

The aim of this paper is to explore the fundamental tension between reciprocity and self-interest in the risk management strategies of inhabitants of rural communities in the late Roman world. The ancient sources reveal tensions between inclusiveness and exclusiveness within communities, and conflict between a consciously espoused ideology of reciprocity and a reality of factionalism, competition and petty jealousies. In recent comparative literature, it has been argued that these tensions hold communities together, and force them to create dynamic strategies for managing the resultant pressure.

Scholars have long recognized that the ideal of reciprocity is a key element in the cohesiveness of rural communities, and underlies strategies for risk management (e.g., Horden and Purcell 2000). By choosing to live in a community, individual households lessen the risk of subsistence crisis, and increase potential strategies for coping with such crisis. If a household in subsistence crisis calls on its neighbors for assistance, they will help—if they can—in order to safeguard their own survival when their own subsistence crisis arises. At the same time, rural communities are heterogeneous collections of alliances and loyalties, groups of households aware that they may at any moment find themselves in conflict with their neighbors for resources. The village is a stage for internecine disputes, disagreements between sedentary and pastoral populations and petty crime. The ideology which the community espouses and the reality of community behavior can, and frequently do, conflict.

Inclusion in a community involves interactions and activities which are theoretically voluntary but effectively compulsory (cf. Reynolds 1997). These activities include communal harvesting, processing and storage of grain, construction of agricultural buildings such as wells and cisterns, threshing floors, olive presses and granaries, and the maintenance of irrigation systems. The advantages of such behavior are clear. But each undertaking is fraught with tension. Who determines the order of plowing, of harvesting and threshing each household's grain? Who is responsible for recording the amount of grain each household stores in communal granaries? Who controls the release of that grain, and ensures that each individual takes only his share? Who regulates the irrigation system so that each plot of land receives its fair share of water? (cf. Shaw 1982). Drawing upon the agronomic treatise of Palladius and the Byzantine *Farmer's Law*, as well as legal, hagiographical, epigraphical, and papyrological sources, this paper explores reciprocal practices for managing risk in rural communities in the late Roman period, the tensions they created, and the strategies developed to manage those tensions.