8.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I would like to develop a general contrast between the West and the East Mediterranean/Near East which has its roots in the classical world, especially the period known as late antiquity. By, say, 600, the West was defined by a tradition of tied labour inherited from the late Roman world and shaped both by the strength of slavery in the post-Roman tradition and by the legacy of the colonate. By contrast, in the East, much of the rural labour-force is best described as a landless peasantry that survived on short-term leases or by labour-tenancy on the large estates, where these existed. The eastern provinces of the Roman Empire were characterised by a disciplined aristocracy, a thriving monetary economy and densely populated countrysides.\(^1\) A new aristocracy emerged in the late fifth century, and one of its most striking features was its ability to build substantial estates and ensure that these properties remained intact over generations.

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\(^1\) Banaji 2007. A preliminary draft of this chapter was written for the JAC conference in London in May 2008. I am especially grateful to Henry Bernstein and Terry Byres, for their support and friendship, and their remarkable achievement in forging a whole discipline and sustaining it through some of the direst decades of British intellectual and political life.
Thus, the Apion estates in Egypt are attested from the 430s down to the 620s, when the last known member of the family, Flavius Apion III, was killed by the Persians.² Both Peter Sarris and I have described the main features of estate-organisation characteristic of this late antique aristocracy, viz. the direct management of substantial estates which grouped their workers into settlements that were both structurally and topographically sharply demarcated from the villages [kōmai].³ It is these workers whom I started by defining as a landless peasantry. The usual term for them was georgoi, but it is important to realise that, in their case, the term referred not to a smallholding peasantry but to rural households of whom the majority were clearly dependent on the estate for employment. In the more densely-settled eastern provinces, landlessness was endemic, and large estates were major employers of such labour.⁴ But the East Mediterranean was also characterised by a diversified labour-market with considerable fluidity in the forms of employment and types of contracts that wage-earners settled for. Sharecropping was widespread, and sustained the expansion of the wine industry, but so was casual labour and a host of more skilled employments/trades, some regulated to impede collusive wage-agreements⁵ or wage-inflation.⁶

Now, some of these features of the late antique East Mediterranean would have been true of the West as well. For example, Procopius tells us that the majority of Rome’s population in the 530s consisted of artisans and casual labourers.⁷ Also, there was no dramatic de-escalation of monetary economy in the West but rather a gradual decline. The crucial difference, of course, was that, by the sixth century, the late Roman aristocracies no longer ruled the state in the various ‘kingdoms’ that replaced the Empire, since the imperial system had ceased to exist and their survival depended on adjustments with the Barbarian rulers in the regions where they regrouped. In other words, when the western empire fell apart in the fifth century and the former Roman

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² P. Oxy. LXIII 4389 (439) for an early document; LVIII 3959 (12.1.620) and LXVIII 4703 (22.5.622) for the latest ones.
³ Sarris 2006, esp. Chapter 2; Banaji 2007, Chapters 6–7.
⁴ Banaji 1997, p. 93ff.
⁵ Cf 59.2.1 (483), where the Emperor Zeno bans collusive agreements in the skilled building trades, calling such behaviour monopolium.
⁶ Nov. Just. 122.1 (544), clearly reflecting a scarcity of labour of all types in the aftermath of the plague.
⁷ Procopius, BG 1.25.11 (Dewing, History of the Wars, Volume 3, 240–2).