

Living at the Margins

African Peasants in an Age
of Extremes 300–900 CE

PAOLO TEDESCO



Hiersemann
Stuttgart
2025

CONTENTS

Note on Abbreviations	11
Preface	13
Origin and Development of This Book	13
Acknowledgments	14
Influences	16
Introduction: Writing a Peasant History	19
The Argument	19
Defining the Peasant	22
Differentiation of the Peasantry	25
Peasant, Landowner, and the State	29
Summary of Themes	33
Chapter One: A Land Teeming with Peasants	39
“The African Age of the Empire”	39
Senatorial Elites	43
Provincial Elites	49
The Middle Ground	54
Ecclesiastical Estates	58
The Logic of the Estate	60
Smallholders and Tenants	63
Wage Laborers	67
Agricultural Slaves	70
Conclusion	73
Chapter Two: Ending of Empire and Peasant Trajectories	75
From Empire to Peasant Household	75
Change and Continuity in the African Society	79
Transformations in the Tax System	87
Agrarian Regime and Trajectories of Trade	91

Micro-Regional Divergence and Peasant Histories	97
Tripolitania	99
Mauretania	101
Byzacena and Numidia	104
Conclusion	107
 Chapter Three: Peasants at the Margins: The Fundus Tuletianos	111
A Place of No Significance	111
An Unusual Dossier	113
A Diverse Landscape	115
Demography	118
Breaking Down the Peasantry	120
Peasants, Landlords, and the State	128
The Moral Economy of the Peasants	134
Agrarian Change or Peasant Economic Strategy?	141
 Chapter Four: The World the Peasants Made	149
The Prehistory of the Tuletianos	149
Before Land Concentration	151
Buyers	155
Sellers	161
Tuletianos's Neighbors	180
Notables and Outsiders	189
The Legacy of Late Antiquity	196
 Chapter Five: The Peasantry of the Byzantine Period	201
Peasant Trajectories to the Early Middle Ages	201
Restructuring Peasant Communities	205
New, Old Estates	213
The Fictions of Permanent Labor	218
State Demand and Peasant Prosperity	224
 Chapter Six: Declining Prosperity and Peasant Life	231
Conquest, Settlement, and Taxation	234
When Things Fell Apart but Economic Life Continued	239
Large Estates or Slave Plantations?	244

Mixed Labor Regime	250
Conclusion	256
Conclusions	259
Bibliography	267
Primary Sources	267
Secondary Literature	274
Index of Names	333
Index of Places	347
General Index	353

NOTE ON ABBREVIATIONS

In the tables, I use a few abbreviations that must be read as follows:

TA	Tablets Albertini
n.d.	no date
b.	before
a.	after
f.	<i>folles</i>
s.	<i>solidi</i>
hh	heirs

The names underlined in the tables identify the sellers, the buyers, or the neighbors who were members of the household examined in the relevant paragraph. Prices marked by * indicate that the monetary value of the transaction was missing from the original Tablet and has been reconstructed using the list of prices in Tablet xxxiii.

PREFACE

Origin and Development of This Book

In December 2019, I delivered my Joseph C. Miller Memorial Lecture at the Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies (BCDSS). My piece was titled “The Rise and Fall of North Africa’s Peasantry, 300–700 CE,” and the work here at hand comes after five years in which I extensively dedicated my time and efforts to the same topic. But besides my personal endeavors, none of these pages could have reached the public if not for the contribution of many institutions and esteemed colleagues. First and foremost, I would like to thank the community of historians at BCDSS: they are the real inspiration for this project, second to the work of the late Joseph C. Miller (1939–2019), whose outstanding academic achievements I set out to commemorate as I made my first steps in the study of rural slavery. From Colin Bundy’s *The Rise and Fall of the Southern African Peasantry*, I borrowed much more than the title of my initial lecture: it offered me a model and a method to follow the trends of peasants and the peasantry in the ever-changing historical scenarios of rural Africa. Bundy’s view frames the whole process of South African capitalist development through the emergence and decline of the peasantry, which was a key component in the economic growth of the region. Simply put, the structural underdevelopment of the peasantry acted as a counterpart to the rise of capitalism in South Africa.¹

My initial goal was to trace the social and economic trajectories of the North African peasantry in the transition from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages. Focusing on this period, I planned to distinguish phases of peasant prosperity from periods of regression, when peasants were almost indistinguishable from rural slaves.

But after five years of intense (at times frantic) research, this book has begun to pursue its own goals, which—I am not embarrassed to admit—moved away from my original purpose. Now, at its completion, this work revolves around the various fates of African peasants in all their multifaceted social categories and realities, from farmers to smallholders, from tenants to sharecroppers, and from labor tenants to wage laborers. It confronts multiple patterns of land accessibility and employment, different agrarian environments, eventual setbacks due to natural causes, the acceleration of administrative

1 Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry*, pp. 11–12.

deregulation, and the more biting forms of enforcement imposed by the state and the local authorities. Altogether, the six chapters of this volume restore the rich and stratified diversity of the African rural population, a world that met its end when that very same process of capitalist expansion described by Bundy for South Africa, and by several other scholars for North Africa, began to unfold.²

Acknowledgments

Due to its wide-ranging aims and ambitions, this book is not a solo effort but the result of a tight, scholarly exchange with several institutions, colleagues, and friends. First and foremost, I would like to thank the German Research Foundation (DFG) for funding the project *Globalizing the Mediterranean Economy in the Seventh Century* (TE 1300/2–1). The present volume is part of this research initiative, and without the financial assistance of the DFG, it would have probably never seen the light. My gratitude also goes to the Department of Medieval History at the University of Tübingen, which has proved to be an indispensable and supportive platform for developing and refining the ideas within this volume. In particular, my gratitude goes out to Steffen Patzold for our intense, friendly, and very productive collaboration over the last eight years. Together, we organized seminars, workshops, conferences, and related publications, all of which helped me immensely while I gathered and analyzed the materials for this project. Steffen read and commented on the entire volume, offering precious suggestions that only a true early medieval historian like himself could give. He is also responsible for the editorial destination of this study, which is also his: the *History of the Middle Ages Series* (*Monographien zur Geschichte des Mittelalters*) of Hiersemann Verlag.

I wrote most of this book in my office at the University of Tübingen, but it benefited enormously from the conversations I had with my colleagues when I presented its preliminary versions in many institutions across Italy and Germany, such as at my home institution in July 2021, at the University of Rome La Sapienza in November 2021, at the DFG RomanIslam Center in Hamburg in December 2022, and at the State University of Pisa in February 2023. I am also grateful to Peter Sarris, Caroline Goodson, Rory

2 Bourdieu – Sayad, *Uprooting*, pp. 4–14; Launay, *Paysans algériens*, pp. 223, 280; Valensi, *On the Eve of Colonialism*, p. ix; *Tunisian Peasants*, pp. 220–228; Seddon, *Moroccan Peasants*, pp. 141–164; Pascon – Ennaji, *Les paysans sans terre au Maroc*, pp. 16–22; Andersson, *Peasant or Proletarian?*, pp. 7–21; Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt*, pp. 40–41, 96–97.

Naismith, and Lorenzo Bondioli for our vibrant and lively discussions at the Department of History, Cambridge University, in March 2023, during my stay there as a visiting fellow.

The final part of the manuscript was completed in the wonderful environment of the Firestone Library at Princeton University during the summer months of 2024. My sincere thanks go to the Seeger Center for Hellenic Studies for providing the generous fellowship that allowed my stay. The culture and the tradition of Princeton was a truly valuable source of inspiration as I applied the finishing touches to this work. All the esteemed friends and colleagues that I have met at Princeton during this time have given me insights that enabled me to bring the book into its current form. I would particularly thank Helmut Reimitz who provided advice, help and companionship.

I want to thank Eugenia Vitello (Oxford), who has demonstrated unwavering enthusiasm for my research and has helped me to improve it in numerous ways. She shepherded this manuscript (both intellectually and electronically) as it emerged in its final form, drew the maps, and discussed in depth many of its key sections. I am also grateful to Merle Eisenberg (Oklahoma State), who read the entire manuscript and offered detailed comments about its contents, structure, and style. Merle acted as a true editor, suggesting several crucial tweaks to make the text clearer and easier to read. I am thankful to Brent Shaw (Princeton), who not only read and annotated the whole manuscript but also discussed several possible changes and structural improvements, all aimed at offering the reader a better glimpse into the relationships among the short- and the long-term changes within the rural African world. As it will emerge from the book, Brent's *Bringing in the Sheaves* has had a strong influence on my decision to research rural labor.³ I am grateful to Jaqueline Bemmer (Dublin) who offered comments from the perspective of a legal historian and appreciated my non-normative approach to late Roman law. My thanks also go out to Noel Lenski (Yale), who made helpful comments on the first four chapters of the manuscript; Jamie Wood (Lincoln, UK), who offered important insights on chapters one and two; and John Haldon (Princeton), whose expertise in Byzantine Africa was indispensable for the fifth chapter. Amar Salem Baadj's (Relizane) work was a constant source of inspiration while writing about rural labor in early medieval North Africa. Finally, Lorenzo Bondioli (Harvard) commented on the sixth chapter, focusing on Islamic Ifrīqiya. I want to thank him for helping me with his field. He has saved me from making some rather perilous missteps.

3 Shaw, *Bringing in the Sheaves*, pp. xv–xx.

The contributions of these students of history are especially dear given that not all of them agree with my conclusions: nevertheless, their generous interventions, especially their unsparing criticisms of the first draft of the manuscript, made all the difference.

Jolanta Komornicka was an exemplary copy editor: she made sure that the final manuscript was as free of errors, opacities, and contradictions as it could possibly be. I wish also to thank Yusuf Umrethwala for proofreading the Arabic language. My junior Tübingen collaborator Sabina Garber has on several occasions cooperated on editorial work. I am also grateful to all those who took part in my seminars *Our Daily Bread* (Summer 2023), *Medieval History from the Ground Up* (Fall 2023), and *Priests, Peasants, and Outcasts* (Fall 2024): they all showed a deep interest in the stories of ordinary women and men from Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

My final thank goes to the staff of the Hiersemann Verlag, who trusted my project and have so patiently waited to see this manuscript to production. I am particularly grateful to Simone Leidinger for her sterling and inspired work in getting my ideas translated into print.

Influences

Finally, I must acknowledge my intellectual debt to several authors who were not directly involved in the preparation of the manuscript but whose works have left me in their intellectual debt. *Living at the Margins* is a tribute to Chris Wickham, whose theoretical and empirical work on the peasant mode of production remains influential and provocative. Wickham has demonstrated how peasant societies had their own internal logic: peasants decided how much land to farm, which crops to cultivate, how to use the eventual surplus, and how to reduce the risks of periodic crisis.⁴ The emergence of a land-owning elite was the main factor transforming this system.⁵

I admire the works of the late James Campbell Scott (1936–2024), who explained how peasants all over the world tended both to deal with and shy away from external powers, whether in the form of the always present landlords or the intrusive and

4 Wickham, *The Mountain and the City*, pp. 40–67; *Land and Power*, pp. 43–75, 201–226; *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 519–588.

5 Wickham, “How Did the Feudal Economy work?,” pp. 9–11.

demanding state.⁶ Scott's reflections on the contradictions between the state's vision of the peasantry and the actual organization of local rural societies has been crucial to revealing the true lives of peasants beyond the official accounts.

Richard Hodges's theoretical and archaeological studies on how peasants joined and eventually expanded both local and interregional trade have been key to understanding the decentralized structures of commercial exchange in the post-imperial centuries.⁷

My less proximate inspirations are just as important. I have learned a great deal from Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Les Paysans de Languedoc* and his writings on the peasantry. Although I do not share Le Roy Ladurie's view of demography as the most prominent motor of historical change, his study of the impact of the long-term agrarian cycle on the peasantry, combined with his account of daily life in the isolated rural community of Montaillou from 1300 to 1320, encouraged me to embrace his approach. Following in his footsteps, I decided to dedicate parts of this work to microhistory, including in the third and fourth chapters, where the stories of the average peasants from the fundus Tuletianos feature prominently: these silent figures, so long absent from history, have now been given their rightful place within the historical transformations that led from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages.⁸

Last but not least, I owe a huge intellectual debt to Jairus Banaji. His efforts to re-center the focus of ancient and medieval agrarian history on the question of labor have been emulated throughout this book. In the following pages, I strive to present a model of agrarian organization that does not simply revolve around the social category of landless peasantry. As in Banaji's key argument, I too agree that to cover all, or at least most, types of labor arrangements within both the ancient and the medieval countryside, we must—as far as possible—reexamine tenancy as an aspect of labor deployment.⁹ In this sense, my work sets out to prove, once again, that history, especially the real history that has until a few decades ago evaded the interests of scholarship, is too complex to be placed under the logical frame of a few, well-defined social categories.

Princeton, August 2024

6 Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, pp. 35–55; *Seeing like a State*, p. 3; *Decoding Subaltern Politics*, pp. 101–105. Notable works also include: *Weapons of the Weak*, pp. 70–74; *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, pp. 1–16; *The Art of Not Being Governed*, pp. 178–219; *Against the Grain*, pp. 116–149.

7 Hodges, *Primitive and Peasant Markets*, pp. 74–95; *Dark Age Economics*, pp. 41–66.

8 Le Roy Ladurie, *Les Paysans*, p. 135; *Montaillou*, pp. vii–xvii.

9 Banaji, *Theory as History*, pp. 108–111.