Received: February 17, 2025 | Accepted: June 10, 2026

GRIG, L. POPULAR CULTURE AND THE END OF ANTIQUITY IN SOUTHERN GAUL, C. 400–550. CAMBRIDGE: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2024. 260p. ISBN: 9781108491440

Marcio Monteneri[1]

Lucy Grig, a professor at the School of History, Classics, and Archaeology at the University of Edinburgh, has been working for years on the question of popular culture in Antiquity, having previously written a book on the subject, *Popular Culture in the Ancient World* (2017). In her most recent work, *Popular Culture and the End of Antiquity in Southern Gaul, c. 400–550*, Grig expands on her reflections, now focusing on cultural transformations during Late Antiquity. In this new study, the author examines the social, economic, and religious changes in southern Gaul between 400 and 550 through the lens of popular culture, which was itself undergoing transformation during this period. Through an analysis of literary sources, particularly the sermons of Caesarius of Arles, as well as other materials like recent archaeological reports, the author explores the agency of different social groups, including artisans, beggars, peasants, shepherds, and others. Thus, Grig investigates the interaction of opposing forces, both top-down and bottom-up, operating within a context of profound transformations.

The book, as expected from Cambridge University Press, is certainly well-produced, free of major typographical errors, and includes a few colored and black-and-white images. It consists of seven chapters, including the introduction and conclusion. The chapters are well-balanced in terms of length—each ranging from 29 to 37 pages—with the longest and perhaps most important being Chapter 6, which is dedicated to a case study on the Kalends of January.

In the introduction, Grig presents what she and other authors, particularly Stuart Hall, understand as "popular culture." Popular culture, as defined by the author, is shaped through a continuous relationship—of influence and/or antagonism—with dominant culture. There is no fully formed, authentic, and autonomous popular culture that exists outside the force field of power relations and cultural domination. Through a brief discussion of historical sources, such as graffiti from Pompeii and

[1] Marcio Monteneri – University of São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil. E-mail: marciomonteneri@gmail.com.

Aphrodisias, as well as texts by Ammianus Marcellinus and Sidonius Apollinaris, the author raises a series of key questions for her investigation of popular culture in southern Gaul during Late Antiquity: what spaces ensured the expression of popular culture? Who frequented these places? What was the impact of labor organization on popular culture? What was the relationship between popular culture and social conflict? The focus then shifts specifically to southern Gaul, outlining the historical context of the main political and structural changes of the period. Here, the author also provides readers with essential background for understanding the activities of Bishop Caesarius and the Church of Provence. Finally, she introduces the main sources, methods, and themes. The literary evidence produced by the Late Antique Church is at the core of her analysis. The texts primarily include sermons but also conciliar documents, hagiographies, and letters. In her study, the author also incorporates material culture evidence, including survey reports,

excavations, and archaeological syntheses. The use of this material presents substantial methodological challenges. The distorted lens of episcopal writings and the often-limited archaeological record make access to popular culture particularly difficult.

In Chapter 2, *Urban Contexts for Popular Culture in an Age of Transformation*, Grig analyzes the transformations of cities in southern Gaul during Late Antiquity. The author combines textual and archaeological evidence to construct a comprehensive picture, focusing primarily on Arles and Marseille but also considering other urban centers such as Aix, Nîmes, and Narbonne. In this chapter, Grig examines the transformations in the urban landscape of these cities, the professions and identities of their inhabitants, the topographical and social impact of the Church on the urban environment, and the social relationships formed around these cities. The goal is to establish a context in which popular culture was shaped and experienced. Broadly speaking, the urban landscape of cities in southern Gaul underwent substantial changes during Late Antiquity. The abandonment of traditional public buildings, including entertainment venues where public spectacles organized by the elite took place, fostered the development of a more informal, "do-it-yourself" popular culture, including drinking, singing, dancing, and gambling. At the same time, the rise of the bishop to power and influence created new opportunities for the urban non-elite to have their voices heard.

In Chapter 3, *Popular Culture, Society and Economy. The Countryside in Transition in Late Antiquity*, Grig analyzes the main characteristics of the countryside during Late Antiquity. The author focuses primarily on some

of the landscapes that made up the territory of Arles—such as the lagoons to the south, including the Étang de Berre and the Étang de Vaccarés, the Camargue and Crau regions, the Alpilles hills, and the coastal area of Languedoc—but also examines spaces beyond this boundary. This section explores evidence of social organization and its changing patterns, economic activities, and the religious landscape of rural areas. The countryside, too, was in constant flux during Late Antiquity. The author identifies new settlement patterns as well as the growth of new centers of consumption and production. At the same time, the Late Antique Church sought to extend its social and economic influence over rural areas. After these transformations, secular and religious elites remained present across much of the landscape. However, there are also signs of greater autonomy for at least some rural populations. Together, Chapters 2 and 3 provide an important and necessary contextualization for understanding a popular culture deeply rooted in the society and economy of Late Antiquity.

In Chapter 4, *Christianizing Popular Culture: The View 'from the Pulpit'*, Grig examines popular culture as seen by the Church in Late Antiquity. The author analyzes the ways in which clerical discourse, particularly the sermons of Caesarius of Arles, constructed and contested popular culture. Grig also compares Caesarius' sermons with other voices from different periods and places. Through a comparative and "against the grain" reading of sources produced by religious elites, the author brings to light practices such as singing, dancing, and mockery, which were associated with non-elites. She demonstrates that, despite Caesarius' persistent attempts to define, shape, and control "unauthorized culture," his success was far from complete.

In Chapter 5, *An Alternative View: Lived Religion as Popular Culture*, Grig examines certain popular religious practices in the rural areas of southern Gaul during Late Antiquity. Drawing on ecclesiastical sources such as the texts of Gregory of Tours and the Vita Caesarii, as well

as material evidence, the author discusses a range of popular practices, including a cult dedicated to a sacred lake, festivals in honor of John the Baptist in Provence and North Africa, and rituals for protection against natural disasters, among others. To shed light on her approach to popular culture, the author incorporates insights from anthropological, archaeological, and religious studies. This analysis reveals that religious changes in Late Antiquity should not be understood as a top-down "Christianization." Instead, people and groups appropriated, created, adapted, and even resisted aspects of religion as defined by ecclesiastical discourse. This chapter, therefore, shifts away from a purely top-down

perspective centered on the ecclesiastical elite, instead considering a broader and more diverse range of popular religious practices on their own terms.

In Chapter 6, *The Kalends of January: The Persistence of Popular Culture*, Grig presents a case study on the festival of the Kalends of January. The author once again examines texts by Caesarius of Arles, along with other ecclesiastical sources from Gaul and different parts of the world. In this chapter, she provides an overview of the Kalends of January in Late Antiquity, discusses the ecclesiastical criticism of the festival, and closely examines the role of gift exchange (*strenae*) during the celebrations. Various academic approaches, particularly carnival theories, are considered in her interpretation of the festival. The celebration of the Kalends in the Roman Empire included both official public events and unofficial festivities—such as eating, drinking, singing, dancing, and revelry—many of which we know primarily through the Church's hostile response in Late Antiquity. Ritual practices carried out in both rural and urban settings, such as preparing a table filled with food to ensure abundance throughout the year and exchanging "good luck gifts" (*strenae*), were labeled as "superstitious" by clerics. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the festival from the perspective of popular culture was the tradition of door-to-door visits. New Year's revelers would go from house to house in various disguises: painting their faces, dressing as animals—especially as deer and cattle. To the dismay of their clerical opponents, men dressed as women, and women dressed as men. The Kalends revelers, often securely hiding their true identities under masks and costumes, gathered in groups and felt free to enjoy themselves. A clerical account by Asterius, Bishop of Amasea in the Black Sea region in the late fourth century, describes how revelers—including common beggars, actors, and even women—gathered primarily to visit the homes of local politicians and demand gifts in the form of cash. Grig interprets these descriptions as evidence of how the poor and marginalized creatively used the festivities as an opportunity to express themselves, improve their material conditions, and settle scores, particularly with corrupt and inept politicians.

Popular Culture and the End of Antiquity in Southern Gaul, c. 400–550, by Lucy Grig, is undoubtedly an innovative work, as it sheds light on a largely unexplored debate—the dynamics of popular culture in Late Antiquity—through an interdisciplinary approach that combines textual and material sources. Grig makes a significant contribution to this discussion by highlighting the interaction between popular and dominant culture, as well as the tensions and adaptations that shaped cultural practices during this period. One of the book's greatest strengths is its consistent use of an

against-the-grain reading of texts produced by religious elites, which allows for a perceptive exploration of the experiences and practices of subaltern and popular groups. However, the work leaves room for questions about what truly changed in popular culture during the transition from the 'Classical' world to Late Antiquity. Activities such as drinking, dancing, and gambling—described as hallmarks of a 'do-it-yourself' culture—appear to have existed in earlier periods, raising questions about

the extent of the cultural transformations suggested. This point could have been explored further, contributing to a clearer picture of the continuities and ruptures in this historical process. Despite this, the book offers a rich and thought-provoking analysis, establishing itself as a fundamental reference for studies on Late Antiquity and popular culture.