wake, is that ancient economies were tightly intertwined with these other aspects of society.[9] In the case of the Roman Empire it is easy to show that economy and politics were intimately interwoven. Wealth was not only a practical and legal prerequisite for officeholding; the largest financial profits were also to be expected from holding political office.[10] In a sense, Roman politics were a form of high-risk investment which was practised by only a small part of the economic elite.

4 *Cf.* Mackil 2023.
5 E.g., Runciman 1989. This division is ultimately based on the work of Marx and Weber. Mann 1986 separates military from political power.
6 MacMullen 1988: 58–121.
7 Tacoma 2020.
8 Morley 2019.
9 Finley 1985. On the further debates, see Launaro 2016.
10 Lavan and Weisweiler 2022: 228–33, MacMullen 1988: 122–70. See also Chapter 1.

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