Popular Culture in Ancient Rome
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My mother worked for many years in Cambridge as a college servant, as they were known in those days, to support her three children and disabled husband. Watching her showed me how hard it can be for ordinary people to make ends meet and deal with a socially distant and sometimes difficult elite (thankfully the Governing Body of her college did not possess the powers of the Roman judiciary). Thankfully also she believed in education, which allowed me to ‘move upstairs’ and indulge in the luxury of Roman history. This book is dedicated to her in gratitude for that.
This is a book about popular culture in the Roman world. Popular culture is probably best defined in a negative way as the culture of the non-elite.1 The non-elite (I shall also call them simply ‘the people’) comprised a whole host of different social groups – peasants, craftsmen and artisans, labourers, healers, fortune-tellers, storytellers and entertainers, shopkeepers and traders – but also consisted of their women, their children, and the have-nots of Roman society: slaves and those who had fallen into destitution and beggary. The culture these groups shared was very much the unofficial and subordinate culture of Roman society.

In total, we are talking about tens of millions of people inhabiting a region stretching from the damp lowlands of Scotland to the baking-hot banks of the river Nile. Dozens of local languages, most of which we have little or no trace of, jostled alongside the official Latin and Greek. It will never be possible to re-create the richness of each of these local cultures. We are also looking at a period spanning hundreds of years, from roughly 100 BCE to 500 CE. The evidence is so scanty that we cannot examine the popular culture of any one point in time. Regrettable though this is, it need not present an insurmountable obstacle. The argument of this book is that the popular culture can best be understood as a whole. Popular culture represented a set of attitudes, which in many ways can be seen as responses to the broadly similar social, economic and environmental conditions that the majority of the population of the Roman Empire faced throughout its history. I will be trying to look at the themes that characterized and dominated the lives of these largely voiceless people.
The non-elite were too great a hotchpotch of differing groups to be united by a single, monolithic culture. They inhabited a complex world of different geographies, wealth and status levels that meant that no uniform way of life could ever exist. One of the main internal divisions was between slaves and the free. Most Roman citizens saw themselves as anything but servile. But the poorest of the free could easily find themselves in a far worse material condition than most of the slave population. An increasing number of them drew their ancestry from the slave body. That might explain their vigorous protests against the execution in 61 CE of Pedanius Secundus’s entire household of 400 slaves, after his murder by one of them.2 The fervent desire for freedom that we encounter among many slaves argues for a shared outlook with the free. Both free and slave valued the same privileges. They took their pleasures in the same boisterous way. They faced the same social pressures, albeit in varying degrees. Both had to cope with a system of hierarchy that placed them at the whim of the powerful, even more so as the value of citizenship declined under the empire. The people had their own marginals too: beggars, bandits, the mad. There was never just a simple division between free and slave.

The non-elite were not unified by class interests: few if any elements of class consciousness can be sensed in the surviving record. Most of them saw their neighbours as competitors not comrades in the harsh struggle for scarce resources. To have nothing was to be nothing in the Roman world. Theirs was a culture where people strove to look down on their neighbours with something of the same disdain that the elite looked down on them. For the most part, these were people who were far too busy getting on in the world, or just striving to maintain what little they had, than to worry about whether anything fundamental was wrong with the system itself.

Not a class but a culture none the less. A mosaic of popular subcultures united by broadly similar interests, facing the same day-to-day problems of making a living, and equipped with the same tried-and-tested ways of trying to get things done in a tough, hierarchical world run by the elite for the elite. Popular culture was far more than a collection of circus entertainers and half-remembered songs from the theatre.3 Popular culture was how people survived.

The non-elite comprised about 99 per cent of the empire’s population of about 50 or 60 million. The elite consisted of the senators, the equestrian class and the local governing class. The elite numbered perhaps 200,000. The army numbered another half a million or so. The status of the army is a moot point given that they represented a group with a strong subculture of its own and, for reasons of space, I have largely omitted them from the discussion.4 Of the non-elite
about 80–85 per cent lived in the country, mostly eking a living from the land either as small-holders, tenants or labourers, or indirectly as slaves. Of the 15 per cent of the total population who comprised the urban non-elite, about 30–40 per cent represented Hoggart’s ‘respectable’ sorts – tradesmen, craftsmen and the like. And 50–60 per cent worked as labourers. Rome was one of history’s great slave-owning societies and slaves accounted for about 10–15 per cent of the total non-elite population, but perhaps 15–25 per cent in Italy, and are double-counted since they worked mostly as labourers or for craftsmen. A substantial portion of the population, which will have varied hugely depending on local factors, lived at little more than subsistence levels of income. About a tenth of the population were destitute, scraping by on begging and thieving, but this represented only a base figure, which could balloon in periods of economic crisis to as much as two-thirds of the population.

The elite for the most part set themselves sharply apart from this mass of Roman society. A huge wealth gap served to distance them from the majority. The richest of the rich possessed fortunes exceeding 100 million sesterces, which can be expressed as about 25,000 times an annual subsistence income (though this is actually a lower ratio than exists today). More importantly, the elite felt themselves bound together by a common upper-class culture of learning (paideia). This educated, literary outlook represented the shared world-view of the ruling class. Recondite, academic and stylistic, paideia served as a hard-won badge of class membership. It excluded the majority by relying on what it saw as taste and discernment, but also on what can be seen as deliberate obfuscation. So, in the court of the later emperors in Constantinople, a mode of handwriting was developed known as litterae caelestes, ‘heavenly writing’, which was the preserve of palace administrators. Similarly, the legal profession developed a sophisticated jargon. All of this must have been complete gobbledygook to the non-elite. They were expected to look on in awe at elite culture: ‘whatever is highly placed must be prevented from becoming low and common in order to preserve due reverence’.

It is this element of social conflict that makes it dangerous to think about the non-elite in terms of having a folk culture. ‘Folk’ suggests a common culture that all members of Roman society shared equally, regardless of social position. It tends to ignore issues of politics, ideology and conflict so as to emphasize the communal. There is no doubt that there was much culture that the elite and the non-elite did hold in common. The risk is that ‘the folk’ become the harmless characters from an H. E. Bates novel, sitting in their farmyards drinking mead and discussing olive oil; and folklore comes to represent a romanticized, rosy view of Roman life, with the non-elite content to be under
the wise rule of their betters. Roman society cannot simply be seen as a culture characterized by social consensus. This is to deny its conflictual elements. The vast and widening gaps in wealth that the acquisition of empire had created meant that social contrasts were stark. There was little direct, personal contact between the elite and most of the populace, particularly in the city of Rome where its colossal size meant that traditional face-to-face social mechanics had broken down. Most of the non-elite, as a simple matter of arithmetic, were not hooked into the network of patrons and clients. The city’s population was full of slaves, perhaps as many as a third, who cannot safely be assumed to have been happy with their lot. Herodian blames the melting-pot of Rome, which had resulted from mass immigration, for the intensity of urban violence. Outside Rome, we know that some at least of the oppressed passionately resented their imperial oppressors. Everywhere, the people lived in a power structure that dealt out a steady stream of degrading treatment. Such humiliation was never humdrum. It hurt.

All of these people confronted a daily reality of a steeply stratified society in which power was concentrated firmly at the top. Discus-
sions about the exact meanings of Latin terms such as *populus*, *plebs*, *turba*, *multitudo* or *vulgus* are in danger of missing the point. It is hardly surprising that the elite failed to express themselves more clearly when talking about the the non-elite because, to put it crudely, they didn’t give a damn about them. So, to be clear, this is not a book about the narrow role or otherwise of the Roman plebs in the world of largely elite Roman politics, an approach which risks implying that the people only mattered to the extent that they existed as an adjunct to power. Rome was a complex society and as such requires a more complex model of social relations. That is why the modern term ‘popular culture’ is so useful: the term recognizes the plurality of Roman culture and the difference, division and contestation between the non-elite and the elite. Real differences existed between many of their values, beliefs and behaviours. The non-elite represented a variety of social groups distinguished from society’s economically, politically and culturally powerful groups. Potentially, these groups could be united and so represented a potent threat to the elite, one that needed to be carefully observed, policed and, where possible, reformed.

We must not fall into the trap of being melodramatic here. The flip side of seeing the people as members of a folk culture is to reduce them to the status of mere victims, romanticizing their suffering in the process. It is easy to exaggerate the overall level of poverty when judged against the standards of the time (the people were undoubtedly all poor in comparison to modern, Western standards of
living). Nor was this a crude class struggle between elite and subordinate. The popular culture definitely did include elements of resistance against the dominant groups in society, but even then much of this took the form of minor skirmishes along the borders of class relations; more friction than warfare. There were also obviously significant ‘grey areas’ along the division between the popular and elite cultures. Social mobility did allow some lucky few to break through the glass ceiling of servile, plebeian or provincial status into the upper echelons of Roman society, even though the elite do ‘have a way of looking the same over the centuries’. This book does not, though, concentrate on these areas of overlap. Obviously there are many points where I will discuss the differences or otherwise between the popular and elite cultures, but to make that the primary focus of the book would be to make the mistake of seeing the non-elite as of interest only in terms of the way that they related to the elite. This is an attempt to describe and analyse the popular culture on its own terms, on a stand-alone basis. This is, after all, how elite culture has traditionally been viewed: as something as worthy of study in its own right and not simply as an adjunct to the popular culture.

Great and little traditions coexisted. The great tradition – classical learning, knowledge of Greek, philosophy, rhetoric – contrasted sharply with the little tradition: folk tales, proverbs, festivals, songs and oracles. The great tradition sometimes participated in the little, in for example sermons or speeches given at meetings before the plebs in Rome. The elite sometimes joined in the fun at festivals, and they gambled, and quoted well-known proverbs. But the great tradition was harder for the people to penetrate, requiring as it did years of rigorous learning and large amounts of cash. Harder but not impossible. One of the themes of this book is that the two traditions were interdependent and frequently affected each other. Cultural influence flowed both ways and served to create new traditions. It did not just trickle down from above to a people below who were grateful for the opportunity to have something to imitate.

Nor were the people simply passive consumers of Roman culture, in the ‘bread and circuses’ style. It suited the elite to think of the people as apathetically apolitical because it helped justify their own tight grip on the exercise of power. Instead, the people actively interpreted the cultural images that the ruling elite put before them. In some cases they took them at face value. In some cases they sought to reinterpret these symbols in a way that clearly aped the elite way of doing things but for a non-elite purpose, as in the organization of their associations. In others, such as apocalyptic literature, they actively subverted them to create a message that entirely contradicted the original meaning and purpose. The non-elite cannot simply
be seen as receptacles for the values that their social betters deigned to send their way. Popular culture was more creative than that. People were always able to adopt, adapt and reject as they saw fit.

The non-elite frequently bore the charge of being indiscriminate and gullible. Popular religious ideas in particular earned the pejorative label of being mere superstitions, foisted on a credulous public by a mercenary and cynical class of diviners, oracle interpreters and magicians. This does too little justice to the active use to which people put these religious ideas so as to understand, influence and control their social environment. Similarly, elite condemnation of the crowd in the games focused on their seemingly mindless and wanton obsession with trivial horse races and gladiatorial combats. In fact, the games were a place where the non-elite took an active role in consuming the images that elite benefactors placed before them. The detailed expertise that many of the crowd exhibited acted both to establish social identities and as a training in the key life skills that a member of the non-elite needed to survive and thrive in Roman society.

In an article on using less conventional sources for gleaning evidence concerning daily life in the Roman world, Millar rightly notes that ‘in a perfectly literal sense’, ancient historians ‘do not know what we are talking about’. The problems of discovering lay attitudes from elite sources can seem to be insurmountable. No ready made body of source material exists. Evidence is fragmentary, with the sources sometimes obscure and usually far from comprehensive. I make use of elite literary texts, popular texts such as oracles and joke books, papyri, graffiti, magical spells and curses, as well as inscriptions, law codes and archaeological artefacts. Precision is impossible in this situation and may in any case be inappropriate for a subject area that requires a high level of generalization. Most of these generalizations will be subject to major exceptions given that we are dealing with evidence drawn from very different times and places. It definitely involves some speculation if only to put forward the most likely and plausible solutions. Overall the argument proceeds by piling up fragments that give a reasonable impression of what it was like to be one of the people in Rome. Nor can a book of this size hope to be comprehensive – I have, as already mentioned, omitted the army, but also do not cover the status of lower class women’s culture adequately, nor do I enter into the dense debate concerning the degree of non-elite literacy, which in any case risks seeing the people as mattering only to the extent that they could participate in elite culture. I have focused on specific areas of religious practice, such as oracles, festivals and exorcism, where I believe these to be critical to understanding the popular culture, but there were many other rites, such
as household worship, mystery cults and disposal of the dead, which do not receive the coverage they deserve. The regions are underrepresented, with Rome, as usual, hogging the limelight. I am also guilty of using the term ‘elite’ somewhat indiscriminately to cover all the wealthy and powerful in Roman society. In reality, of course, elite culture was every bit as diverse as I am arguing the non-elite culture to have been. Elite literature cannot therefore be read simply as an unmediated presentation of elite attitudes. But in the context of a book about the people, the term ‘elite’ will have to do as a historical generalization to stop the argument from grinding to a halt in a quagmire of qualifications.

Roman popular culture changed. Rome was a society in constant, albeit steady, transition and non-elite culture changed with it. It is very easy to slip into a view that sees popular life as an unchanging cycle of recurrent life events, a permanent now of seasons and festivals. This is an exaggeration. The creation of a large empire, the growth of a huge capital city to match, and the changes in the leadership structure of Roman society all gave great impetus to the popular culture to adapt itself to these unsettling new realities. In the later empire, new popular heroes and religious movements testified to the continued dynamism and ingenuity that characterized the non-elite’s attempts to protect their interests and get something out of the system. Maintaining access to some form of power through patronage, whether secular or spiritual, and having to adapt when social realities changed: the people were no different to the elite in that respect.

The first chapter concentrates on the ways in which the non-elite dealt with the significant array of problems that beset their lives. If the elite had their paideia, the people had communal experience found in such things as fables and proverbs: a knowledge and practical wisdom won from the daily battles they engaged in to survive. In the eyes of the elite this was knowledge that was simply not worth having; the people were ignorant of everything that really mattered. But this archive of collective wit and repertoire of communal action mattered in the popular world. The people shared a range of tactics that enabled them better to cope with living with Roman inequality. One element of this was the active management of social superiors, not so much wealth-management but management of the wealthy. Another was that the non-elite had a strong sense of social justice that operated as, in Thompson’s famous phrase, a ‘moral economy’ to ensure that the elite fulfilled their social obligations to the people. The popular world was one full of physical insecurity, with both physiological and psychological distress. Fear was pervasive, both real (wild animals, illness, thieves, bandits, authorities) and imagined (demons, premonitory dreams, portents). The people acquired by
themselves a set of creative, if sometimes contradictory, means to stay alive in this threatening, risky environment. Mutually exclusive practices coexisted within the non-elite view, but such occasional contradictions served to help the people adapt to changing circumstances. They supplied a range of options on which to draw according to the requirements of the particular situation.

In case the popular culture should appear as calmly rational, I move on to examine the mental health of the non-elite. A huge amount of profitable work, pioneered by Garnsey, has been done on the level of physical health that the Romans had. Here I look at what degree of mental health we can reasonably expect to have existed given what we know about the various kinds of social stressors that most people faced. Hierarchy and violence cause human beings high levels of stress and stress-related disorders, and both factors were in plentiful supply in Roman society. Mental health should not be confused with madness. Rather mental health represents a spectrum, ranging from severely debilitating illnesses such as schizophrenia to a range of less serious problems such as depression and personality disorders. Modern comparative evidence would lead us to expect as poor a level of mental health among the overall Roman population as was the case with their physical health. The evidence would also strongly suggest that incidence of mental disorders will have correlated negatively with social status. The world of aberrant mental phenomena was therefore a core issue for the popular culture to deal with.

If one thing characterizes popular culture for most people, though, it is its informality, fun and irreverence. The third chapter looks at the festivals that the people enjoyed to alleviate the stresses of their everyday lives by turning their hierarchical world bottom up. Using Bakhtin’s notion of carnival, I look at the themes of the inversion of the normal hierarchy, the popular focus on the body and its functions to bring everyone down to the same level, and the use of humour to mock and ridicule all forms of authority. This spirit of carnival, however, spilled over into all forms of non-elite fun. It was not just contained in an annual jamboree. The elite found this unsettling in that many of their members chose to participate in these popular pleasures. In the collapse of the republic and the crisis of leadership it engendered, it became clear that a new way of integrating the government and the people had to be found. I argue that the imperial games can be seen as a way of incorporating some of the carnival spirit so as to entice the people into a new social contract. Popular culture fed upwards into new forms of elite behaviour.

The elite and the people inhabited different sensory worlds. Whether it was in their use of delicate perfumes, fine art, or writing itself, the elite strove to define itself in terms of sensory refinement
and taste. The non-elite, by contrast, lived in narrow, noisy, stinking places of overweening proximity. The elite adopted certain practices precisely because they were in contradiction with popular behaviour, but they then used this invented sense of their own good taste to condemn the non-elite as immoral and worthless: the city’s filth and scum. The city was seen as particularly threatening because the senses were thought to affect the individual’s physical and moral self directly. You were what you smelled. The new imperial settlement sought to re-order the sensory universe by giving the non-elite access to taste, thereby bringing it under the calming and morally improving influence of the refinements that the elite had previously sought to keep for themselves. The splendour of imperial largesse overwhelmed the senses. Luxury became a point of communal consensus, even if this did create tensions with the traditional elite. Most analysis has focused on the architecture, art and the use of urban space to convey powerful imperial images and ideological messages. Here I look at how the emperors used the whole world of the senses to create and manage a new context for the coming together of ruler and ruled. The literary texts which form the basis for this chapter are themselves expressive of a new sensuousness in Roman literature, which reflected a wider cultural shift in that direction. The overblown tales of imperial largesse, while not fully believable as records of historical fact, show that luxury became the normal context for the meeting between the emperor and his people, whatever misgivings the literary elite might still have had about that fact.

Many slaves hated their masters. Many free men loathed their patrons. Many provincials despised Rome. Any analysis of the popular which did not look at how these people expressed the resentments born of their subordination would be seeing Roman culture too much from the elite point of view. Resistance, however, is a broad term that can cover a whole array of acts, ranging from the dramatic revolts of Spartacus to the daily acts of dissent and deceit that a slave might save for his master. I suggest that popular culture, as the culture of the subordinate classes, will always try and carve out for itself a free space in which it has greater room for self-expression and manoeuvre. In Rome, this was achieved primarily though the use of new, imported religions. The dominant culture will largely be indifferent to such spaces so long as they do not publicly threaten the status quo, at which point they will come down with full state coercive power. But the powerful will also try and incorporate elements of the oppositional subculture into a new mode of government, as the Romans did with Constantine’s conversion to Christianity.

Rome did not possess a monolithic, homogeneous culture. The concept of popular culture brings in difference, diversity and
2. **Introduction: Elite and Popular Cultures**

Resistance to how we see the Roman world. This in itself raises questions about the degree to which people actually believed the emperors’ ideological claims to good governance. Focusing on the production of images in imperial art and architecture runs the risk of ignoring their reception. Once we recognize that the people could actively reinterpret and undermine any image that was put before them, it becomes impossible to be so confident about how those images were perceived. Popular culture in ancient Rome was not just about folklore; it was about how people sometimes mocked, subverted and insulted their superiors; how they manipulated the elite to get something of their own way; and how they saw through the ideologies by which the powerful sought to dominate them.
Problem-solving

Problems and risk

This chapter deals with the attitudes, tactics and beliefs that helped the overwhelming majority of the non-elite make a relatively reasonable living in all but the most exacting periods of crisis. I have characterized this approach as one of problem-solving because it seems to me that life for most people represented a series of difficulties to be overcome, of a varying nature and size. Most of these problems had arisen before and were already addressed by cultural attitudes that people had learned at their mother’s or father’s knee. The non-elite therefore came ready prepared to address most of the troubles that were likely to come their way.

Difficult problems tend to share certain characteristics. First, they lack clarity in that it is often unclear exactly what the problem is, what has caused it or what will be the outcome of doing nothing. Difficult problems also tend to force people to confront multiple goals that they might have and to decide between them by selecting a least-bad option. Above all, difficult problems are complex – they include a variety of interrelated factors and often involve the pressure of time constraints too. Modern management textbooks tell us that the resolution of tough problems like these requires each factor to be tackled in turn. The problem for the average Roman was they had only very limited knowledge on which to base their decisions. They did not have the luxury of modern analysis. I would argue that, in such an uncertain environment, the popular approach to problems was generally characterized by one or more of the following: keeping to simple,
clearly defined solutions; focusing on one primary aim; relying on trusted techniques; sticking firmly to their own areas of expertise; referring to backward-looking precedents; trusting individual cunning first and turning to mutualism only occasionally; and finally trying to kick the problem upstairs to those with more resources to cope with the situation.

Exactly what constitutes a problem is often socially constructed. It is not just a rational balancing act between a fixed set of dilemmas. Certain priorities are probably fairly universal – food, marriage plans, threats to safety – but others vary considerably in the degree of importance which people attach to them. As is so often the case in Roman society, status concerns loomed large. A significant portion of the oracles and spells of the Roman world concerned the removal of perceived and actual threats to status, opportunities for status advancement, and gaining revenge for actions by social competitors that had resulted in a loss of face.

The main variable that confronted any member of the non-elite when facing a problem was that of risk. Risk means facing an uncertain future and in a world where the average person considered themselves ‘vulnerable to impoverishment’, and even middling sorts ‘lived under a permanent threat of impoverishment’, levels of uncertainty were high. Put simply, the man in the street was never far from becoming the man on the street. Gallant has shown that when faced with a ‘capricious natural environment and armed with a rudimentary technology, Greek peasants developed an extensive but delicate web of risk-management strategies’ to help them cope. Recently, Eidinow has provided us with a remarkable study of how the ancient Greeks used oracles and curses to control risk, finding that ‘those who used oracles were uncertain and wanted to be sure they were making the right choice; those who turned to curses were usually already in a situation of danger and wanted to limit the damage their enemies might inflict’. In addition to this, I suggest that risk can usefully be thought of as representing volatility, as it does in modern portfolio management theory. The problem with the term ‘risk’ is that it tends to highlight the downside. Volatility is a more neutral term that reflects the fact that risk can produce equally good and bad results. Risk in itself, therefore, is not the problem. It is the vulnerability of the risk-taker to negative events that will dictate their appetite for taking risk.

Risk perceptions changed according to social status. The rich were able to tolerate high degrees of volatility of returns and so were happy to invest in speculative ventures such as shipping. Those close to subsistence level were much more vulnerable to volatility and so focused on controlling their downside risks, even if this came at the
expense of giving up some upside possibility. Broadly speaking, risk
tolerance was inversely related to social status. Compare the extrava-
gantly reckless speculation of the nouveau riche Trimalchio in the
Satyricon, where his fortunes oscillate to the tune of tens of millions
per day, with the natural conservatism of the rustic in the Aesop
Romance, riding an ass, loaded with wood, to which he says, ‘The
sooner we get there and get the wood sold for a dozen farthings, the
sooner you’ll get two of them for fodder. I’ll take two for myself, and
we’ll keep the eight against bad times, for fear we’ll get sick or some
bad weather will come along unexpectedly and keep us from getting
out.’ Trimalchio is mocked because his behaviour is a caricature of
rich freedmen aping the risk-taking attitudes of the elite to an absurd
degree. By contrast, the peasant living on little more than subsistence
income levels has to employ basic risk-management techniques –
ensure a sale, save for a rainy day – to keep himself from falling into
starvation. He has prioritized his aims and adopted a clear, tried-and-
tested strategy, revolving around the utilization of his own area of
expertise, which, in this case, is selling firewood. Interestingly, Tacitus
notes that both the utterly poor and the vastly rich could be shame-
lessly reckless. In fact, recklessness was associated with the needy.
Perhaps by the time an individual sank into destitution their risk
appetite increased again; either they had nothing further to lose or
they needed to take substantial risks in order to make any meaningful
difference to their lives.

An additional issue concerning risk that affected people’s handling
of it was that harvests in the Roman world varied considerably from
year to year. Agricultural volatility can be exceptionally high in the
Mediterranean region, with average variations in interannual wheat
yields in excess of 60 per cent in Tunisia. Egypt at 12 per cent has
the lowest annual variation in yield, which helps account for the reli-
ance emperors had on it for generating tax revenues and surplus grain
supplies. The distribution of the crop returns will not therefore have
exhibited the bell-shaped, normal distribution curve that statistics
tell us to expect from a particular set of outcomes. In practice, the
curve for Roman harvests will have exhibited kurtosis, meaning that
it had ‘fat tails’. Whereas a normal curve tells us to expect two thirds
of outcomes to be within one standard deviation of the norm, with
only an occasional extreme event, the reality was that extreme, four
or five standard deviation events happened far more frequently than
would statistically be expected. Bumper harvests could easily be
followed by years of dearth. Unless reserves had been put aside,
the impact of these shocks could be devastating. The effect of these
two additional factors was to place even more emphasis on risk
control. The overriding aim of the vulnerably poor, those close to the
threshold of subsistence, was to secure stability of income at or above subsistence and try and put something by for a rainy day. Those with greater assets at their disposal could afford to take a more liberal attitude to risk-taking. For all, life involved constant calculation, weighing up the risk and likely outcomes based on what had happened in the past.

As well as employing risk-control techniques, the non-elite sought to spread their risk and so limit their potential downside by diversification. Peasants sowed a variety of crops, lest one should be hit by disease. Younger family members might be sent out to work as apprentices to provide a valuable additional income from a source less correlated with agricultural returns. It was an attitude that spread to whatever they were doing, so that when faced with illness it seemed natural to use a variety of resources in order to find a cure, be they magical incantations, folk remedies or Greek medicine. Patrons needed to be cultivated so that they might help out in times of dearth. Networks of friends, kin and neighbours also had to be established as an insurance policy against hard times. The mantra of ‘spread risk, diversify sources of income’ informed much of non-elite life.

In many ways the popular attitude to volatility was derived from their idea of the ‘limited good’. The non-elite saw everything as a zero-sum game. They did well only to the extent that another did badly. Moreover, ‘limited good’ means that another’s good fortune is a direct threat to your own. In fact, one’s own misfortune comes to be seen as the direct result of another’s gain. This was a sensible position to adopt in a society where economic growth was close to zero. If the size of the pie stayed the same then someone having a good feed was having it at another’s expense. This is why putting curses on social competitors was not just the result of ‘envy, fuelled by gossip’ that might lead to supernatural attack; it was a desperate attempt by people to stop someone else taking what little they had, leaving them stranded on the wrong side of the subsistence threshold.

Likewise a belief in the power of luck, which the non-elite almost uniformly seem to have shared, can be seen as a belief in the power of averaging (in that over the long term luck will even out). This is itself just another restatement of the limited-good hypothesis. If a person were having more than their fair share of luck, it meant by definition he or she must either be cheating or relying on the manipulation of magical powers to sustain it. The only rational response to such a situation was to launch a counter-attack to try and rebalance the position, through means such as curses. This was a mindset born of a society that fostered fear, envy and intense rivalry among its members. People fought not just for basic subsistence but for what might be termed ‘subsistence status’. The non-elite were prepared to
act vigorously to maintain their limited interests and standing in the world if they perceived it to be under attack from another.

Did it work? Did the popular approach to solving the problems they faced make them happy and fulfilled human beings? That is too much to answer. But what happiness economics can tell us is that their approach was a good one for maximizing their overall levels of satisfaction given the low level of resources available to them. The Easterlin paradox observes that at low levels of income happiness increases quickly for only minor additional increases in income, but not beyond. People’s aspirations increase along with their income and, after their basic needs have been met, most find satisfaction only in being relatively better off than others. The wealthy, it seems, are like dogs chasing the tail of their own happiness, only ever content if they are richer than their neighbour. Rome was a world where even small changes in income or luck could have a major impact on the quality of life of the average person. It could also have significant concomitant effects on their relative standing within the community, which in itself would likely have an additional impact on their quality of life. Their focus, naturally therefore, was on doing everything in their power to ensure that they secured those small additional boosts to their income that would push them up the status ladder, while avoiding those gut-wrenching hits to the downside. As Augustine said, the labourers in the fields ‘sing with transports of joy’ at times of abundant harvest. Or, as they traditionally say in Iceland when they win the jackpot, ‘Beached whale!’.

Family management

The popular culture had a different attitude towards time. High mortality rates themselves affected people’s attitudes, given that average life expectancy at birth was probably only twenty-five years. The elite prided themselves on being able to look to the long term, with the family acting as the focus of this social investment. The elite caricatured the poor as being fixated with daily issues such as bread and circuses. In fact some of the poor may also have aspired to longer-term dynastic ambitions, as is seen in some gravestones of freedmen marking their success for perpetuity. But, for most of the lower orders, long-term thinking was a luxury they could ill afford. More pressing problems crowded in on them closer to home: finding the rent, which sometimes was paid by the day, buying the daily bread, getting work. In difficult times this could require drastic measures: feeding the
women or weaker children less food to keep up the strength of the male wage-earners; moving down the food chain to eat the acorns which usually fed the pigs, along with other crops not usually considered good for human consumption; and in some circumstances selling one or more of the children into slavery, or to a begging gang who would mutilate them by twisting their limbs and cutting out their tongues, to increase their begging-power.

These actions provided immediate solutions to current problems and it would be wrong to see them as short-termist. Most people’s lives had a hand-to-mouth aspect, a day-to-day outlook. They had no alternative but to focus on keeping their heads above water, even if that meant a tradesman selling off the tools of the trade that supplied his living. Lucian has a fictional tale about the widow of a smith slipping into poverty after his death, selling his tools for cash, then spinning wool to help raise their child, who she plans to prostitute eventually to support them both. From such a perspective, time becomes an extremely relative concept. Longer-term planning had to take a back seat. Just hanging on in there for a few more days until the boats carrying the corn arrived, or they started hiring for the new public-building works, could seem like an eternity. The alternative, after all, was death and that was only a solution in the most negative of ways.

Problem-solving within the context of the family group was paramount. Family management was vital if the domestic unit was to maximize its resistance to shocks and smooth the volatility of its income and expenditure. Otherwise life would be as it was fated for the man born when Mars or Saturn stood in aspect to Jupiter in the second house, and ‘his life will be constantly changing, at one time abounding in riches, at another oppressed by poverty’.

Family, kinship and social roles defined social identity, and the family unit represented the primary buffer against risk. As the Aesop fable says, family life is like a bundle of sticks – so stick together. Risk was highest when most of a family group’s income came from the same source. For this reason women were exceptionally vulnerable to the death of their husband, who for most was the main breadwinner. Many widows fell into dreadful poverty. In crisis situations such as this, the solution to the problem was clear: cut costs where they are easiest to make by reducing the number of mouths to feed: ‘My husband died and I was left to toil and suffer for my daughter ... and now I no longer have the means to feed her ... I have requested that you receive her from me as your daughter.’ If children found themselves orphaned and so unattached to any family unit, it was vital for them to try and re-attach themselves to another as soon as possible, primarily by looking to the wider kinship structure.
The mother of Tare, an Egyptian girl, died while they were in Syria. Tare wrote as follows to her aunt back home: ‘Please be informed, dear aunt, that my mother, your sister, has been dead since Easter. While my mother was with me, she was my whole family; since her death, I have remained here alone in a strange land with no one to help.’

If the family unit was intact, increasing income, preferably from diversified sources, enhanced security. Again, the younger members of the non-elite family played an important role here. The orator and writer Lucian, originally from a modest background, describes how at about the age of thirteen he was sent out to work as an apprentice to a sculptor: ‘in a short time I would even delight my father by regularly bringing him an income’. Thirteen is likely to have been a late age to be put to productive use, probably reflecting Lucian’s somewhat wealthier family background. Something between age five and ten seems to have been the most common age for a non-elite child to be sent to work. One gravestone is inscribed: ‘In memory of Viccentia, a very nice girl, a gold-worker. She lived for nine years.’ For most parents, children acted as income generator, insurance scheme and pension provider, all rolled into one. As Augustine says, the man with many children and grandchildren thinks that he is ‘assured against the dangers of death’.

But children were a cost base too, an expensive commodity to maintain for the years before they could generate a positive return. For that reason, the head of the family had to take care to manage the overall size of the unit, ensuring that the structure of the family was regulated to spread costs evenly: ‘sometimes when parents have begotten one, two, or three children, they fear to give birth to any more lest they reduce the others to beggary’. In Egypt, at about the time of the birth of Jesus, one absent father, Hilarion, wrote to his expectant wife: ‘I beg you and entreat you to take care of the child and, if I receive my pay soon, I will send it up to you. If you have the baby before I return, if it is a boy, let it live; if it is a girl, expose it.’ Exposure horrifies modern sentiments, but it is important to see it in the context of the good of the overall family unit. It was also not the worst option for the baby: exposure was an alternative to simple infanticide. Seneca describes how some fathers threw out weak and deformed babies rather than expose them. Nor was exposure always an economic measure: some were cast out simply because they had been born under an unlucky star or their father ‘favours his expulsion’ and has ‘a belief in misfortune’. Sometimes it was fated by the stars that a child, ‘will be nourished for a few days before being thrown into water’, or ‘will either be exposed or not nurtured’ (in other words, not fed), or ‘be suffocated at birth’. Exposed babies