CfP Responsive governance and population well-being in later Antiquity (3rd – 6th c. AD)

For a conference that will be held in **Stellenbosch**, South Africa, from **13 to 15 November 2025**, we are inviting abstracts for papers on government involvement and concern for population well-being in later Antiquity (3rd-6th century AD). Selected papers from the conference will be collected in an edited volume on the conference theme.

Venue: Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS)

Confirmed speakers: Clifford Ando (Chicago), Philip Bosman (Stellenbosch), Ernst Conradie (Western Cape), Elsemieke Daalder (Muenster), Carlos Machado (St-Andrews), Nadia Marais (Stellenbosch), Bronwen Neil (Macquarie), Alan Ross (Ohio State), Chiara Thumiger (Kiel), Lieve Van Hoof (Ghent), Ursula Westwood (Stellenbosch), Matthijs Zoeter (Ghent)

Conference brief

Pagan as well as Christian authors in Antiquity recognised the important role of the government in ensuring the well-being of its population. Cicero famously stated that "when the best men rule the state, the citizens must necessarily enjoy the greatest happiness, being freed from all cares and worries" (*Rep.* 1.34.52). Similarly, in his *City of God*, Augustine asked "[I]s it reasonable, is it sensible to boast of the extent and grandeur of empire, when you cannot show that men lived in happiness, as they passed their lives amid the horrors of war, amid the shedding of men's blood – whether the blood of enemies or fellow-citizens – under the shadow of fear and amid the terror of ruthless ambition?" (4.3). While the areas of responsive governance and of individual happiness have attracted considerable scholarly attention, the role of the Roman government in population well-being remains underexplored.

This conference aims to address this gap by bringing together papers that examine the state's (actual and imagined) role in ensuring economic, physical, mental, social, and environmental well-being in the later Roman Empire. We invite contributions on two key themes. First, how did the Roman state itself address issues of well-being—reactively or proactively? To what extent did late antique emperors take the initiative in areas of population well-being? Which levels of government were involved in population well-being, and in which areas? Second, how were issues brought to the state's attention by the general populace: through networks, petitions, or acclamations? What areas of population well-being were being addressed? By addressing these questions, this conference – and the subsequent edited volume – hopes to shed more light not only on the issue of popular well-being, but also on the functioning of the later Roman empire in general.

Possible topics include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Government reactions to crises endangering population well-being, such as famines, epidemics, grain crises, wars, and natural catastrophes.
- Legislation aiming and/or claiming to enhance population well-being.
- (Shifts in) imperial rhetoric related to population well-being over time.
- Divisions of tasks concerning population well-being amongst the various levels of government (emperors, prefects, governors, city councils, etc.).
- Ancient philosophical/theological reflections on the state's responsibility in ensuring population well-being.

- Popular expectations of the state's role in ensuring population well-being.
- Complaints and accusations about the government's failure to ensure population well-being.
- Petitions to governors, magistrates, and the Emperor related to population well-being.
- Shifts from public to private (church) initiatives in the care for the poor and the sick with the advent of Christianity.

For more information or to submit an abstract (approximately 300 words), please contact Matthijs Zoeter at matthijs.zoeter@ugent.be by **February 28, 2025.**

Best regards,

Prof. dr. Philip Bosman
Prof. dr. Lieve Van Hoof
Prof. dr. Ernst Conradie
dr. Kristian Christensen
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Nuraan Essop MA