

Urban Violence in Imperial Rome

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Urban Violence

in Imperial Rome Bread, circuses, and an occasional riot—such, we are told, were the main interests of the populace in Imperial Rome: an indolent and debased people, glutted with free food and addicted to spectacles. Tacitus sneered at “the sordid plebs who hang about the Circus and theaters,”¹ and Juvenal impaled them with an epigram: “The people, who once bestowed republican offices, have now only two interests, bread and games.”² These charges have been echoed by many modern authors, and even authorities of the stature of Rostovtzeff repeat them.³

Evidence for the history of the Roman commons is fragmentary, but, even so, the record does not confirm the image of a spoiled, fickle, and irresponsible people.⁴ Since Roman history was written by men of the senatorial class, or by those who had attached themselves to its interests, it is not surprising that Roman historians had little sympathy for the lower classes. Tacitus employed an arsenal of invective against the commons: *plebs sordida*, *vulgus imperitum*, *inops vulgus*⁵—they were a vile, ignorant, wretched rabble. From his viewpoint, the Roman masses were *canaille*, *Lumpen*, or, in Burke’s words, “a swinish multitude.”⁶ Impudent and unruly, they seemed an amorphous mass, potentially a mob. Yet even Tacitus made a subjective distinction between the “respectable commons” who rejoiced at the fall of Nero and the “riff-raff” who lamented the tyrant’s passing.⁷

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1 Tacitus, *Historiae*, I, 4. Cf. *Dialogus*, 29.

2 Juvenal, X, 79–81.

3 Mikhail I. Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford, 1957), I, 81–82. For a different view, see Thomas W. Africa, *Rome of the Caesars* (New York, 1965), 14–17, and John P. V. D. Balsdon, *Life and Leisure in Ancient Rome* (New York, 1969), 267–269.

4 Two recent studies which deal with the Imperial period are by Ramsay MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), 163–191, and Zwy Yavetz, *Plebs and Princes* (Oxford, 1969). Though both are valuable, the former is concerned with the empire more than with the city of Rome, and the latter is limited to the period ending in A.D. 68.

5 Tacitus, *Historiae*, I, 4; III, 31; *Annales*, II, 77. See the excellent discussion of the subjectivity of Tacitus’ terms by Yavetz, *Plebs and Princes*, 141–155.

6 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Chicago, 1955), 115.

7 Tacitus, *Historiae*, I, 4.

Rhetoric should not be confused with historical evidence, and a crowd is not a mob merely because historians label it so when they disapprove of the masses' actions. While Imperial Rome had its share of social scum and criminals, the people who demonstrated in the Circus, and who sometimes took to the streets in riots, were not the dregs of society. The Roman "mob" was generally composed of shopkeepers, craftsmen, and workers (particularly in transportation and the building trades)⁸ who had grievances to air. The Principate had wiped out all but the formalities of republican government. No longer able to effect decisions through republican channels, the Roman commons could only petition the emperor through mass demonstrations, and, if he failed to heed their demands, they sometimes resorted to violence.

In assessing urban violence in Imperial Rome, one must not lose sight of its causes, nor of the grievances and loyalties that prompted humble men to challenge tyrants, and civilians to battle professional soldiers. The environment and values of the Roman masses must be considered, as well as their composition and actions. Clichés about "bread and circuses" throw little light on the lives or aspirations of the urban masses.

Imperial Rome was a city of about one million inhabitants.⁹ Filled with palaces, monuments, and slums, it was a city of contrasts where splendor and squalor existed side by side. Short of space, Rome had expanded vertically as well as horizontally, and much of the population lived in multistoried tenements. Most housing was poorly built, and the collapse of apartment houses was not uncommon. Yet, since living space was at a premium, rents were high. Fires were frequent and destructive. Although the city contained many large public baths, sanitation was poor. Congested and noisy, Rome had grown without

8 Peter A. Brunt, "The Roman Mob," *Past and Present*, XXXV (1966), 3–27, esp. 24. Cf. George Rudé, *The Crowd in History* (New York, 1964), 204–205. For the purposes of the present paper, a crowd becomes a mob when it turns to violence. Its social composition is irrelevant, for the mob that lynched Tiberius Gracchus included the Pontifex Maximus and many nobles and equites.

9 Karl J. Beloch, *Die Bevölkerung der griechisch-römischen Welt* (Leipzig, 1886), 392–412, estimated the population of Augustan Rome as about 800,000; in "Die Bevölkerung Italiens im Altertum," *Klio*, III (1903), 489–490, he raised it to about 1,000,000. Whitney J. Oates, "The Population of Rome," *Classical Philology*, XXIX (1934), 101–116, argues for 1,250,000, but see now James E. Packer, "Housing and Population in Imperial Ostia and Rome," *Journal of Roman Studies*, LVII (1967), 80–95, who favors under a million. Tenney Frank, *An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome* (Baltimore, 1940), V, 218, and Jerome Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome* (New Haven, 1940), 16–20, agree on about 1,000,000. Henry T. Rowell, *Rome in the Augustan Age* (Norman, Okla., 1962), 102–106, is rightly cautious of ancient statistics and modern calculations.

planning, and its streets were narrow and winding—a factor that aided rioters. Like modern capitals, Rome depended on imported food, and a delay in the arrival of the grain fleet could reduce the city to famine and bread riots.

As the cosmopolitan center of a world state, the population of Rome was mixed, for freedmen of varied ethnic backgrounds were absorbed into the body politic as citizens.¹⁰ The city also included a large number of non-citizens and probably 100,000 slaves. Though upper class Italians were contemptuous of provincials in general, and Eastern peoples in particular, Roman society was not marred by overt racial or ethnic discrimination. Organized in guilds, craftsmen and tradesmen often lived together on the same streets, thus affording them a sense of sodality.

In Imperial Rome, crime was commonplace, and some of it was organized. Domitian broke up a ring of professional murderers who killed their victims with poisoned needles, and who operated both in the city and throughout the empire. Under Commodus, there was a revival of the same gang, but it was soon suppressed.¹¹ Most criminals at Rome followed more traditional pursuits, and the city was plagued with housebreakers, pickpockets, petty thieves, and muggers. Juvenal gives a vivid description of the many dangers of Rome at night.¹² Yet, despite the inconveniences of life in the great city, Juvenal and a million others found Rome too exciting to leave.

The attractions of Rome included bread for some and circuses for all. Occasionally, the emperors would distribute gifts of cash or grain to the citizenry. In 5 B.C., for example, 320,000 citizens of Rome received a cash gift from Augustus.¹³ More important was the monthly dole which the state furnished to a fixed number of citizens, who were issued a square wooden chit redeemable for five *modii* (about $1\frac{1}{4}$ bushels) of grain.¹⁴ A holdover from the Republic, the grain dole was not welfare,

10 Sepulchral evidence would suggest that freedmen outnumbered freeborn men by three to one, but these statistics ignore the fact that the freeborn poor could not afford epitaphs, and that wealthy freedmen were anxious to boast of their acquired citizen status. See Lily R. Taylor, "Freedmen and Freeborn in the Epitaphs of Imperial Rome," *American Journal of Philology*, LXXXII (1961), 113–132. Susan Treggiari, *Roman Freedmen in the Late Republic* (Oxford, 1969), has an excellent discussion of the ethnic composition (5–11) and numbers of freedmen in Rome (31–36).

11 Cassius Dio, LXVII, 11.6; LXXXIII, 14.4.

12 Juvenal, III, 268–308.

13 Augustus, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, 15.

14 Suetonius, *Augustus*, 40. Frank, *Economic Survey* (Paterson, N.J., 1959) I, 328–330, assembles the evidence for the dole under the Republic.

or even philanthropy, but was viewed as the hereditary privilege of the descendants of the Romans who had conquered the world and were entitled to its tribute. The privilege was confined to citizens who resided in the city, and only the poor relied on the dole.¹⁵ No man could live on the dole alone, however, much less depend upon it to feed his family, and rent and clothing required money. The Roman masses worked hard for a living, and at the most the dole only supplemented their meager incomes. In all periods, the dole and its recipients have been criticized by well-fed moralists, but the Roman commons were not lazy parasites feeding at the public trough—they were working men who received a food supplement and little else from their imperial masters.

Like all peoples, the Romans enjoyed shows and games, and the more spectacular they were, the better. Much, though not all, of the public entertainment at Rome was free, and holidays were frequent, for the ancients did not subscribe to the Puritan ethic. Under Claudius, ninety-three days per year were devoted to spectacles at government expense; in the third century A.D., the figure almost doubled.¹⁶ How much time a working man could afford to waste on amusement is open to speculation, though common sense suggests some obvious limitations. The city boasted many large theaters which offered pantomimes, ballets, and operas of sorts. However, the main centers of public entertainment were the Circus Maximus and (after Vespasian) the Colosseum. Many Romans were passionately devoted to the races in the Circus, and rivalries were strong between the fans of famous teams of charioteers. Best known are the partisans of the Blues and the Greens, who were also active in Antioch and other cities, especially later at Constantinople. (A comparable phenomenon is the rabid devotion to soccer

15 Though not originally intended as economic aid, the dole made life in a preindustrial city of the size of Rome tenable for the poor. In 2 B.C. a little over 200,000 men were on the dole registers (Augustus, *Res Gestae*, 15). By A.D. 202 the number seems to have dropped by a few thousand (Cassius Dio, LXXVI, 1.1.; cf. *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, "Septimius Severus," 23.2). In the troubled third century, Aurelian substituted baked bread and added a ration of pork and oil (*Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, "Aurelian," 35.1, 48.1–4. See also Rostovtzeff, *Social and Economic History* [Oxford, 1963] II, 735, n. 39). Though the additional items may have been relief measures for refugees, they soon became fixtures in the dole. In A.D. 369 Valentinian substituted six loaves of high quality bread for twenty coarse loaves (*Codex Theodosianus*, XIV, 17.5). In A.D. 419 the pork ration was five pounds per month for five months out of a year (*Codex Theodosianus*, XIV, 4.10.3). At this time, about 120,000 men were on the dole at Rome, a figure which may reflect a general drop in the city's population (Arnold H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire* [Norman, Okla., 1964], I, 696; II, 1289, n. 35).

16 Carcopino, *Daily Life*, 205–206. See also Balsdon, *Life and Leisure*, 245–248.

teams in Latin American countries today.) While not edifying, the races were hardly demoralizing, and even Fronto admits that all classes were fond of them.¹⁷ Originally, the Circus seated 150,000 spectators; later, it accommodated 250,000.¹⁸ When a crowd of this size chanted a grievance to the imperial box, the emperor did well to pay attention. The Colosseum held about 50,000 spectators¹⁹ and featured games with rare beasts from foreign lands. It also provided grislier fare with gladiatorial combats and the staged executions of criminals. Though always bloody, not all gladiatorial fights were to the death, for many gladiators were popular with the crowds, and no impresario would allow the slaughter of a champion who had many fans. Nevertheless, death was part of the scene in the arena. While such sports degraded men, it was an age not squeamish to pain and hand-to-hand combat.²⁰ In any case, the aristocracy flocked to the arena as eagerly as did the masses, and the Romans have not been the only people in history to enjoy violent sports.

In Roman society, violence was endemic and had been accentuated by the political chaos of the Late Republic.²¹ Like other Italians, the Romans were emotional and volatile. Though the state could usually cope with major disorders,²² personal violence plagued the city. Under the Republic, the police powers of the state had been rudimentary, with a few officials and their limited staffs trying to maintain a semblance of order.²³ Without a police force, Romans traditionally had to rely on relatives and friends when violence entered their lives. While a commoner would call upon his friends and neighbors to assist him, a noble could also summon a throng of clients to do battle for him.²⁴ In rural

17 Fronto, *Principia Historiae*, 17.

18 Dionysius, *Antiquitates Romanae*, III, 68. Pliny the Elder, *Historia Naturalis*, XXXVI, 102.

19 Carcopino, *Daily Life*, 235.

20 Though Seneca, *Epistulae ad Lucilium*, VII, 3–5, considered the gladiatorial games revolting and sadistic, Pliny the Younger, *Panegyricus*, 33, excused them on the grounds that such spectacles conditioned the audience to scorn wounds and death.

21 Andrew W. Lintott's *Violence in Republican Rome* (Oxford, 1968) has been reviewed severely by G. V. Sumner, *Phoenix*, XXIV (1970), 88–92, but enthusiastically by Adrian N. Sherwin-White, *Journal of Roman Studies*, LIX (1969), 286–287.

22 See Tacitus, *Annales*, I, 77, for the government's reaction to the theater riots in A.D. 15.

23 Lintott, *Violence in Republican Rome*, 89–106. Edward C. Echols, "The Roman City Police: Origin and Development," *Classical Journal*, LIII (1958), 377–384, is more sanguine and argues that the Republic had a police force of *custodes urbis*.

24 Lintott, *Violence in Republican Rome*, 6–16, 66. See now his "The Tradition of Violence in the Annals of the Early Roman Republic," *Historia*, XIX (1970), 12–29.

areas, the situation was worse, and landowners hired armed bands to protect them and intimidate their foes. In the 50s B.C., Clodius and Milo had headed private armies of thugs at Rome, but such gangs were banned by the Principate. Even when public violence was at a low ebb, the average Roman felt it quite natural to call upon his friends to help him resist an assault—or to commit one.

One of the major achievements of Augustus was the establishment of effective military and paramilitary forces to police Rome. Within or near the city were stationed about 12,000 professional soldiers. Nine cohorts of Praetorian Guards served as the household troops of the emperor, while three urban cohorts policed the city, although they functioned mainly as riot troops.²⁵ The 3,000 troopers of the urban cohorts were under the command of the urban prefect, who was responsible for public order in the city. A fourth urban cohort was added, probably by Caligula,²⁶ and a total of seven was reached under Claudius.²⁷ During the civil wars of A.D. 69 the Praetorians and the urban cohorts gambled in politics, and both units backed Otho against Vitellius. After defeating Otho, Vitellius reduced the urban cohorts to four but increased the Praetorian cohorts to sixteen by adding his own troops. When Vespasian's brother, the urban prefect Sabinus, rose against Vitellius, the urban cohorts supported the prefect, and most died in his abortive attempt to hold the Capitol.²⁸ In A.D. 70 the victorious Vespasian restored the number of cohorts to four urban and nine Praetorian.²⁹ His son Domitian added a tenth Praetorian cohort,³⁰ and the number ap-

25 Tacitus, *Annales*, IV, 5. Cassius Dio, LIII, 24.6, assigns 10,000 soldiers to guard the emperor and probably includes a corps of personal bodyguards; he also lists four urban cohorts with a strength of 6,000. Echols, "The Roman City Police," 381, would include 3,000 *custodes urbis* in this figure. Dio's statistics may reflect the Severan era. The actual strength of a cohort is controversial. Marcel Durry, "Praetoriae Cohortes," *Realenzyklopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*, XXII, col. 1613–1614, argues that the figure was 500 before Septimius Severus doubled it. (Thus, Tacitus, *Historiae*, II, 93, deals with an exception.) However, Alfredo Passerini, *Le coorti pretorie* (Roma, 1939), favors a strength of 1,000 from the beginning of the Principate. The latter figure seems more realistic, for it would insure the Princeps the equivalent of two legions at his disposal.

26 Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae*, XIX, 188, but he mentions three urban cohorts in *Bellum Judaicum*, II, 205.

27 Echols, "The Roman City Police," 382. Apparently, Claudius also increased the number of Praetorian cohorts to twelve—*Cambridge Ancient History*, X, 232, n.3.

28 Tacitus, *Historiae*, II, 93; III, 57, 69, 73. One cohort deserted to Vespasian; three died with Sabinus. In A.D. 41 the urban cohorts had briefly backed the short-lived "restoration" of the Republic—Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae*, XIX, 188.

29 Echols, "The Roman City Police," 383.

30 *Cambridge Ancient History*, XI, 135, n.2.

parently remained fixed.³¹ While available in an emergency, the Praetorian Guards were an elite corps, and the actual policing of the city fell on the urban cohorts.

The “police force” of Rome was augmented by a quasi-military fire brigade, the *vigiles*, who served as both firemen and nightwatchmen and often in a police capacity as well. In A.D. 6 Augustus established seven cohorts of freedmen³² as *vigiles*, with a strength of about 7,000.³³ In the second century, however, the *vigiles* were largely recruited from freeborn citizens.³⁴ (Frequently, the office of prefect of the *vigiles* was a stepping-stone to the choice Praetorian prefecture.³⁵) When Tiberius engineered the overthrow of the powerful Praetorian prefect Sejanus in A.D. 31, neither the Praetorians nor the urban cohorts could be trusted, so *vigiles* guarded the crucial meeting of the Senate where Sejanus was deposed.³⁶ Yet, during the great fire of A.D. 64, some *vigiles* behaved unprofessionally, looting and spreading fires themselves.³⁷ Discounting the Praetorians, the “police force” of Rome, including *vigiles*, numbered about 10,000 in the Augustan age, and later about 11,000.³⁸ With a third of the population of Chicago, Imperial Rome had a police force of about the same size as that of the modern city. By present standards, Rome was heavily policed in terms of numbers, but much of that force was occupied with fire fighting, and the core of the police were riot troops, not patrolmen. When the average resident of Rome was in difficulty, he stood little chance of aid from a policeman and called upon his neighbors for help. When he had a grievance against the state, he was likely to do the same.

Under an authoritarian regime, it is not easy for a citizen or even a group of citizens to communicate with the head of state. Absorbed in the awesome task of running the empire, the emperor at Rome was generally inaccessible to his subjects. It was equally difficult for him to learn of their needs and wishes, for the ruler was surrounded by secretaries

31 Herodian, III, 13.4, says that Septimius Severus quadrupled the forces at Rome, but this is an unlikely figure even including the legion at Albano and assuming that Severus doubled the numbers in the Praetorian and urban cohorts.

32 Cassius Dio, LV, 26.4–5. Suetonius, *Augustus*, 30. Strabo, V, 3.7.

33 Cassius Dio, LV, 24.6, says 6,000.

34 P. K. Baillie Reynolds, *The Vigiles of Imperial Rome* (London, 1926), 67–68.

35 Note the career of Ofonius Tigellinus—Tacitus, *Historiae*, I, 72.

36 Cassius Dio, LVIII, 9.3–5.

37 Cassius Dio, LXII, 17.1.

38 Mason Hammond, *The Antonine Monarchy* (Roma, 1959), favors a strength of 500 for an urban cohort or one of the *vigiles*. This figure results in a police force of 5,500, equivalent to that of Los Angeles.

and courtiers. The great exception to the isolation of the emperor was his appearance at the Circus or the theaters. To display their affinity with the people, even rulers who were bored by shows and games made token appearances, although Marcus Aurelius, like Caesar, annoyed the audience by reading and dictating letters.³⁹ Augustus, on the other hand, frankly enjoyed the shows,⁴⁰ and so did most of his successors. When the emperor was present, the crowd took full advantage of the opportunity to attract his attention. In the anonymity of a mass audience, it was safe to be impudent and call out witticisms that bordered on sedition. In the sheer numbers which filled the Circus, there was great power, both in the psychological force of noise itself and in the latent possibility of a riot. Claques organized rhythmic chants and clapping in unison and were often joined by other spectators, who were caught up in the compulsive excitement of a crowd atmosphere. Sometimes the cries and requests were flippant, but often matters of import were brought to the ear of the ruler. Though freedom had long since vanished from Rome, the emperors could not afford to disregard public opinion when it was howled by an immense throng. Even the dour Tiberius, who loathed the games and the crowds, was forced by their cries to grant freedom to a slave comedian and to restore a statue which had been taken from a public building.⁴¹ When the crowds blamed him for high grain prices, however, the emperor ordered the Senate to issue an official censure of the populace for their impudence.⁴²

Toward the Circus crowds, the tyrannical Caligula was less forbearing than Tiberius. From a good Roman source (possibly Cluvius Rufus), Josephus preserves an account of a clash between Caligula and the masses in the Circus:

There, the assembled throngs make requests of the emperors according to their own pleasure. Emperors who rule that there can be no question about granting such petitions are by no means unpopular. So in this case, they desperately entreated Gaius to cut down imposts and grant some relief from the burden of taxes. But he had no patience with them, and when they shouted louder and louder, he dispatched agents among them in all directions with orders to arrest any who shouted, to bring them forward at once, and to put them to death. The order was given and . . .

39 *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, "Marcus Aurelius," 15.1.

40 Suetonius, *Augustus*, 45.

41 Suetonius, *Tiberius*, 47. Pliny the Elder, *Historiae Naturalis*, XXXIV, 62.

42 Tacitus, *Annales*, VI, 13.

carried out. The number of those executed in such summary fashion was very large. The people, when they saw what happened, stopped their shouting.⁴³

When faced with a resolute tyrant, Cassius Dio remarks of this episode, the people can only be sullen and mutter.⁴⁴ Yet most emperors were receptive to public opinion as represented by the multitude in the Circus. When the masses in the Circus and theaters cried for the death of Nero's hated henchman, Tigellinus, Galba quieted them by announcing that their foe was dying of disease.⁴⁵ Later, the crowds in the Circus and theaters—where, Tacitus adds, “they have less restraint”—compelled Otho to order Tigellinus' death.⁴⁶ Only foolhardy tyrants like Caligula totally disregarded the voice of the people in the Circus.

When civil war broke out between Septimius Severus and Clodius Albinus in A.D. 196, Dio witnessed an extraordinary display of crowd discipline during a demonstration for peace that took place at the Circus:

While the entire world was disturbed by this situation, we senators remained quiet, at least as many of us as did not, by openly inclining to the one or the other, share their dangers and their hopes. The populace, however, could not restrain itself but indulged in the most open lamentations. It was at the last horse race before the Saturnalia, and a countless throng of people flocked to it. I, too, was present . . . and I heard distinctly everything that was said. . . . They had watched the chariots racing . . . without applauding, as was their custom, any of the contestants at all. But when these races were over and the charioteers were about to begin another event, they first enjoined silence upon one another and then suddenly all clapped their hands at the same moment and also joined in a shout, praying for good fortune for the public welfare. . . . Then, applying the terms “Queen” and “Immortal” to Rome, they shouted: “How long are we to suffer such things?” and “How long are we to be waging war?” And after making some other remarks of this kind, they finally shouted, “So much for that,” and turned their attention to the horse race.⁴⁷

Dio adds that divine inspiration must have prompted the demonstration, for how else could so many men have cooperated?⁴⁸ It may well

43 Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae*, XIX, 24–26, in (trans. Louis H. Feldman) *The Works of Josephus* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), IX, 227–229.

44 Cassius Dio, LIX, 13.4.

45 Plutarch, *Galba*, 17.4.

46 Tacitus, *Historiae*, I, 72; Plutarch, *Otho*, 2.2.

47 Cassius Dio, LXXV, 4.2–5, in (trans. Earnest Cary) *Dio's Roman History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1927), IX, 203–205.

48 Cassius Dio, LXXV, 4.5–6. In other cities, the Circus was also the scene of dis-

be that *vox populi* is *vox dei*, but the senator was not privy to the organizations among the masses that could produce such a disciplined display of peace sentiment from perhaps 250,000 people. Critics of the commons can note with satisfaction that the masses soon turned their attention to the races, but the Roman people had made known their desire for peace in a most impressive manner. Unfortunately, Severus was not swayed by the people's weariness with war, for his throne was at stake.

In Imperial Rome, safety to shout en masse was not an idle thing, for the individual was helpless when confronted with the massive power of the state and its ubiquitous secret police. Originally, the secret police were soldiers in civilian clothes, but they soon became a separate adjunct of the Principate, working closely with the urban cohorts.⁴⁹ "Their titles, like those of their twentieth-century equivalents, are the more terrifying for their blandness: *curiosi*, *frumentarii*, *agentes in rebus*."⁵⁰ The secret police not only ferreted out subversive courtiers,⁵¹ but also lured common people into making disloyal remarks. Epictetus warns his fellow Romans to beware of strangers who strike up a conversation and begin to criticize the emperor, for they are surely secret agents and, if the unwary victim joins in berating the ruler, he will be arrested for sedition.⁵² Historians have preserved accounts of prominent figures who were denounced by informers, but how many more commoners were trapped by the secret police and perished for their indiscretion?

A frequent cause of popular discontent at Rome was food shortages. At best, prices rose, and, at worst, the city was brought to the brink of famine. When the situation became critical, a bread riot could break out. In 41 B.C. the fleets of Sextus Pompeius cut off the food supply for Rome, and the hungry citizenry staged a massive strike, closing all shops and protesting loudly to the government to provide food.⁵³ Two years later, when the city again faced famine, the entire populace rose to complain of hunger and high taxes. Angry mobs

ciplined demonstrations and occasional riots. See, for example, John B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire* (New York, 1953), II, 39–48, 71–74, and Robert Browning, "The Riot of A.D. 387 in Antioch," *Journal of Roman Studies*, XLII (1952), 13–20.

49 William Sinnigen, "The Roman Secret Service," *Classical Journal*, LVII (1961), 65–72, esp. 68.

50 MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order*, 336, n.2.

51 *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, "Hadrian," 11.4–6.

52 Epictetus, *Dissertationes*, IV, 13.5, specifies that the *agent provocateur* is a soldier in mufti.

53 Appian, *Bella Civilia*, V, 18.

threatened to stone those who did not join them and to burn the houses of those who held aloof. When he tried to calm them in the Forum, Octavian was stoned and wounded by the rioters, who also hurled rocks at Antony when he tried to intercede. Seeing that the mob could not be restrained, Antony summoned a detachment of troops and charged into the crowd to rescue the bloodstained Octavian. The soldiers then began to massacre the civilians and soon cleared the streets. Appian notes that the rioters had included "men of the better class."⁵⁴ Though the people of Rome paid a high price in casualties, the riot forced Antony and Octavian to come to terms with Sextus Pompeius in order to relieve the situation that had caused the disorders.⁵⁵

So crucial was the problem of food for the capital that the Principate took great care to ensure prompt and sufficient deliveries of grain for the city.⁵⁶ In A.D. 51 a delay in the arrival of the grain fleet caused a serious food shortage, for only a fifteen-day supply was left in Rome. An angry crowd surrounded Claudius in the Forum and pelted him with stale crusts of bread until soldiers rescued the emperor and hurried him away to the palace.⁵⁷ Yet Claudius was most conscientious with projects to provide adequate supplies for the city.⁵⁸ In A.D. 68 food shortages at Rome helped to topple Nero from his throne.⁵⁹ In A.D. 189 the Praetorian prefect Cleander was hoarding grain to raise the price, and his political enemies cut the city's supply even more to bring on famine and riots which could unseat the unpopular prefect. Exasperated by hunger, the masses rose and demanded that Commodus execute Cleander. When the emperor sent out the cavalry to disperse the crowds, heavy street fighting ensued. The Praetorian Guards, however, backed the rioters, and the combined force of infuriated citizens and professional soldiery compelled Commodus to accede to the demands and behead the hated Cleander.⁶⁰ In the bread riots, the violence of the mob resulted from impatience with a government that had failed to fulfill one of its major responsibilities.

It is often said that the masses are incapable of acting on behalf of abstract principles, for common men are stupid and crowds are

54 Appian, *Bella Civilia*, V, 67–68.

55 Cassius Dio, XLVIII, 31.5–6.

56 Guy E. Chilver, "Princes and Frumentationes," *American Journal of Philology*, LXX (1949), 7–21.

57 Tacitus, *Annales*, XII, 43; Suetonius, *Claudius*, 18.

58 Frank, *Economic Survey*, V, 41, 268–269.

59 Suetonius, *Nero*, 45.

60 Cassius Dio, LXXII, 13.1–6; Herodian, I, 12–13.

aggregates of the irrational. In his classic study, *The Crowd*, Le Bon pontificates: “The powerlessness of crowds to reason aright prevents them from displaying any trace of the critical spirit, prevents them, that is, from being capable of discerning truth from error, or of forming a precise judgment on any matter.”⁶¹ Such a generality is as worthless as the snobbish quips of ancient writers on the fickleness and irrationality of the masses.⁶² Even Tacitus, who was no friend to the commons, reports a striking example of the masses challenging the state on behalf of a very abstract principle—justice for slaves. In A.D. 61 an unsavory official was murdered by one of his slaves, which by law required the arbitrary execution of all slaves in the household, innocent and guilty alike. When it was learned that the full measure of the law was to be employed, a large crowd gathered to protest and demand that the innocent slaves be spared. While the matter was being debated in the Senate, the crowds besieged the building and encouraged those senators who spoke in favor of moderation and justice. The majority of the Senate voted to carry out the letter of the law, however, whereupon the crowd armed itself with stones and torches and tried to prevent the executions. To uphold the authority of the state, Nero dispatched troops and lined with soldiers the route where the luckless slaves were led to death.⁶³ The riot had not been a protest against slavery but against a glaring injustice. Apparently, the Roman masses cherished the principle of justice more dearly than did most of the haughty senators. When evaluating clichés about the “debased” Roman commons, this episode should not be forgotten.

How many comparable episodes went unrecorded or, if recorded, have been lost, can only be conjectured. A year later, the masses loudly protested Nero’s divorce and degradation of Octavia, and rioters overthrew statues of her successor, Poppaea.⁶⁴ How much of their devotion was inspired by loyalty to the family of Claudius and how much was due to sympathy for a wronged and virtuous wife is open to argument, but the masses had already displayed a fine sense of justice in the affair of the slaves. After the great fire of A.D. 64 Nero blamed the disaster on Christians and executed a number of them as enemies of society. The

61 Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd* (London, 1947), 66–67.

62 See, for example, Polybius, VI, 56.11, and the note by Frank W. Walbank, *A Historical Commentary on Polybius* (Oxford, 1957), I, 742.

63 Tacitus, *Annales*, XIV, 42–45.

64 Tacitus, *Annales*, XIV, 59–61. See also the contemporary play, *Octavia*, which is usually included in editions of Seneca’s tragedies, though Seneca himself appears as a character in the drama.

emperor invited the public to view the torments which he inflicted on the unpopular sectarians, but the masses were not amused: "Compassion arose because they were being sacrificed to the fury of one man and not for the public good."⁶⁵ Admittedly, such examples are rare, but not because the masses were insensible to the principle of justice. Rather, the sources for ancient history (especially for social history) are fragmentary at best, and the historians of antiquity, preoccupied with rulers and the upper classes, disdained the attitudes of the faceless "mob."

In the early Principate, there was still a residue of republican sentiment among the common people. In A.D. 19, when news of the death of Tiberius' heir Germanicus reached the capital, the entire populace closed their shops and went into mourning before the Senate had time to proclaim a public display of grief. Part of Germanicus' popularity was based on a belief that he had intended to "restore the liberties of the Roman people with equal rights for all."⁶⁶ Such egalitarian views were not shared by the conservative "senatorial opposition," who yearned for the oligarchic realities of the Republic, but among all classes the image of the Republic was still popular. Augustus had been in his grave for only five years, and the assemblies still functioned at least as formalities.⁶⁷ At any rate, Germanicus had seemed a symbol of egalitarian republicanism to the masses. No doubt, these hopes were ill placed, for Germanicus was a shallow mediocrity and surely no democrat, but nonetheless he represented to many Romans the possibility of a republican restoration.

With the passage of time, the aura of the Republic faded, and the masses became attached to the concept of legitimate emperors and dynastic loyalty. In theory, the emperor was still a republican magistrate, but to the people he was a "just king" who embodied the general will. Dynastic sentiment increased devotion to the ruler. When Caligula was assassinated in A.D. 41, the Senate wished to seize power by "restoring the Republic," and the "restoration" received some support from the urban cohorts, but the masses rallied in support of Caligula's uncle,

65 Tacitus, *Annales*, XV, 44.

66 Tacitus, *Annales*, II, 82; Suetonius, *Caligula*, 5-6. Supposedly, he derived these sentiments from his father, Drusus—Tacitus, *Annales*, I, 33. Suetonius, *Claudius*, 1. See Sir Ronald Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford, 1958), I, 418, on the pro-Germanicus tradition.

67 Arnold H. M. Jones, "The Elections under Augustus," *Journal of Roman Studies*, XLV (1955), 9-21, believes that Augustus allowed considerable freedom to the assemblies; but Peter A. Brunt, "The Lex Valeria Cornelia," *Journal of Roman Studies*, LI (1961), 71-83, is more cautious and rightly so. At any rate, the forms of the Republic were in evidence. For a lively meeting of the *comitia tributa* as late as A.D. 41, see Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae*, XIX, 158-159.

Claudius, as emperor.⁶⁸ Once the commons had accepted the principle of dynastic legitimacy, even a despot could be viewed as a “just king” if he was legitimate and had not offended the masses. Thus Nero, though hated by the aristocracy, was popular with the commons, and many people regretted the overthrow of the last of the Julio-Claudian house. For years his grave was strewn with flowers.⁶⁹ In the fierce power struggles of A.D. 69, the masses generally held aloof, for the armies decided who would occupy the throne. Yet Otho took great pains to exploit legitimist sentiment by identifying himself with Nero.⁷⁰ After Otho’s suicide, Vitellius was viewed as a legitimate emperor, and the masses demanded arms to defend him when the Flavian armies were approaching Rome. Tacitus expresses some surprise at the episode and notes with satisfaction that the support of the people soon melted away.⁷¹ Understandably, the civilian militia hesitated to stand up to legionary veterans in a pitched battle.

At times popular indignation erupted into open violence, and the people of Rome rose against tyrants and usurpers. Ideologically, the masses rallied in the name of a “just king,” and the disorders at Rome resemble what Hobsbawm calls “Church and King” riots.⁷² According to Rudé, “the target of ‘Church and King’ is nearly always ‘the rich’ or the wealthy middle class, and the ideas and institutions that they espouse.”⁷³ Usually, the element of social protest was lacking in the Roman riots, or at least our scanty accounts make little mention of it. In A.D. 193, following the assassination of Commodus, the Senate elected the able and popular Pertinax as emperor, but, after only eighty-seven days, the mutinous Praetorians murdered him and auctioned the throne to a wealthy senator, Didius Julianus. Though the supine Senate

68 Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae*, XIX, 166–189, 227–228. Suetonius, *Caligula*, 60; *Claudius*, 10. Josephus mentions that the commons feared a revival of the civil wars. With or without their support, Claudius’ success was guaranteed by the swords of the Praetorians and the diplomacy of Herod Agrippa.

69 Suetonius, *Nero*, 57. Cf. Tacitus, *Historiae*, I, 4. The false Neros who soon appeared in the East confirm the popularity of the fallen emperor in the provinces. See Tacitus, *Historiae*, I, 2; II, 8; Cassius Dio, LXIV, 9.3; LXVI, 19.3; Suetonius, *Nero*, 57. Despite the “bad press” that he received from senatorial historians and Christian propagandists, Nero became “the once and future king” in the popular mind.

70 Suetonius, *Otho*, 7; Plutarch, *Otho*, 3.1–2. The ambitious Praetorian prefect, Nymphidius Sabinus, had tried to create a claim on the throne by posing as Caligula’s bastard—Plutarch, *Calba*, 9.1.

71 Tacitus, *Historiae*, III, 58. See Zwy Yavetz, “Vitellius and the ‘Fickleness of the Mob,’” *Historia*, XVIII (1969), 557–569.

72 Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* (New York, 1959), 108–125.

73 Rudé, *The Crowd in History*, 138.

accepted the coup, the masses were furious over the murder of Pertinax and the degradation of the imperial office. Denouncing Julianus, the common people spurned his offers of cash gifts and threw stones at him until the soldiers came to his rescue. After some street fighting, the mob seized the Circus Maximus and held it for a night and a day without food or water, calling upon the frontier generals to overthrow Julianus. Since they had no provisions, the crowds then dispersed.⁷⁴ The opportunistic generals pretended to heed the voice of the people, though regardless of the disorders at Rome the legionary commanders would not have allowed the Praetorians to impose Julianus on them. However, the popular rising in the capital had added a tone of legitimacy to a new crop of usurpers. Septimius Severus won the scramble for the throne by marching rapidly to Rome, where Julianus was immediately deposed. An astute politician, Severus posed as the avenger of Pertinax and disbanded the guilty Praetorians, replacing them with his own troops.⁷⁵ Later, to legitimize his regime, Severus deified the late Commodus and attached himself and his sons to the Antonine family.⁷⁶ Whatever his faults, Commodus had been the son of the beloved Marcus Aurelius. By claiming to represent the Antonine dynasty, Severus assumed the aura of the “just king,” dear to the hearts of the Roman people. Even without the riot at Rome, the generals would surely have toppled the puppet Julianus, but nevertheless the Roman “mob” had defended the cause of justice and honor while the Senate was groveling before a usurper.

In the third century A.D. there were more incidents of urban violence, though the sources for this period are especially poor. For some obscure reason, the people battled the Praetorians for three days during the reign of Severus Alexander, and the riots ended only when the soldiers threatened to set fire to the city.⁷⁷ In A.D. 238 disorders broke out which were true “Church and King” riots with an undertone of attacks on the rich. Rome was languishing under the despotism of Maximinus Thrax, who had overthrown the last of the Severan house. At a false rumor that the tyrant was dead, the Senate elected Gordian as emperor, and mobs swept through Rome overturning statues of

74 Cassius Dio, LXXIV, 13.3–5. Cf. Herodian, II, 7.2–3, and *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, “Didius Julianus,” 4.2–5.

75 Cassius Dio, LXXV, 1.1, 4.1. Herodian, II, 10.1. Cassius Dio, LXXV, 1.4–5, witnessed the enthusiasm of the crowds for Severus when he entered the city.

76 Cassius Dio, LXXV, 7.4; LXXVI, 9.4. *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, “Septimius Severus,” 10.3–6. Herodian, III, 10.5.

77 Cassius Dio, LXXX, 2.3.

Maximinus and lynching his henchmen. Herodian notes that “without warning, men broke into the houses of their creditors and their opponents in lawsuits, indeed into the house of anyone they hated for some trivial reason; after threatening and abusing them as informers, their attackers robbed and killed them.”⁷⁸ When Gordian was defeated by Maximinus’ supporters in Africa, the Senate elected Balbinus and Pupienus as emperors. The latter, however, was unpopular with the Roman masses, who rioted until the two emperors proclaimed Gordian’s grandson, Gordian III, as their heir.⁷⁹ While Balbinus and Pupienus marched against Maximinus, the Praetorians at Rome were still loyal to him, but the masses were fiercely opposed to Maximinus. After attacking the soldiers with stones in the streets, a large mob seized arms and laid siege to the Praetorian camp.⁸⁰ When the rioters cut off the water supply to the barracks, the soldiers made a sally from the camp. Herodian vividly describes the street fighting:

A sharp skirmish resulted and, when the mob fled, the guards pursued and drove them into all parts of the city. Bested in the hand-to-hand fighting, the people climbed to the housetops and rained down upon the Praetorians tiles, stones, and clay pots. In this way, they inflicted severe injuries upon the soldiers, who, being unfamiliar with the houses, did not dare to climb after them, and, of course, the doors of the shops and houses were barred. The soldiers did, however, set fire to houses that had wooden balconies, and there were many of this type in the city. Because a great number of houses were made chiefly of wood, the fire spread very rapidly and without a break throughout most of the city. . . . A great many people died in the fire, unable to escape because the exits had been blocked by the flames. All the property of the wealthy was looted when the criminal and worthless elements in the city joined with the soldiers in plundering. And the part of Rome destroyed by fire was greater in extent than the largest intact city in the empire.⁸¹

In the conflagration, the riot ended and looters replaced the crowds who

78 Herodian, VII, 7.3, in (trans. Edward C. Echols) *Herodian of Antioch’s History of the Roman Empire* (Berkeley, 1961), 185. Herodian, VII, 3.5, attributes the resentment of the masses to Maximinus’ expropriation of public funds earmarked for games and entertainment. Relying on Herodian, VII, 3.1–6, Rostovtzeff, *Social and Economic History*, I, 452–453, views Maximinus as primarily a relentless foe of the *bourgeoisie*. Apparently, the pro-Gordian riot got out of hand when the poor began to attack the homes of the rich.

79 Herodian, VII, 10.5–9.

80 Herodian, VII, 11.6–12.4. Cf. *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, “Maximini Duo,” 22.6; “Gordiani Tres,” 22.7–23.1; “Maximus et Balbinus,” 9.1–10.8.

81 Herodian, VII, 12.4–7, in (trans. Edward C. Echols) *Herodian*, 196.

had fought against the troops of the “unjust king.” However, the masses had once again defended the cause of legitimate government.

Another clash between civilians and Praetorians took place in A.D. 311. While fire swept the Temple of Fortuna, a soldier, possibly a Christian, blasphemed and was promptly lynched by a mob. The Praetorians then attacked the crowd and slew many until they were restrained by the “emperor” Maxentius.⁸² In this episode, the masses were not defending a “just king,” but the “true gods.”

In the fourth century the city of Rome was demilitarized and outbreaks of urban violence increased. Because the troops in the capital had backed his rival, Maxentius, the victorious Constantine disbanded both the Praetorians and the urban cohorts and did not replace them with a military force.⁸³ The date is uncertain, but it occurred perhaps by A.D. 318 and surely by A.D. 331.⁸⁴ “A similar fate must have befallen the *vigiles*,”⁸⁵ for they too vanished from the scene, and artisan clubs assumed the duties of fire fighting.⁸⁶ Deprived of both professional troops and a police force, the urban prefects had to maintain order with only the aid of their limited staffs. Imperial Rome reverted to the hectic insecurity which had characterized the city under the Late Republic.

The extant books of Ammianus Marcellinus cover only the years 353–378, but they record a number of outbreaks of urban violence. Throughout the century, there were obviously many more riots, for in A.D. 388, Ambrose dryly remarked: “Do you remember, O Emperor, how many homes of prefects at Rome have been burned, and no one exacted punishment?”⁸⁷ Some prefects had managed to assert authority by displays of bravado. In A.D. 356, a riot broke out over the arrest of a popular charioteer, and the prefect’s aides seized a few of the rioters. A few days later, a major disorder erupted over a wine shortage, but the prefect Leontius drove into the crowd, personally arrested the ring-leader, and had him flogged on the spot, whereupon the mob melted away.⁸⁸ In A.D. 358 there were more disturbances, but Ammianus

82 Zosimus, II, 13. Naturally, Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VIII, 14.3, considers Maxentius responsible for the massacre. Cf. Aurelius Victor, *de Caesaribus*, 40.

83 Aurelius Victor, *de Caesaribus*, 40. Zosimus, II, 17.

84 William Sinnigen, *The Officium of the Urban Prefecture during the Later Roman Empire* (Roma, 1957), 35, n.11; 91, 92, n.21.

85 *Ibid.*, 92–93.

86 Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*, I, 695.

87 Ambrose, *Epistulae*, 40.13, in (trans. Sister Mary Beyenka) *Letters* (Washington D.C., 1954), 11.

88 Ammianus Marcellinus, XV, 7.2–4.

provides no details.⁸⁹ During a bread riot in the following year, the prefect Tertullus could only calm the mob by offering his own children as hostages. Shamed by the gesture, the crowd dispersed.⁹⁰ In A.D. 364 a mob burned down the house of the prefect Symmachus, who had threatened to destroy his stock of wine rather than sell it at reduced prices.⁹¹ A year later, a mob fired the house of the prefect Lampadius, who was vain, high-handed, and hated by the poor. Since there were no police, neighbors drove off the rioters, but the prefect still thought it prudent to flee from the city.⁹² During the disputed papal election of A.D. 366, fierce fighting broke out between the followers of Damasus and those of his rival for the bishopric. In one engagement alone, 137 fatalities occurred. Despairing of the strife, the prefect Viventius withdrew to the suburbs, and order was only slowly restored to Rome.⁹³ While such outbreaks were detrimental to public order, the contested episcopal elections at Rome and in other cities were rowdy exercises in democracy, one of the few opportunities for the people to make their own decisions under the stifling despotism of the Late Empire.⁹⁴ In the absence of police and troops, demonstrations easily degenerated into riots.

Surveying four centuries of urban violence in Imperial Rome, it is obvious that “bread and circuses” played a major role, but not as corruptive factors as the moralists would have it. Since the city depended upon imported food, hungry crowds sometimes engaged in bread riots. While the Circus and theaters may have tempted some Romans to idle amusements, the poor could not afford much absence from work. Though partisanship between the Blues and Greens often grew overheated, the Circus was more important as the principal means for the masses to communicate with the emperor. Often the roar of the crowd was political in tone, protesting high prices and unfair taxes, appealing for justice, and even demonstrating for peace. When the Circus crowds complained about discrimination between social classes in matters of punishment, Diocletian growled to his councillors: “The empty voices of the people are not to be heeded.”⁹⁵ Less despotic rulers did heed the

89 Ammianus Marcellinus, XVII, 11.5.

90 Ammianus Marcellinus, XIX, 10.1–4.

91 Ammianus Marcellinus, XXVII, 3.4.

92 Ammianus Marcellinus, XXVII, 3.8–9.

93 Ammianus Marcellinus, XXVII, 3.11–13.

94 At Milan in A.D. 373, the governor, Ambrose, tried to quiet the rowdy electorate and wound up being elected bishop. Paulinus, *vita Ambrosii*, 6–7.

95 *Codex Justinianus*, IX, 47.12.

voices of the people, who, if too long ignored, might resort to violence. When the masses took to the streets, the mobs were largely made up of ordinary citizens, “little people” driven to desperate action, though obviously criminals and social scum readily joined in the violence in hopes of looting. It is too often overlooked that the majority of episodes of urban violence at Rome were either provoked by food shortages or prompted by ideological attachments to abstract justice or the cause of a “just king.” Were the sources more complete and less warped by class bias, even more episodes might come to light. Though most ancient (and some modern) writers dismiss the masses as lawless and fickle, the records of even unsympathetic historians tell a different story. To a large extent the history of the Roman Empire is a grim chronicle of military despotism in the name of law and order, cringing servility on the part of the Senate, and irresponsible opportunism by the armies. In defense of justice and legitimate government, the Roman “mob” often acquitted itself better than its social superiors.