From: "The Conquering Crowd of Byzantium"

Alexander Huber

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1. Introduction

In 532, a riot broke out in Byzantium, unexpected and unexpectedly troublesome for emperor Justinian[1] . The crowd, with the notorious circus factions at its core, freed prisoners from their own ranks, as Justinian would not pardon them. The highest government officials were subsequently called to be removed from office, the riot continued, and the crowd even set up an emperor on their own. In the course of the uprising many buildings were set on fire and destroyed. Justinian, seemingly unable to defuse the situation, called on his generals Belisarius and Mundus to crush the crowd with their barbarian armies. The grim balance of the event shows around 30,000 dead people and large parts of the city burned down. The Nika riot is one of the best documented uprisings of the 6th century and late Roman history in general[2] . We learn from the Nika[3] riots mainly through two source traditions[4] . One comes from Procopius and his Wars[5] and the other from John Malalas Chronographia[6] . On this Chronicle the Paschal Chronicle[7] and Theophanes Chronicle[8] are built upon . The outlier among the sources is

[1]Procopius, *History of the Wars*, trans. H. B. Dewing, vol. 1, Procopius with an English Translation by H. B. Dewing (London and New York, 1914), 218 i.xxiv.1.

[2]Procopius, *History of the Wars*; Johannes Malalas, *The Chronicle of John Malalas*, trans. Elizabeth Jeffreys, Michael Jeffreys, and Roger Scott, vol. 4, Byzantina Australiensia (Leiden, 2017); Michael Whitby and Mary Whitby, trans., *Chronicon Paschale* (Liverpool, 1989); Theophanes Confessor, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History, AD 284 - 813*, trans. Cyril Mango, Roger Scott, and Geoffrey Greatrex (Oxford, 1997).

[3]Procopius, *History of the Wars*, conquer! being the shout of the crowd, subsequently became the name of this stasis - uprising. 223 i.xxiv.10; J. B. Bury, "The Nika Riot," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 17 (1897): 94.

[4]Bury, "The Nika Riot,"Bury discusses all the sources and how they relate to each other. The surviving account of Malalas is only an abridged Version, some details in the Paschal Chronicle and Theophanes can give an idea of what the "original" Malalas might have looked like. The Paschal Chronicle is the most detailed of these three Chronicles. pp.92–119.

[5]Procopius, *History of the Wars*, i.xxiv.

[6]Johannes Malalas, *The Chronicle of John Malalas*.

[7]Whitby and Whitby, *Chronicon Paschale*.

[8]Theophanes Confessor, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*.

Marcellinus Comes[9] a Latin speaker, whose short notice probably describes the "official story" of what happened. At least it was the version favoured to be told by the emperor himself, as Marcellinus was close to the Court at that time.[10]

This then is the story that is related to us through the sources. How can this conquering crowd of Byzantium be described? What were its aims and how did they shift? What did the changes to the crowd mean to its relation to Justinian and how does the alleged usurper Hypatius fit into all of this? To gain an understanding of the Nika riot some points must be considered: Who is the Roman Crowd, how does it act and relate to authority figures, such as the Senators and the Emperors. What are the actions of the crowd, what forms do they take and what inspires these forms? How do the sources talk about the crowd, especially in comparison with other uprisings? These questions must be asked against the background of late Roman culture and the way the population took part in the life of the city. As much as the Emperor, his clergy and the administration tried to reshape and rebuilt their vision of a Roman Mediterranean, the people had a part to play in the way the civic life of Constantinople would play out in the times to come. As the vision of governance changed, civic life did as well, the Nika revolt is a clash resulting out of these changes. To describe this crowd, I want to look the way the crowd emerged as a force in Constantinople. It has its origin with the circus factions, the ritual life of Constantinople and the Hippodrome. From there on one can try to understand the self-perceived legitimacy of the crowd and its goals and what this meant for their actions. To get a feel for the crowd one must differentiate between the crowd as described by the byzantine chroniclers from the event behind it. From this, a picture will emerge of how the crowd was imagined and what that means to the interpretation of the sources. We shall see that the crowd was not without direction. To speak of a single crowd will also be not enough. The event rather produced a narrative that gave concrete the opportunities for crowds of people to arise, and in return to reproduce the narrative itself. From this the crowds also gained their directedness.

2. Who is this crowd?

2.1 What to call a crowd

Marcellinus Comes[11] , the only Latin source calls the crowd a *seditiosorum turba* and *sceleratos cives*. However, they do not act on their own, they are *armis donisque ministratis illecta* through a conspiracy of the nephews of Anastasius – Hypatius, Pompeius and Probus – and their other senatorial allies. At the end of the riot, when Belisarius and Mundus entered the Hippodrome *innumeris*

[9]Marcellinus Comes, *Chronicon*, ed. Theodor Mommsen, Chronica Minora Saec. IV. V. VI. VII. Vol. 2 (Berlin, 1894), ad annum 532.

[10]Bury, "The Nika Riot," p93; Brian Croke, *Count Marcellinus and His Chronicle* (Oxford, 2001), 135.

[11]Marcellinus Comes, *Chronicon*, ad annum 532.

passim in circo populis trucidatis. At this point, as with the fist charaterisation, Marcellinus Comes does not consider the crowd as an agent. At first, they were a tool for the seditious elites, then they are the victims of the generals' barbarians. The co-conspirators of the would-be usurpers are *tyrannorum sociis*, who get their punishment too. In contrast to Marcellinus Comes Procopius grants the crowd agency, at least to some extent. To him the riots is a mad crowd, motivated by their misguided and perverted interests. He sees breakout of the riot as the fault of the circus factions. Procopius calls the breakout unexpected,[12] but he does not bring in God (or the Devil) at this point as an explanation.[13] The stasis "just" broke among the demos, who were split between the two merei all over the empire since ancient times.[14] The partisans of the factions called themselves meros as Procopius tells us.[15] These factions then came to fight a mad and useless war between themselves, which gained them only punishment by the governing body and weakened their soul. Ultimately Procopius diagnosed the factions with having a "sickness of the soul"[16] . After the crowd acclaimed Hypatius as the new emperor, Procopius introduces the figure of Origenes, a senator, and his colleagues.[17] This is the clearest statement of how Procopius saw the crowd. Origines addressed the assembled people, a speech that indicates how the elites saw the crowd[18] . While he seems sympathetic enough with the crowd, he sees them as a pure force of action, in need of direction. Origines decidedly wants to continue this "war" against Justinian. However only him and his colleagues could direct such action successfully [cameronProcopiusSixthCentury1985, He also brings in Fortuna, Tyche at this point. Cameron sees this as his problem to reconcile his Christianity with his classicising history, p.31] . Procopius also relates to us how he understood the authority of the emperor and how Justinian could lose it. If they could drive him from the city, he would have lost his legitimacy. Back to back with Origines speech is the famous speech of Theodora, motivating Justinian to stay in the city and die in the purple.[19] John Malalas has a different view. He sees the crowd as a product of the factions. He calls the riot a taraches, caused by avenging demons, that Eudaimon held partisans of the factions in custody to be executed is more of an afterthought.[20] The partisans

[12] Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 1:218 i.xxiv.1.

[13] The will of God functions for Procopius seemingly as explanation of events like the Fall of Antioch or the Plague. Averil Cameron points out that Procopius leaves here the example set by Thucydides, who looks for a more "human" or "scientific" explanation. In the Secret History Cameron points to "greed" or "blood-lust" as explanations for Procopius. Malalas, contrary to Procopius, does bring in the Devil with the Nika riot. ibid., 1:1:45 ii.xxii.1, ii.x.4; Johannes Malalas, *The Chronicle of John Malalas*, 4:276 (474); Averil Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century* (London, 1985), 40–41, 64.

[14] Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 1:218 i.xxiv.1–2.

[15] Ibid., 1:i.xxiv.5; Alan Cameron, *Circus Factions Blues and Greens at Rome and Byzantium* (Oxford, 1976), 273.

[16] Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 1:i.xxiv.6.

[17] Ibid., 1:i.xxiv.26–31.

[18] Or at least how he wants his readers to see it. But this view is consistent with all the sources portraying the crowd. Having Origines sympathizing with the crowd, however, does not necessarily seem genuine.

[19] Ibid., 1:i.xxiv.32–37.

[20] Johannes Malalas, *The Chronicle of John Malalas*, 4:275 (473.5).

are referred to as atachtus who are again part of the factions meros. The crowd formed by the united factions leaving the hippodrome is called plethos[21], and it is still at the massacre at the end.[22] The Paschal Chronicle and Theophanes call the uprising a antarsia, the crowd is also a plethos.[23] The author of the Paschal Chronicle breaks down the crowd at the massacre into different parts. It is no longer a plethos at this point. The soldiers indiscriminately also kill politon and xenu[24]. He also underlines the "truly rebellious", the demoi. This specifically refers to the partisans of the factions. Procopius does something similar at the beginning of his account, he has the sane minded people flee the city, even before it escalates too much.[25] The authors of the 6th century an onwards saw the Nika riot as an uprising, either of a mad mob, or as a tool of elites to further their own goals. What is common to all of them is the point of view, that they did not consider the crowd as possible to have a direction and goal of themselves. Only Procopius comes close, but ultimately it is greed and bloodlust that motivates them. Because of this they tried to find explanations of how such an uprising was possible, namely by senatorial conspiracy. The crowd as such was deeply rooted in Roman customs. They employed acclamations to communicate their message and had the circus factions to give them an identity and a repertoire of actions. These customs need to be considered next.

2.2 Late Roman Crowd Culture

The crowd could be called a typical form of experiencing public late Roman life. So much so that engaging with the crowd was a major part of being an authority figure. The crowd could take various forms in Roman ritualised life.[26] Especially the Bishops could gather crowds and employ them outside of Roman tradition. By recontextualization of these very traditions[27] they could be employed in other contexts, such as to fight against heterodoxy. Ambrose used his basilica as a place to gather a crowd directed against the emperors wish of gaining a church for his Arian Goths.[28] With the Nika riot we have a crowd at the heart of the empire. Constantinople, as the city of the emperor had its own rules[29] . The adventus of Justinian in 559, after an unusually long

[21] Ibid., 4:276 (476).

[22] Ibid., 4:279–80 (476).

[23] Whitby and Whitby, *Chronicon Paschale*, 116 (620); Theophanes Confessor, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, 181.25.

[24] Whitby and Whitby, *Chronicon Paschale*, 124 (626–627).

[25] Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 1:i.xxiv.8–9.

[26] Andreas Alföldi, *Die Monarchische Repräsentation Im Römischen Kaiserreiche* (Darmstadt, 1970).

[27] Acclamations had religious origins, Ambrose employed not typical Christian Forms such as the Psalms but rather "antiphonal chanting", teaching his crowd the theology behind his actions against the emperor. Charlotte Roueché, "Acclamations in the Later Roman Empire: New Evidence from Aphrodisias," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 74 (1984): 181; Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), 126.

[28] Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 124–26; J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Ambrose & John Chrysostom: Clerics Between Desert and Empire* (Oxford, 2011), 59–60, 85–89.

[29] McCormick discusses the growing importance of Constantinople and the city's connection to the emperor in connection with the way "liturgical life" develops. Michael McCormick,

absence from his city, shows this connection. It was a meticulously planned event full of acclamations. Every step through the city happened in public, the entire city took part in it and had some significance.[30] This close connection between the emperor and the City of Constantinople was a development of the beginning 5th century. Due to this development the city and special places within it – such as the Hippodrome – gained even more significance as a point for communication and mediation between the emperor and the population. Imperial inaugurations took place there, triumphs were celebrated in it, it was the stage of public executions and riots took their origin in the Hippodrome too.[31] The Hippodrome itself could be described as a microcosm[32] of the entire city and its population, in it the "citizen body was no abstraction, but became a reality."[33] Even the seats were marked, divided up in specific citizen groups. The population was not only made physically visible there, but the emperor too had his kathisma, the imperial box, to be present among his people[34] , linked internally to the palace by a passageway. From there the emperor could appear visible to all and come into dialogues with his city[35] . The way these "Dialogues with the crowd"[36] played out, were by acclamations[37] , chants expressing wishes

Ethernal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium and the Early Medieval West (Cambridge, Paris: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme and Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[30]Brian Croke, "Justinian's Constantinople," in *The Cambridge Companion to: Age of Justinian*, ed. Michael Maas (Cambridge, 2005), 60–67.

[31]Steffan Diefenbach, "Frömmigkeit Und Kaiserakzeptanz Im Frühen Byzanz," *Saeculum* 47 (1996): 41–43.

[32]Not really "micro", as the Hippodrome could probably fit up to 30,000 people. On the Hippodrome too see Dagron. Gilbert Dagron, *L'hippodrome de Constantinople: Jeux, Peuple et Politique* (Paris, 2011); Michael McCormick, "Emperor and Court," in *Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, AD 425*, ed. Averil Cameron, Bryan Ward-Perkins, and Michael Whitby, vol. 14, The Cambridge Ancient History (Cambridge, 2001).

[33]Peter Brown, *Power and Persuation in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Wisconsin, 1992), 84–84.

[34]Peter Bell, "How the Circus and Theatre Factions Could Help Prevent Civil War," in *Civil War in Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Henning Börm, Marco Mattheis, and Johannes Wienand, vol. 58, Heidelberger Althistorische Beiträge Und Epigraphische Studien (Stuttgart, 2016), 399.

[35]See Boeck for a reconstruction of the Hippodrome as depicted in the art in the Cathedral St. Sophia in Kiev. A fresco from the 10th century in this church depicts the Hippodrome with the Kathisma and the people around.@cameronMediterraneanWorldLate1996, 26-27; Elena Boeck, "Simulating the Hippodrome: The Performance of Power in Kiev's St. Sophia," *The Art Bulletin* 91 (2009).

[36]Mandouze coined the Phrase "Dialogues with the crowd", cited after Brown. Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 340; André Mandouze, *Saint Augustin: L'aventure de La Raison et de La Grâce* (Paris, 1968).

[37]On the way Acclamations were structured, about their function, evolution and recording see Rouche, Wiemer and Alföldi. Alföldi brought the ritual live of the late Rome into the focus. Wiemer misses the way Acclamations were not only used to show loyalty, but also to insult, as it was done for example in Antioch in 362/63, see Van Nuffelen and van Hoof for Antioch. Alföldi, *Die Monarchische Repräsentation Im Römischen Kaiserreiche*; Roueché, "Acclamations in the Later Roman Empire"; Hans-Ulrich Wiemer, "Akklamationen Im Spätrömischen Reich: Zur Typologie Und Funktion Eines Kommunikationsrituals," *Archiv Für Kulturgeschichte* 86 (2004): 27–74; Peter van Nuffelen and Lieve van Hoof, "Monarchy and Mass Communication: Antioch A.D. 362/3 Revisited," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 101 (2011): 166–84.

or opinions in unison by a group of people. They usually utilizing rhyme and rhythm[38]. Acclamations typically followed a structure of first honouring god and the emperor and second by praising specific persons, actions or making demands.[39] These acclamations, initially religious in nature soon spread to "secular" matters. Acclamations were a public form of honouring individuals and of making requests, both in the eastern and the western parts of the empire.[40] Acclamations carried widespread interest by their recipients, they were often recorded and transmitted to their intended receivers. Pope Leo, for example, mentioned acclamations he received. Moreover, the consent was that the people had some "right to attention", to make their acclamations heard, following a law of Constantine[41] . The unity in which acclamations were given conveyed also a theme of divine inspiration, both in Pagan and Christian context[42] . The unison nature of acclamations too suggest that all people could take part, no mater what class, social standing and profession they had. The spontaneity and complexity were possible by widespread "training" and the standardised nature of the commonly used phrases.[43]

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[38] Roueché, "Acclamations in the Later Roman Empire," 181.

[39] Ibid., 189.

[40] Ibid., 181–83.

[41] The officials gathering and transmitting acclamations even were entitled to use the imperial post. Cod. Theod. 8.5. 32. ibid., 186–87.

[42] Acclamations were to be given with one voice and one soul. ibid., 187–88.

[43] Wiemer mentions Libianus complaining about "controlled acclamations" in Oratio 33, 11-13 and others, John Chrysostom did so too, Homilia 37,6. Wiemer sees the acclamations more as a controlled form of public discourse, while van Nuffelen stresses the spontaneity. This ability to make up Acclamations on the spot and the need to react to them is, what made events like the Nika riot so dangerous. Wiemer, "Akklamationen Im Spätrömischen Reich," 54–55; Peter van Nuffelen, "Playing the Ritual Game in Constantinople (379-457)," in *Two Romes: Rome and Constantinople in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lucy Grig and Gavin Kelly (Oxford, 2012), 185.

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