

Self-Governance in Antiquity

An Introduction

ADRIAN S. ERBEN / JULIA SCHWARZER

KEYWORDS: local self-governance, governance, weak statehood, civil society, antiquity

1. Introduction

On February 6, 2023, a devastating earthquake struck southeastern Turkey, leaving in its wake widespread destruction and immense loss of life. Among the hardest-hit cities was Antakya (the ancient Antioch on the Orontes), where eighty percent of the historic center was reduced to rubble. Tens of thousands died. The scale of the disaster, coupled with the area's remoteness and the extensive damage across the region, severely hampered the arrival of state assistance. Relief efforts fell largely to humanitarian organizations and the city's own residents. In response to the crisis, a group of Antakya's inhabitants came together to establish Buradayız Hatay ("We are here, Hatay"), a community-driven association dedicated to the educational, social, and cultural reconstruction of the city. This grassroots initiative emerged independently from the state, shaped by local needs rather than external directives.¹

This example from modern-day Turkey serves as an example of local self-governance in action, illustrating how communities autonomously organize to address common challenges. We define self-governance as the formation of a group whose structure and decision-making processes are determined and carried out exclusively by its members (or their representatives). Self-governance is rooted in social norms that reflect the shared values of all group members. Designed to be enduring, it operates autonomously, free from external control. The natural setting for such groups is the lo-

¹ <https://buradayizhatay.org/en/> (last accessed on 12 February 2025). As part of an administrative reform in 2014, Antakya was merged with the surrounding province to form the Hatay metropolitan area. Locals often use the names Antakya and Hatay interchangeably.

cal level – the face-to-face societies of villages, neighborhoods and city districts, where direct interaction fosters communal identity and collective decision-making.²

Local self-governance is not an exclusively modern phenomenon. Throughout history, people have organized themselves along religious, professional, ethnic, and other lines. They have formed cultic associations such as churches and synagogues, professional associations, clubs supporting athletes and more. They have looked after one another and managed shared concerns. They have formed self-governing groups.

Given the limitations of the ancient evidence, local groups are most clearly discernible in urban contexts. Here, they typically interacted with other groups, navigating the balance between cooperation and isolation, between living together and segregation. They did so in geographical, social, and metaphorical spaces. Self-governing groups not only addressed the immediate needs of their members but also played a crucial role in broader societal responses. Particularly in times of crisis, they contributed to managing external threats or resource problems on the ground.

Local governance arrangements did not exist in a political vacuum. On the contrary, they both influenced and were influenced by other political structures. On the one hand, they shaped the (autopoietic) processes of collective self-reproduction in neighboring local communities. On the other hand, and perhaps most importantly, they were often embedded within regional or even imperial power structures, which had significant repercussions on local stability and dynamics. Local self-organization thus serves as a functional basis of larger statehood while simultaneously interacting with the formations of this statehood at higher governance levels. An empire, after all, is nothing without its villages; yet each village must continually negotiate the complexities of imperial rule.³

2. Civil society

Following the approach of the DFG Research Unit 2757, “Local Self-Governance in the Context of Weak Statehood in Antiquity and the Modern Era” (LoSAM),⁴ we argue that the functioning of governance arrangements depended less on government or city regulation than on local groups operating beyond state institutions. These groups can be conceptualized as “civil society”. The term refers to the part of the public sphere that

2 PFEILSCHIFTER *et al.* (2020), 10; POPITZ (2006), 61–116; THOMANN (2017).

3 PFEILSCHIFTER *et al.* (2020), 6.

4 For studies combining ancient and modern perspectives, cf. the volume KRÜGER/MOHAMAD-KLOTZBACH/PFEILSCHIFTER (2023). For further information on the follow-up project, the DFG Package Project 1066 “Locality and Society: Horizontal Binding Forces in Antiquity”, cf. <https://www.theologie.uni-wuerzburg.de/at/projekte/lokalitaet-und-gesellschaft/> (last accessed on 29 January 2025).

exists beyond the family and is distinct from both the state and the economic sphere of the market.⁵

The editors of this volume advocate an adapted version of contemporary conceptions of civil society – one that reinterprets contemporary conceptions traditionally grounded in political science and governance studies and associated with liberal Western democracy.⁶ We propose a normatively reduced definition of “civil society”, emphasizing public spirit, fundamental acceptance of the political system and an effort at peaceful conflict resolution.⁷ This revised concept, critically examined and explored in several of the following chapters, enables a better understanding of individual groups and their contributions to governance arrangements – aspects that have too often been overlooked in scholarship.

Elite members of local structures were generally closely connected to the state, whether as office-holders in the administration or as *curiales* in city councils. The situation was different for the local self-governing groups we classify as part of civil society: They also included the vast population strata below the elites. By focusing on these groups, we shift the analytical perspective away from elite actors and their vertical ties to other individuals – often exemplified through patronage relationships – and concentrate on more horizontal relationships.⁸

3. The state and the local level

Understanding local governance requires more than a top-down perspective centered on state regulation. In recent decades, scholars have often emphasized that state authority cannot be taken for granted. While much of this discussion has centered on the modern era,⁹ research has also shed new light on the heterogeneity of premodern political organization.¹⁰ Similarly, current social science theories recognize that social negotiation processes and forms of political authority cannot be adequately captured with rigid conceptions of state. Instead, a comprehensive analysis must consider both formal and informal rules and regulations.¹¹ Thus, forms of governance beyond the state have gained greater attention. Today, we have categories to identify informal rules

5 LAUTH *et al.* (2019), 28.

6 On civil society in contemporary political science, *cf.* LAUTH/MERKEL (1997); MERKEL/LAUTH (1999). For governance studies and the role of civil society therein, *cf.* BENZ *et al.* (2007); BENZ/DOSE (2010).

7 PFEILSCHIFTER (2022a), 31.

8 PFEILSCHIFTER (2022a), 16; (2022b), 196 f.

9 For example SCHLICHT (2005); LEIBFRIED *et al.* (2015). This section draws on PFEILSCHIFTER *et al.* (2020), 5–16 (with further literature).

10 LUNDGREEN (2014) provides an overview of the debate on the modern and ancient state.

11 MARCH/OLSEN (1989); PETERS (1999); LAUTH (2004).

and patterns that allow for an adequate analysis of empirical diversity. Contemporary scholarship examines not only the official structures but also the multitude of informal regulations that permeate society. These exist alongside the formal structures or – more commonly – are deeply intertwined with and embedded within them.¹²

This is particularly true for governance constellations in antiquity. The ultimate supra-local government structure was the Roman Empire, a prime example of a “weak” state by modern definitions. Not weak in the military sense, but in terms of its regulatory capacity. In the Western world legal and welfare states have become the norm, possessing tremendous capability to structure society. The Empire, by contrast, rather resembles many countries in the Global South where weaker forms of statehood prevail. Following classical Weberian conceptions, the core of statehood lies in its monopoly on violence, which enables the state to enforce binding decisions in a given territory.¹³ A “weak” state, however, is not capable of fulfilling all the functions it should according to the Western model. Even some Western states are not up to this ideal. Such polities – and with them the Roman Empire and all the other states in antiquity – possess only limited capacity to enforce their rules.¹⁴ But weak statehood does not imply that the state withdraws from local affairs. Rather, it remains stable and is not directly threatened in its existence yet exercises only partial authority. The state persists as an active force, influencing and shaping local arrangements.

This should not necessarily be seen as a negative development. Contemporary discourses associate weak statehood with notions of incompleteness or dysfunctionality – a perspective we seek to challenge. As this volume will demonstrate, the interaction between local self-organization and weak statehood often produced local arrangements of considerable duration and stability, effectively addressing a wide range of local needs. From this perspective, weak statehood is not inherently a condition to be resolved. Rather, it may represent a desirable state of affairs or even one worth preserving. Greater state regulatory capacity is not automatically better, nor should it be automatically equated with “progress”.

When self-governing groups contributed effectively to local governance arrangements, they also reinforced the stability of weak states. However, scholarship on statehood has largely overlooked the local level.¹⁵ For the Greco-Roman world, the numerous works on the city, particularly on the *polis* of classical Greece, constitute an

12 AKUDE *et al.* (2011); SCHUPPERT (2011); ELWERT *et al.* (1983); GIORDANO (2013).

13 WEBER (1972), 29; WRASE (2013), 6.

14 DRAUDE *et al.* (2012), 9; LAMBACH (2016).

15 Research on the dependence of states on informal governance constellations has largely focused on the national or even international level, *cf.* AKUDE *et al.* (2011); GENSCHEL *et al.* (2006). One of the exceptions is the Berlin SFB 700 “Governance in Areas of limited Statehood: New Modes of Governance?” (2005–2017) which dealt with local manifestations, *cf.* RISSE *et al.* (2018). For the ancient world, research on empires has long been en vogue, *cf.*, for example, GEHLER/ROLLINGER (2014), 33–535. Actually, these forms of polity are historical exceptions.

exception.¹⁶ But the Greek “city-state” was not regulated by a supra-local state. Rather, the state itself functioned as a form of local self-organization, blurring the boundaries between categories. Again, we aim to shift the focus away from a top-down approach, placing the local level – and its interactions with the state – at the center of our analysis.

Therefore, investigating the relations between the state and the local level is an important aspect of this volume. We distinguish four fundamental modes of interaction: In substitutive relations, local self-governance replaces state functions or prevents them from developing at all. At the opposite extreme, contrary constellations emerge when local and state actors provide similar and competing services. The central power’s approach here is perceived as functionally inefficient. The most intriguing cases, however, lie in the middle. In complementary constellations, the interactions occur in mutual yet uncoordinated coaction with the central power often perceived as insufficiently engaged. Finally, self-governance and state regulation are coordinated, complementing one another in a subsidiary arrangement.¹⁷

A particularly broad spectrum of parallel structures – whether subsidiary, complementary, or contrary – emerges in response to critical problems, whose effective regulation or resolution is essential to sustaining local governance arrangements.¹⁸ A notable example is the provision of drinking water, a fundamental necessity that often relies on coordinated efforts between local actors and state authorities.¹⁹

4. About this volume

The present volume comprises nine chapters, organized across five thematic sections, each addressing a key research question:

- 1) “Statehood and Local Self-Governance” examines the relationship between state and local levels through a theoretical approach that is specifically tailored to the ancient world. Unlike the LoSAM project, which is strongly influenced by political science, the contribution in this section adopts a perspective that is more attuned to historical and classical studies, thereby complementing the theoretical foundation of the volume.

16 Cf., for example, HANSEN (2006); BECK (2020); MA (2024). It is not by coincidence that non-urban places of self-governance, such as villages, are often ignored. Notable exceptions are SCHMITZ (2004); MITCHELL (1993), 176–197; SCHULER (1998), 217–288.

17 We understand subsidiarity here as a division into organizational functions, not in terms of the modern interplay between (state) decision-making authority and (local) organizational power in the sense of cf. GENSCHER/ZANGL (2008), 431 f. An autonomous functioning of self-governance is not compatible with ultimate state responsibility, even if the danger of such a development is not small in a subsidiary relationship.

18 ERBEN (2021).

19 ERBEN *et al.* (2023).

- II) “Governance within: The Anatomy of Local Groups” shifts the perspective from the macro to the micro level, offering an in-depth examination of the internal structures of local groups. By exploring their organization, decision-making processes, and responses to external influences, this section lays the foundation for the subsequent discussions on their broader societal and political roles.
- III) “Shaping Local Life: Between Customs and Civil Society” examines the local contexts in which these groups operate, as well as the factors that transform them over time.
- IV) “Shaping Authority: The Impact of Local Groups on State Power” challenges the conventional top-down approach in research on localism. Instead, inspired by the LoSAM project, it adopts a bottom-up perspective: How did local actors influence state structures?
- V) “Synergy in Governance: State and Local Cooperation” challenges the often overly rigid distinction between state and local levels. This dichotomous portrayal oversimplifies historical realities, where cooperation, mutual dependencies, and even hybrid governance arrangements were frequent and essential components of political structures. This final section explores these dynamics, highlighting the fluid and interconnected nature of state-local interactions.

The sections build on one another thematically and are linked by bridging commentaries, summarizing the key findings of the preceding section and providing a transition to the next. To enhance accessibility, each chapter is preceded by an abstract. Approximately half of the chapters focus on Late Antiquity, reflecting the research interests of the Ancient History subproject within LoSAM, which places particular emphasis on this period. Moreover, Late Antiquity offers an exceptionally rich basis for detailed studies on governance and institutional frameworks, thanks to the diversity of its source genres and the abundance of available evidence.

At the same time, the volume deliberately includes case studies from other periods of antiquity. Local self-governance was by no means exclusive to Late Antiquity, and restricting the case studies to this period could introduce a bias. To provide a broader comparative perspective, we have incorporated investigations from various contexts of weak statehood across different epochs, including Classical Greece, the Early Republic, the Hellenistic period, the Imperial era, and Byzantium. By adopting this wider chronological framework, the volume highlights the recurring patterns and unique developments in local self-governance, demonstrating its significance across different historical settings.

Acknowledgments

The nine chapters originate from an international conference held online from March 26 to 31, 2021, due to the pandemic.²⁰ We would like to take this opportunity to express our sincere gratitude to all those who contributed to organizing and executing the conference, as well as compiling this anthology. First and foremost, we thank all the speakers for their outstanding manuscripts and for their patience throughout the rather lengthy publication process. Maria Osmer, Barbara Schmitz, and Katharina Wojciech moderated sessions, and Fabian Knopf wrote a conference report for *H-Soz-Kult*.²¹ Our student assistants – Elisabeth Berchtenbreiter, Julia Fischer, Eva Fürst, Daniel Mäckler, Leon Nast, and Hannah Walter – helped in editing the manuscripts. Leon Nast is also to be thanked for compiling the indices.

A special thank you goes to Dominique Krüger (formerly of LoSAM, now at De Gruyter Brill) for her support, advice, and expertise throughout the editorial process. Finally, we would like to express our appreciation to the editors of *Historia Einzelschriften* and to the publisher, Franz Steiner Verlag, especially Katharina Stüdemann, for their excellent collaboration in the production of this book.

Bibliography

- Akude, John E. / Daun, Anna / Egner, David / Lambach, Daniel (eds.) (2011), *Politische Herrschaft jenseits des Staates: zur Transformation von Legitimität in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Globale Gesellschaft und internationale Beziehungen), Wiesbaden.
- Beck, Hans (2020), *Localism and the ancient Greek city-state*, Chicago (IL)/London.
- Benz, Arthur / Dose, Nicolai (eds.) (2010), *Governance – regieren in komplexen Regelsystemen: eine Einführung* (Governance 1), 2. Aufl., Wiesbaden.
- Benz, Arthur / Lütz, Susanne / Schimank, Uwe / Simonis, Georg (eds.) (2007), *Handbuch Governance: theoretische Grundlagen und empirische Anwendungsfelder*, Wiesbaden.
- Draude, Anke / Schmelzle, Cord / Risse, Thomas (2012), *Grundbegriffe der Governanceforschung* (SFB 700 Working Paper Series 36), Berlin.
- Elwert, Georg / Evers, Hans-Dieter / Wilkens, Werner (1983), *Die Suche nach Sicherheit: kombinierte Produktionsformen im sogenannten informellen Sektor*, *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 12, 281–296.
- Erben, Adrian S. (2021), *Kritische Regelungsgegenstände: ein Konzept für eine relative Subkategorie* (LoSAM Working Papers 5), Würzburg. <https://doi.org/10.25972/OPUS-24233>

²⁰ A tenth contribution, Edward Watts' "Local identity and imperial survival in the Roman Empire of the 260s", will appear separately in *Millennium* 23 (2026).

²¹ Fabian Knopf, Conference report: self-governance in antiquity: local groups, the city, and the state, *H-Soz-Kult*, 07/06/2021, <www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/fdkn-127525> (last accessed on 14 October 2024).

- Erben, Adrian S. / Krüger, Dominique / Thomschke, Susan (2023), Water for the people: provision and maintenance of water infrastructure in the context of weak statehood in Antiquity and the Modern Era, in: Dominique Krüger / Christoph Mohamad-Klotzbach / Rene Pfeilschifter (eds.), *Local self-governance in Antiquity and the Global South: theoretical and empirical insights from an interdisciplinary perspective*, Berlin / Boston (MA), 77–105. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110798098-005>
- Gehler, Michael / Rollinger, Robert (eds.) (2014), *Imperien und Reiche in der Weltgeschichte: epochenübergreifende und globalhistorische Vergleiche. Vol. 1: Imperien des Altertums, mittelalterliche und frühneuzeitliche Imperien*, Wiesbaden.
- Genschel, Philipp / Leibfried, Stephan / Zangl, Bernhard (2006), *Zerfaserung und Selbsttransformation – das Forschungsprogramm “Staatlichkeit im Wandel”* (TranState Working Papers 45), Bremen.
- Genschel, Philipp / Zangl, Bernhard (2008), *Metamorphosen des Staates – vom Herrschaftsmopolisten zum Herrschaftsmanager*, *Leviathan* 36, 430–454.
- Giordano, Christian (2013), The social organization of informality: the rationale underlying personalized relationships and coalitions, in: Christian Giordano / Nicolas Hayoz (eds.), *Informality in Eastern Europe: structures, political cultures and social practices*, Bern, 27–45.
- Hansen, Mogens (2006), *Polis: an introduction to the ancient Greek city-state*, Oxford.
- Lambach, Daniel (2016), *Fragile Staaten in der Vergleichenden Politikwissenschaft*, in: Hans-Joachim Lauth / Marianne Kneuer / Gert Pickel (eds.), *Handbuch Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft* (Springer Reference Sozialwissenschaften), Wiesbaden, 319–330.
- Lauth, Hans-Joachim (2004), *Demokratie und Demokratievermessung: eine konzeptionelle Grundlegung für den interkulturellen Vergleich*, Wiesbaden.
- Lauth, Hans-Joachim / Fischer, Doris / Krüger, Dominique / Mohamad-Klotzbach, Christoph / Pfeilschifter, Rene / Rothfuß, Eberhard / Schachner, Andreas / Schmitz, Barbara / Werthmann, Katja (2019), *Interdisziplinarität: eine Grundlegung zu Begriffen, Theorien und Methoden in einer geistes- und sozialwissenschaftlichen Forschungsgruppe (LoSAM Working Papers 2)*, Würzburg. <https://doi.org/10.25972/OPUS-19348>
- Lauth, Hans-Joachim / Merkel, Wolfgang (1997), *Zivilgesellschaft und Transformation: ein Diskussionsbeitrag in revisionistischer Absicht*, *Forschungsjournal Neue Soziale Bewegungen* 10.1, 12–34.
- Leibfried, Stephan / Huber, Evelyne / Lange, Matthew / Levy, Jonah D. / Stephens, John D. (eds.) (2015), *The Oxford handbook of transformations of the state*, Oxford.
- Lundgreen, Christoph (2014), *Staatsdiskurse in Rom? Staatlichkeit als analytische Kategorie für die römische Republik*, in: Christoph Lundgreen (ed.), *Staatlichkeit in Rom? Diskurse und Praxis (in) der römischen Republik (Staatsdiskurse 28)*, Stuttgart, 15–61.
- Ma, John (2024), *Polis: a new history of the ancient Greek city-state from the early Iron Age to the end of Antiquity*, Princeton (NJ)/Oxford.
- March, James G. / Olsen, Johan P. (1989), *Rediscovering institutions: the organizational basics of politics*, New York/London.
- Merkel, Wolfgang / Lauth, Hans-Joachim (1999), *Was ist eigentlich Zivilgesellschaft?*, *Zukünfte* 27, 9–16.
- Mitchell, Stephen (1993), *Anatolia: land, men, and gods in Asia Minor. Vol. 1: The Celts in Anatolia and the impact of Roman Rule*, Oxford.
- Peters, B. Guy (1999), *Institutional theory in Political Science: the “new institutionalism”*, London.

- Pfeilschifter, Rene (2022a), *Antike Zivilgesellschaft: ein Plädoyer für die Adaption eines Begriffs der Gegenwart*, HZ 315, 1–32.
- Pfeilschifter, Rene (2022b), Local self-governance and varieties of statehood: some remarks from an ancient historian, in: Dieter Neubert / Hans-Joachim Lauth / Christoph Mohamad-Klotzbach (eds.), *Local self-governance and varieties of statehood: tensions and cooperation* (Contributions to Political Science), Cham, 193–198.
- Pfeilschifter, Rene / Lauth, Hans-Joachim / Fischer, Doris / Rothfuß, Eberhard / Schachner, Andreas / Schmitz, Barbara / Werthmann, Katja (2020), *Local self-governance in the context of weak statehood in Antiquity and the Modern era: a program for a fresh perspective* (LoSAM Working Papers 1), Würzburg. <https://doi.org/10.25972/OPUS-20737>
- Popitz, Heinrich (2006), *Soziale Normen* (Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft 1794), Frankfurt a. M.
- Risse, Thomas / Börzel, Tanja A. / Draude, Anke (eds.) (2018), *The Oxford handbook of Governance and limited statehood*, Oxford.
- Schlichte, Klaus (ed.) (2005), *The dynamics of states: the formation and crisis of state domination*, Aldershot.
- Schmitz, Winfried (2004), *Nachbarschaft und Dorfgemeinschaft im archaischen und klassischen Griechenland* (Klio Beihefte NF 7), Berlin.
- Schuler, Christof (1998), *Ländliche Siedlungen und Gemeinden im hellenistischen und römischen Kleinasien* (Vestigia 50), München.
- Schuppert, Gunnar F. (2011), *Der Rechtsstaat unter den Bedingungen informaler Staatlichkeit: Beobachtungen und Überlegungen zum Verhältnis formeller und informeller Institutionen*, Baden-Baden.
- Thomann, Eva (2017), The notions of regulation and self-regulation in Political Science, *Journal of Self-Regulation and Regulation* 3, 54–75. <https://doi.org/10.11588/josar.2017.0.40136>
- Weber, Max (1972), *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie*. Besorgt von Johannes Winckelmann, 5. Aufl., Tübingen.
- Wrase, Michael (2013), *Wie wirkt Recht? Überlegungen zur Rechtswirkungsforschung unter den Bedingungen konsolidierter und begrenzter Staatlichkeit* (SFB 700 Working Paper Series 57), Berlin.