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Reevaluating the Nika Riot & Placing it in Conversation with the Antioch Riot of 387

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Reevaluating the Nika Riot & Placing it in Conversation with the Antioch Riot of 387

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CPHAB Senior Thesis

Xavier University 2019

Introduction: A Fine Mess on a Sunny Day

You enter into the stadium and find a place to sit down, doing chores around the house made you late, but multiple races run each day, so much of the fun is still ahead. Behind you sits a man, having brought his son to see the games. In front of you is a young man and woman talking about their interests, on their first date no doubt. You strike up a conversation with the man sitting to your left and begin to talk about the new taxes you both have to pay. Your conversation draws to a close as you hear a horn and your attention is drawn below. Moments before the racers had lined up, but now they have become a loose mob, with one clearly leading the rest. He whips his horses on, making sure to stay on the inside track, but other are close behind him. He slows down at the turn, but a competitor whips up his chariot trying to get ahead. For the moment he seems in the lead, but his speed in the turn drives him off course, causing both horses and the two riders to crash. You hear the man to your right curse his luck, having lost yet another bet as he hands some coins to his beaming friend. In the other section you hear taunts and jeers from the rival team, the Blues.

The home stretch of the race approaches fast, and the team that started with the lead starts to pull away. In response to the rival team you and the rest of the Green supporters now start to cheer on your racers and mock the other team. As the race ends everyone in your section starts to celebrate. However, the applause gives way to some grumbling and shouting as you see two men, both extremely drunk, pushing each other. The Blue shouts an insult to the Green: "How could your team sponsor a heretic? That Monophysite should be hanged!" The Green quickly responds: "At least we didn't have to pay some dirty barbarian to win the race for us. How many does that make this week?" Though each man is only trying to rile the other up, each speaks a kernel of truth: despite the emperor condemning them, many in the city are still Monophysites

and everyone could tell by the light skin that the Green racer was far from home. Others begin to join the argument.

You see that the next race has already started, but you, along with those around you, can only focus on the fight that has broken out. Instead of two drunks bickering, two tides of flesh crash against each other. One man pulls another to the ground. Among them is the young man you saw sitting in front of you, his face in a grimace as he slings slurs at his opponents. You hear the splintering of wood and whining of horses, but now the audience watches the real spectacle as it unravels before their eyes. Only moments later fists turn to clubs as men, Blue and Green alike, begin to hit each other with crude weapons that had been concealed under their clothes.

You hear shouting from your left, as some members of the emperor's guard are coming, sword and shield in hand. They tolerated some rough-housing, but this has become too much. Their presence alone breaks up the fight as people walk away with bruises and blood dripping from wounds. The guards are unable to get one man to leave. It is the old man that started this brawl, now lying dead in the stands; a Blue till death. It had shocked you as a child seeing someone die; although it was rare, it happens enough that that you say a prayer and walk away to find something for lunch.

The chariot races provide a snapshot of both Roman and Byzantine life. Cicero, in his 64 BC speech *In Toga Candida*, attacks his opponent Antonius for himself being a charioteer when he was younger and spending treasury funds on Boculus, a well-known charioteer at the time (Cicero. *In Tog Cand.* 83.20). In 16 BC Ovid gives a whole chapter of his poem, *Amores*, to his attempted wooing of a woman while they watch the chariot races (Ovid *Am.* 3.2). The games were so popular in the early Principate that Augustus issued a decree reserving the front seats of any public race for those of the senatorial class and had similar divisions for lower classes

(Seutonius. *Aug.* 44.2). Chariot races frequently were celebrated parts of larger events, such as the *ludi Romani*, *ludi Apollinares*, and *ludi Ceriales*. As the Roman Empire became more Christianized, violent sports like gladiator games went out of style and chariot racing came into vogue. Chariot racing was so popular in the late empire that within a decade of moving the Easter capital to Constantinople, in 324, he renovated the simple chariot course to the vast Hippodrome still seen in the city. To the Byzantines, the races played both a social and political role. As will be discussed later, audiences at the chariot races could get the emperor to change his mind on a piece of policy or pardon a criminal.

The Byzantines held the races in similar esteem, if not greater. Not only were the emperor and high acting officials often members of those rival racing teams, but the teams would provide choirs at the coronation of the emperor or other functions in the day to day life of the emperor.¹ In return, before the races, the emperor started the day by blessing the racers and their supporters. Frequently during the midday races, the emperor would provide a feast for those watching, so that they would not have to leave their seats. But not everything was happy in this world of chariot racing; as was seen above in the opening vignette, the two rival teams supporting the chariot racers, called factions, could erupt into violence. The focus of this paper will be perhaps the most famous example of factional violence in the Byzantine Empire: the Nika riot under Justinian' reign in 532.²

The circus factions were groups of people who organized together to support charioteers. These factions could then be separated into two groups: “the small body of professional performers who organized and took part in the actual shows, and the much larger bodies of

¹ Cameron 1976: 232

² Nika, Νίκη, is Greek for “victory” and was a popular cheer during the races.

spectators who merely watched.”³ In modern sports we tend to draw a line between fans of a sports team and the athletes/ coaches/ managers who do the work to get the team running, but these two groups were all one faction in ancient chariot racing. The responsibilities of the factions were quite murky to understand, as modern writers would say that groups of the Constantinople militia were made from circus partisans, while others remark that this came about purely because many of the city’s young men were members of the Blue or Green factions, depending on who the emperor was.⁴ For now, the definition of a faction should be: a group of individuals, either spectators, managers, or racers, who come together to support the same racers and to work against those in opposing factions.

Cameron, a historian who specializes in ancient chariot racing, gives support that the ancient faction members were analogous to “hooligans” in British soccer. He notes that both groups are made of young men, *iuvenes*, who wear foreign and extravagant garb with a propensity for violence.⁵ Much like the soccer hooligans, the Constantinople riots under Justinian were very much impromptu and only occurred when two members of opposing factions butted heads and when the imperial guard decided not to intervene.⁶

“Hooligan” might be a word that could describe members of the factions, but this reduces them to greaser gangs of the 60’s. The factions might be most famous because of scenes like this, but each group encapsulated a wide collection of people. Many of the people in a faction did little more than attend the races and cheer from the stands. The administrative side of the factions

³ Ibid. 5

⁴ Ibid. 120-1

⁵ Ibid. 76-7

⁶ Ibid. 277 Of the twelve riots that happened under Justinian in Constantinople, three of them occurred on May 11th. He notes that this most likely came from the fact that these races occurred on the city’s founding day at a ceremony called Genethliaca. This holiday added extra importance, and bragging rights, to victories. He compares Genethliaca to “a cup-final rather than an ordinary league match.” One can imagine the extreme sorrow after losing a championship game compared to one during the regular season.

operated very much above board, even receiving most of the horses they raced and the funding to pay their ranking members from the emperor and the treasury.⁷ By the time of the Nika riot the factions had expanded their power and started to sponsor dancers in the imperial theater.⁸ Even at their most infamous, when “250 young Greens wearing breastplates in the Nika revolt” fight the guards, we see that they had this equipment because partisans were often called to act with the militia to defend the city and act as the emperor’s guard. As a result of this, I do not think that applying the label “hooliganism” is fitting when talking about the factions as a whole.

Circus factions and the riots they caused did not exist in a vacuum. There is always a cause and effect to what they do, although it might not always be crystal clear. This is especially true for the Nika riot, where the rioters cite one event, the emperor’s inability to pardon their partisans, as the start of the riot but making seemingly unrelated demands to the emperor, removing high up officials from their positions. A closer inspection of the rioters’ demands and the situation in the empire at the time reveals that many of the rioters were *coloni*, poor tenant farmers, and the riot spurred on by the recent tax reforms of Justinian and John the Cappadocian. This is supported by showing the similarities between the Nika riot in 532 and the Antioch riot of 387, which had a similar unfolding of events and was also spurred on by a change in tax policy.

⁷ Ibid. 10-11

⁸ Ibid. 195-196

Chapter One: A Day at the Races

To start an investigation of the circus factions found in the Byzantine Empire, first it is important to understand from where both the factions and the sport they supported came.

Although the Nika riots occurred in 532 AD, by going back to the origins of both factions and racing, the evolution of each can help to add context to the events of the riot. Not only will this help the reader understand some background but will also help to define some terms that may appear frequently. It will also be important to understand some of the politics and political systems that existed in the empire. To do this, I will first define the notion of political party in the late Roman Republic and how this notion shifted with the introduction of an emperor.

The sport of chariot racing itself has its roots in the *Illiad*, one of the earliest Greek works, where a chariot race is the first and most rewarding funeral game at the funeral of Patroclus. Following in this tradition, the first evidence of a chariot race outside of literature dates it in 680 BC.⁹ Archaic Greeks also had a different sort of chariot racing, one with mule-carts.¹⁰ This racing was not as fast or intense as those done with horses, and was in the ancient Olympics for about half a century (Pausonius 5.8). Although this more popular form of racing involving horses had some differences compared to our media representation of it, what comes to be Roman chariot racing starts to take shape. The chariots themselves were called *quadrigae*, named so since they were driven by four horses, with each chariot driven by a single driver.

Because of the rough terrain found throughout Greece, many racecourses are much shorter than one would expect. Though the geography of Greece limited how large the

⁹ Harris 1972: 158

¹⁰ The mule (or sometimes donkey) was chosen instead of the horse in these early races because it was the animal common to most Greeks. The lack of good roads or infrastructure found in the Archaic period meant that horses could not travel on the shoddy roads that a mule could much more easily traverse. Also, the lack of a horse collar meant that farmers ploughed their fields with oxen instead of horses. For additional comments on this, see Harris 151-152.

racecourses could be, Pausanias notes that the hippodrome of Olympia, being 600 yards in length, could fit up to sixty racers at once. This is one of the largest courses we know of, so its size should not be used as the standard but can help bring to scale the size of the racecourses. Not only would each of these tracks vary in size, but each would have a different number of laps to be completed. Harris, a scholar of ancient Greek and Roman sports, also notes that these courses would have to be multipurpose, and only hold races for the part of the year where the fields were not used for growing crops. Despite using the word “hippodrome” above to describe these courses, they could not be any more different from the structure later seen in Constantinople. Most courses at this time were impromptu lanes made by removing crops and large stones from a flat stretch of land.¹¹

This style of racetrack might have worked for early chariot racing, but the Greeks were always looking for ways to improve the chariot racing experience. Later innovations to the track included a starting gate, so that each chariot began at the same time, and staggered starts, so that those on the inside of the track would not have an advantage over the others. One thing that these hippodromes lacked was any kind of formal seating. Unlike theaters throughout Greece, where stands and seats were hewn from rock, hippodromes found at this time instead had raised mounds around the track, so anyone watching could get a full view of the field.

Harris notes how the Greeks, compared to their Roman successors, were less enthused about horse races than athletic competitions.¹² He looks at this as a communication of class struggle in the Greek world. Owning and maintaining a team of horses was only possible for the wealthy. Instead Greeks preferred athletics, where all were on an equal field. Romans had much different views about competition, focusing on the viewer’s experience, not the competitor’s.

¹¹ Ibid. 184

¹² Ibid. 183

Romans held their races similarly to the Greek style, but they were different enough that scholars consider each their own sport. Romans put an emphasis on spectacle. Greek sport “was based on the idea that it was for the enjoyment and benefit of the competitors”¹³ while Roman “athletics had become almost wholly professional and were mounted solely for the entertainment of spectators.”¹⁴ Instead of rich amateurs playing with a team of horses against other aristocrats, the chariot drivers were hired by teams of managers to drive a team of horses bred for this specific task. This becomes evident when looking at the origins of Roman racing against those of the Greeks. Whereas the Greeks wanted to invoke the ancient warriors of Troy and the funeral games of great warriors, Romans saw sports as public entertainment. Yes, Romans also had an epic tradition of competition and funeral games, as is found in the games for Anchises in Book 5 of the *Aeneid*, but some of this is Roman revisionist history trying to put a positive light on this public service. Instead, public games were held to keep the people happy and to solicit votes. One needs to look to the office of *aedile*, the man responsible for financing and putting on public shows, to see this link between politics and Roman spectacle. Chariot racing, as is discussed later in this chapter, became big business for those racing, who would receive prize money, and those watching, who would often bet on the ponies.

Many of the differences found between Roman and Greek racing can be found in the structure of the stadium itself. The Roman circus chiefly had a *spina*. This wall connected the two turning posts and divided one side of the track from the other. This prevented racers from one leg of the race from accidentally colliding with those on another leg. In this way it increased the safety of those before and after they came to the turning post, but the turn caused a source of collisions and drivers wanted to be closest to the inside turn as they could be. Atop the *spina* sat

¹³ Ibid 184

¹⁴ Ibid 184

the lap counter, where seven egg shaped discs were placed, so that the racers could tell how far they were into the race.¹⁵ The *spina* served an ornamental function in addition to a practical one. Inscriptions, statues, and even war spoils were placed on the *spina* to impress those in the stands.¹⁶ Romans may have kept the starting gate from the Greeks; they introduced lane lines at the beginning. These lines made sure that, for the beginning stretch of the race, chariots would not collide with each other. This did add some measure of safety to the race, but the writer Cassiodorus notes that not including these lines made the crashes later in the race that much more exciting (Cass. *Variae*. 51).

When Constantine made Byzantium —soon to be Constantinople— his new capital, he brought along this Roman style of racing and circus stadium to this city by building the Hippodrome. Much of the design seen in the Circus Maximus, such as the *spina* and beginning lane lines, was brought to the Hippodrome. At 450 meters long and 130 wide and being able to seat 100,000 spectators, the eastern Hippodrome was a worthy rival to the western Circus Maximus.¹⁷ One way in which the Hippodrome innovates on the circus design is the existence of the Kathisma. On the surface this was the spectator's box for the emperor, imperial family, and any advisors that might join. The Kathisma acted as the main way the emperor could directly talk and address his people, and it allowed these people to address their emperor.

The races themselves were held in the style that was common in the late imperial age of Rome, but the Byzantines modified the sport to accommodate the shift to Constantinople. Many

¹⁵ Ibid. 190

¹⁶ Even now obelisks stand on the *spina* of the Hippodrome in Istanbul.

¹⁷ Though these measurements include the stands and buildings that surrounded the hippodrome, the actual race track constituted most of the size of the hippodrome so that these measurements can be used to give a sense of scale to these races. Dr. Schrodt goes into even further detail as to the construction and dimensions of the Constantinople hippodrome in her article *Sports of the Byzantine Empire*. I will only mention further details that I deem important to understanding the games.

large cities within the empire had chariot courses, often remodeling old tracks from the Greek style. Races were held daily, except in the case of certain events like religious observations. The number of races each day changed, but the races were grouped as either occurring during the morning or in the afternoon. Although there were four different factions that the crowd could cheer for (either Red, White, Blue, or Green), multiple chariots raced at a time, often pairing up members of different factions on the same chariot. This helped to encourage both faction rivalry (for the factions you raced against) and community (for the faction you raced with). This also ensured that each faction was represented at each race, so that one faction with highly skilled charioteers did not overpower the other three factions. Cameron notes that there is some evidence that Greens and Reds were often paired together, but he notes that there is also evidence that Greens paired with Whites, or rival factions paired with each other, so he dismisses this assumption.¹⁸ After drawing lots to determine the position of each chariot, either being on the inside or outside track, the chariots would complete seven laps around the track. To prove their worth in the course, charioteers who had won in the morning races would sometimes exchange their horses and chariot for another set and participate in the afternoon races, to show their victory came on their skill alone and not from their team.¹⁹ These charioteers were often foreigners. This meant someone outside the city often from either outside the empire or at the fringes.

Betting and chariot racing have a long and intertwined history, going as far back as that first race in the *Illiad*, where Ajax the Lesser and Idomeneus bet tripods and cauldrons over who will place first (*Ill.* 23.448-498). Betting was not a prevalent during the Greek races, since these competitions were about the athleticism of the competition. Romans, as they did in many of their

¹⁸ Ibid 68-70

¹⁹ Harris 1972: 241

sports, made gambling a fixture of chariot races. Unlike modern gambling with spreadsheets and computers able to predict odds and outcomes before the race even starts, ancient gambling had no large-scale organization that managed all of this. It was done at the small scale, often on the spot with whomever was sitting nearby. Despite the amount of gambling, there is very little evidence of charioteers taking bribes. The closest that can be found is that very rarely a charioteer would lose because the opposing team was preferred by the emperor, but the Byzantines took chariot racing seriously enough that this was rarely the case. Despite the tendency of Christians to shy away from gambling, when compared to their pagan counterparts, gambling during chariot races had become an ingrained part of the proceedings and could be seen in the stands.

As much as the races were about cheering on a favored faction, the charioteers became athletic stars in their own right. Porphyrius, the most lauded charioteer we know of, was the subject of thirty-four surviving poems.²⁰ Unlike many charioteers, Porphyrius often raced for multiple factions. Although at different points in his life he would primarily race for either the Greens or the Blues, he would exchange his team with that of the opposing faction after achieving a victory, so that both Blues and Greens could claim Porphyrius had won a race for their faction.²¹ An epigram by an unknown author notes Constantinus, another charioteer, raced 25 times in the morning, switched his racing team, and then won 21 more races in the afternoon all in the same day.

The modern knowledge about the factions themselves can often seem contradictory or at odds depending on which source is cited. At their simplest they were groups that supported one

²⁰ Ibid 241

²¹ Ibid 241

of the aforementioned four chariot teams.²² At their most complex they were a group that (possibly) influenced political change, (maybe) were religiously minded, and (perhaps) were separated by different socio-economic status. Although more scholars are investigating the circus factions than in previous years, recent research has muddied and changed a once clear image of who constituted a faction partisan. When Alan Cameron released *Circus Factions* in 1976, it was seen as a very clear and definitive view of what the factions were and what they came to represent. As further research has been written about the topic, other authors argued with his claims. Despite some recent challenges to his claims, Cameron is still a valuable and knowledgeable resource on the circus factions and his stance that the factions were not formed around religious or economic lines, instead forming purely around the sport and the racers on the course, is still valid.

There is no clear starting point to the circus factions. Cameron sums up the various stories as to the foundations of the factions:

According to Tertullian, there were at first only two colours, Red and White. This statement has given rise to an unwarranted and improbable yet universally accepted assumption that the Blues and Greens did not come into existence till the beginning of the Principate... Tertullian's version is in fact a unique branch of this tradition. Another version (preserved by Malalas) credits Romulus with all four factions, and Cassiodorus' version implies the same. John the Lydian has a curious intermediary version in which Reds, Whites, *and* Greens were original, and only the Blues latecomers... there is in addition the semi-mythical quality of *all* versions, all of which also trace the four colours back to the four basic elements and/ or the four seasons.²³

Although the origins of these factions are uncertain, by the late Republic they had become fixtures to the Roman chariot races. Despite this, the factions were not seen outside of the city. It

²² The matter of how to define the circus factions is quite tough, and throughout this paper what I define as a "circus faction" may slightly change. There are two different ways to consider the circus factions. At the most narrow, it was the system of chariot racers and the managers above them. The looser, and more agreed upon definition, includes the fans themselves as members of the factions, despite rarely doing more than cheering in the stands.

²³ Cameron 1976: 59

may be due to the fact that extensive and daily chariot racing was only present in Rome, or the price of multiple satellite factions would have cost too much, but it was not until Constantine built the Hippodrome in 324 that factions existed outside of Rome.²⁴ Some people in the history of Roman chariot racing, tried to innovate on the faction system, such as when emperor Domitian added two new factions to those preexisting, Purple and Gold.²⁵ Not much is known about either of these factions or why he introduced them, as they die out shortly after the death of the emperor himself.²⁶

In their infancy during the Roman Republic, factions started in the hands of private citizens, called *domini factionum*, who ran the games and factions for their own profit. By the late Roman Empire the state took control of the races, with the factions themselves being managed by senior charioteers.²⁷ When the factions are seen in the early Byzantine Empire, they are well under the thumb of the government, receiving the vast majority of their horses from the imperial stables and receiving salaries from the imperial treasury.²⁸ The factions even had a hand in ancient theater, supplanting the guilds and claques, groups of paid actors meant to spur on cheering from the crowd of a theater performance, that had already been performing.²⁹ Despite how insulated the factions had become in the Roman Republic and the Western Roman Empire, under the Byzantines, the factions, specifically the Blues and Greens, spread to many cities throughout the Byzantine Empire.

²⁴ Harris 1972: 239

²⁵ The origin of these colors is much more obvious, being traditionally associated with nobility and power. Domitian was trying to show his power and legitimacy as emperor by creating factions explicitly aligned with the emperor.

²⁶ Balsdan 2002: 314-319

²⁷ Cameron 1976: 9

²⁸ Ibid 10-1

²⁹ Ibid 195-6

Of the four traditional circus factions, the Blues and Greens are considered by modern scholars the “major” factions while the Whites and Reds are “minor.” This naming convention is not on account of the lack of victory for the minor factions on the course: Julian, a chariot driver whose statue was erected following his death, was a known Red; and a driver by the name Constantine drove the city into mourning with his passing.³⁰ Instead, it is viewed that factions were either major or minor based upon what they did outside of the Hippodrome. This comes from the fact that “whenever we find Reds and Whites mentioned together with Blues and Greens, all four colors, these are just the fans who cheer on their respective teams in the hippodrome.”³¹ Whenever the Reds or Whites are mentioned by an ancient source, it is only in context of the sport and chariot racing, while Blues and Greens are found to help with guarding the city walls and, most famously, inciting riots. These two major factions were held in high enough esteem to have their own stables separate from the imperial stables, from which the minor factions took their horses. The system mentioned above, of having riders paired up (exceedingly a major and minor charioteer), helped to cement the relationship between the major and the minor factions while at the same time preventing one team from always winning and gaining all of the glory.

As was stated above, the Kathisma, or the imperial viewing box, in the Hippodrome was arguably the most important part of the track. This showed that the emperor had a common culture, watching the races, with his people. It created a direct link by which the emperor could interface with his people. With the ability to house over 100,000 spectators in the stands and the expectation that the emperor would be in his box seat most days, the Hippodrome created something similar to a public assembly, where the people could voice their concerns to the

³⁰ Ibid 70

³¹ Ibid 46

emperor. The emperor did not tolerate everything, such as slander or complaints against himself or his policies, but he fielded a wide range of requests from the crowds. As is often the case in sports stadiums, the crowd made their requests to the emperor known by their shouting. In the early stage of the Roman Principate, the emperor took up all requests that came to him at the races; Augustus pardoned and freed some in jail in response to a man's request.³² By the time of Justinian this had waned and, although he might not agree to it, a response was at least expected from the emperor.³³ This is key to understanding the proceedings of the Nika riot. Justinian's silence neither placated or satisfied the crowd, making them believe that if they shouted loud enough or make a large enough of a display, then the emperor would listen to them.

If the emperor did not accept a citizen's appeal, as was the case during the Nika Riot, the next escalation would be to start chanting and try to disrupt the games until the emperor listened. If the emperor did not agree to the demands of the fans, they could always fall back on rioting to get what they wanted. They knew that this came with risks though, as the emperor frequently would send his guards to break up any rioting that went too far. In 520 Justin, uncle to Justinian, sent soldiers to stop rioting that had started in the hippodrome. Greatrex makes a note that although the Blues and Greens had teamed up before, this was only the third time: just as it happened in the Nika riot, both of these times resulted in a clash between soldiers and partisans from the Blues and Greens.³⁴ When the Blues and Greens started to team up, Justinian should have seen the writing on the wall and known that violence was brewing.

Emperors themselves held factional allegiances. Part of it was the pure fun of supporting a sports team. Other times, emperors supported teams because of political reasons, specifically to

³² Ibid 134

³³ Ibid 136

³⁴ Greatrex 1997: 69 It is also important to note that these two other events happened in 515 and 520, not even 20 years before Justinian's Nika riot.

keep the factions in check. If the fans were getting a bit too rowdy, instead of projecting their anger at the emperor, they would point it towards the faction that the emperor supported. This even came to the detriment of some emperors, as in the case of Justinian's support for the Blues which was well known even before he became emperor and his political opponents made sure the Greens knew this fact. This was the norm for most emperors, but some broke the mold. Instead of supporting either the Blues or Greens, Anastasius followed a third path and supported the minor Reds.

As to the state of circus factions as political parties, they certainly had political power. The rioting and beseeching of the emperor at the track shows that they had some *de facto* power. The issue comes with the fact that our modern conception of a political party did not exist in ancient times. In late Republic Rome there existed a sense of rivalry and comradeship in public politics. Taylor identifies this as *amicitia*: "*amicitia* in politics was a responsible relationship. A man expected from his friends not only support at the polls but aid in the perils of public life... Friendship for the man in politics was a sacred agreement."³⁵ Just by looking at the word the Romans use, politics was much more personal than political parties. Instead of forming a group around a broad range of principles, politicians formed around people whom they thought embodied their own ideas. The two examples she uses in her book are "Caesarism" and "Catonism." However, with the shift to the Principate and much of the government's role moved away from the individuals of the Senate and into the hand of the emperor, so too does the role of political affiliations change. Augustus tried to "break the old Rome into a single 'party,' or, more correctly, into a group of clients, united in loyalty to the ruler."³⁶ Augustan party politics has some elements of that old Roman style, mainly forming around one central figure, but instead

³⁵ Taylor 1975: 7

³⁶ Ibid. 23

here we see the figure head is the emperor, the head of state. This situation is seen carrying through the late Roman Empire and carrying into the Early Byzantine period. If a group did not ascribe to the “party of the people” then they attempted to remove the emperor by some means, either by assassination (if aristocratic) or rioting (if plebeian).

So, do the circus factions go back to the tradition of the Republic and establish a system of political parties? Not really. In her book, Taylor does not even mention the circus factions. This mostly has to do with the scope of the book. The book looks at Rome in the Late Republic and Early Principate; at this time the factions were nothing more than associations of racers and did not have the expanded scope they would have later. In the example of the Nika riots, any legislation or influence the people of the factions wanted to pass to the emperor was *ad hoc* and impromptu. It is important to remember that these were circus institutions first and secondarily government institutions. Many of the partisans joined a faction because they enjoyed the sport and wanted to cheer on their favorite team, not because of some deep anger at current political maneuverings.

Riots that occurred as a result of escalating chariot tensions seem to break this mold. During the Nika riot the crowd asks for three men to be removed from their positions at the side of the emperor. Modern scholars see these demands in two ways: that the crowd was genuinely angered by what these men did and thought they did not deserve their position and that political opponents of the emperor bribed leaders of each faction to push the riot against these men. Looking at the demands of the rioters and at the situation the rioters found themselves can help shed light on this issue, and will make it easier to put the Nika riot in dialogue with the Antioch Riot.

Chapter 2: When It Started

In this chapter, I hope to discuss the various causes that led to the Nika riots. The last chapter was written to help understand the culture of chariot racing that formed these riots. Now some time will be given to look at the setting and situations leading up to the riots, whom the rioters wanted removed from their government offices, why they wanted them removed, and how Justinian's taxes played a role in starting the riot.

Procopius clearly writes that the riots started in response to the capture of two partisans and that the factions demanded the resignation of John the Cappadocian and Tribonian, two head advisors to the emperor, for the wrongs they had committed against the people (Proc. *Pers.* I. xxiv. 7).³⁷ I will concede that these are both issues that the rioters wanted resolved, but I would consider these *explicit* reasons for the riot. In addition to examining these, I would also like to discuss some possible *implicit* reasons for the riot. Specifically this will deal with taxes, as John the Cappadocian had, in the years leading up to the riot, instituted tax reform to parts of the empire. First, however I will discuss the reasons the rioters give for their actions.

First, the rioters wanted Justinian to pardon some of their compatriots. These men, one Blue and one Green, had been arrested for murder of rival faction members during a previous riot. The gallows broke, allowing the two men to escape (Proc. *Pers.* I. xxiv. 7). While the factions saw this as divine intervention, the city prefect did not, and seized these men again. The next day, in the Hippodrome, the crowd chanted for the pardon and release of these two men (Proc. *Pers.* I. xxiv. 10).

As was discussed in the previous chapter, the Hippodrome, with the emperor's viewing box (*Kathisma*) attached to it, provided an interface for the people as a collective to bring their

³⁷ H. B. Dewing's translations of Procopius's works are used in this paper.

plights to the emperor. This was quite a common thing to do in the early days of the empire as these “requests to which he [the emperor] was morally obliged to at least reply.”³⁸ There was the understanding in the Roman circus that although the emperor did not have to oblige the request, he would at least hear it and answer. By Justinian things had changed. “The early Byzantine emperors regularly treated circus protests with an arrogance and contempt.”³⁹ Cameron relates one time before Nika that an emperor denied the crowds.⁴⁰ In this case, it was just the Greens who appealed to the emperor Anastasius. The shouting and violence got to the point that Anastasius had to send in troops to stop the partisans from getting any more violent. Doubtful was the protesters’ attempt with this precedent, but with an approach from both teams, and with Justinian’s support of the Blues, it was worth a shot.

When the crowd asks for Tribonian’s removal, it seems to come completely out of left field (Proc. *Pers.* I xxiv. 17). Tribonian was appointed as *quaestor sacri palatii* and was helping Justinian complete the *Digest*, a compilation of his updated law system, in 530, during the riot. The *Digest* was a compiling, revising, and trimming down of over 1,500 law books, containing 3 million lines of text, starting in the early days of the Republic up to Justinian’s reign.⁴¹ In fact, the naming of Tribonian by the crowd is the first time that Tribonian’s name is mentioned in Procopius’s work. Procopius does note that Tribonian “was extraordinarily fond of the pursuit of money and always ready to sell justice for gain” (Proc. *Pers.* I xxiv 16) but being of man of slightly immoral bend was actually the norm in Justinian’s court, not an outlier, so that this does not have any true weight in singling him out from any of the other advisors.⁴² Instead, it is

³⁸ Cameron 1976: 162

³⁹ Ibid. 169

⁴⁰ Ibid. 286

⁴¹ Humphress 2005: 167

⁴² An account from Procopius’s *Secret Histories* reveals many of Justinian’s advisors to be of questionable character. Procopius calls Justinian and Theodora, his wife, “vampires” and “demons.”

important to see Tribonian as the people saw him as *quaestor sacri palatii*, and investigate what he could have done to anger the crowd.

Quaestors in the Empire were very different than the treasurers found in the Roman Republic. Harris notes: “The quaestor 'dictated' laws for the benefit of emperor and consistory, and his activities were therefore carried on at the centre of administration, framing decisions on such legal and administrative matters as were brought to the emperor's attention by his officials and subject.”⁴³ Tribonian, as quaestor, would have been Justinian’s legal right hand man, informing him of laws that senators and the common people would want passed and also giving him counsel on these proposals. Specifically, he would give speeches to the Senate on behalf of the emperor about new laws which were to be ratified. Although the quaestor did much of the actual law writing, it was still the feeling that the emperor himself had thought of and written the laws. This raises two completely different possibilities as how a quaestor dictating a law might be interpreted. On one hand, since the quaestor might have seemed to be the mouthpiece for the emperor, any blame for a hated law would be placed on the emperor, with a “do not shoot the messenger” mentality. On the other hand, the quaestor was the one dictating the laws and had much more legal knowledge than the emperor, so that he would be the face of and associated with each law that passed. Either of these interpretations could be the truth, or a mixture of both; but as Harris remarks: “The routine work of quaestors was conducted largely behind closed doors.”⁴⁴ Tribonian might have dictated the laws of Justinian, but this was only to the Senate, and he would not have made appearances to the public and proclaim the laws.

Procopius also claims that the Prefect would enact gladiatorial games with people he jailed. (Proc. *Secret.* XVII)

⁴³ Harris 1988: 148

⁴⁴ Harris 1988: 148

Greatrex is slightly cynical of Procopius's description of Tribonian, as he was a historian prone to partiality, and instead suggests that this hints at senators working behind the scenes to remove close advisors to Justinian.⁴⁵ Part of the senatorial class thrived on the incongruities and contradictions of the legal system. By knowing the loopholes, they could exploit the system to their own advantage. Interestingly enough, despite losing his government position, Tribonian continued to oversee the compiling of the *Digest* and was returned to power before the end of the year.⁴⁶ It is impossible to know for sure how truthful Procopius was in his description, so it may be better to look at the other man who was named, John the Cappadocian, and find any similarities between them to that might help parse this puzzle.

John the Cappadocian was either one of the best or worst men in Constantinople in this time, with many contemporaries considering him the worst.⁴⁷ Though Justinian was the person who put into place a large amount of tax reform, which will be discussed later this chapter, it was John who created much of the planning.⁴⁸ As a praetorian prefect, John not only had the ear of the emperor, but he controlled the department that “calculated, collected, and redistributed the land-tax assessment.”⁴⁹ John held great power in the government, as the livelihood of both small farmers and landowners depended on him. He did not sit back and let his department do all of the work, instead he had a personal hand in tax collection. Stories come from both Procopius and John the Lydian as to the cruelty of John the Cappadocian. Procopius mentions how he would profit from the losses of other men. John the Lydian is much more direct in his accusations, and

⁴⁵ Greatrex 1997:71

⁴⁶ Pugsley 1984: 357

⁴⁷ John the Lydian provides quite a negative view of the Cappadocian, calling him “wicked” and “foul” (*Lydus Mag.* 3.23). His claims are backed by Procopius, who describes him as the “basest of all men” (*Proc. Pers.* I. xxiv. 11)

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 49

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 44

notes multiple times how John the Cappadocian would torture those who did not pay up the sum he wanted. (Lydus *Mag* 3.50, Procop. *Pers.* I. xxiv. 12-15). Though Justinian attempted to stamp out corruption in tax collection at the lower levels, John the Cappadocian could not be controlled and skimmed quite a sum of money off the top (Procop. *Pers.* I.xxiv.13). This was quite common among the officials that Justinian held in his court, they could do their job well enough, but were themselves quite the character.⁵⁰ As praetorian prefect, John had additional powers besides overseeing taxes. In addition, by a law created in 539, he was able to appoint some of the imperial judges that oversaw lawsuits. This created corruption both for those who were to be appointed to those positions and people whose cases were to be helped and wanted to get in good standing with John, often with a bribe.⁵¹ Do these behaviors by John the Cappadocian justify the crowds desire to see him resigned? Possibly. Little is known about the actual tax accounts from this era, but not much suggests that his actual policies would hurt the common man too much. Instead, it seems more that people disliked his character and how he handled himself (Proc. *Secret.* I).

To show this, just like Tribonian, an investigation of his office as praetorian prefect will be done to see if anything about his office would drive the crowd to remove him. Much of John's time up to this point had been spent on reforms. One of his first jobs was to oversee the First Law Commission, which compiled all of Roman law up to this point and would lay the foundation for the *Digest* work of Tribonian.⁵² Justinian's war with the Persians and the need for

⁵⁰ John the Cappadocian would often glut himself so much that he would vomit up much of what he ate and the prostitutes he often had hanging around him would slip and fall on this. Theodora, Justinian's wife, started life as a prostitute and Tribonian was charged with pagan worship.

⁵¹ Although this law was established after the Nika Riots, it still shows the character of John the Cappadocian and it can be imagined that there were similar instances of meddling with the courts before the riots.

⁵² Honore1978: 212

constant protection against the Goths meant the treasury always hungry. Tax collection was critical for the continued stability and safety of the Empire.

Having investigated both of these men, what do they have in common? Both men had strong positions of power at Justinian's side. Although not named in Procopius's account, the crowds also wished to have the city prefect, Eudaemon, removed from his position. Greatrex describes these three people, all named by the rioters as people they wished removed, as "the three highest government officials resident in the capital: *magister officiorum*."⁵³ This helps to give weight to the idea of a riot backed and paid for by the senatorial elite. Martindale argues that since Tribonian was writing the *Digest* at the time, he would not have done enough in the public eye to warrant the ire of the rioters.⁵⁴ Targeting by the senators is also true for Eudaemon and John, but equal arguments can be made that these demands came from the rioters.

Eudaemon, the city prefect, was perhaps the biggest target for the rioters, having been the man who seized and arrested the two partisans after they escaped from the execution. Attacking and blaming the city prefect had a precedent in Constantinople: Protesters against a grain shortage in 408 burnt down the praetorium of the city prefect Monaxius and in 609 when the Greens burnt the praetorium and other government buildings in response to executions by the city prefect Cosmas.⁵⁵ Cameron notes how "the city prefect's house was always the first to be burned in riots at old Rome."⁵⁶ At this point, attacking the prefect and his dwelling was par for the course and expected of rioters. Either way, it would not have surprised anyone that Eudaemon was named by the rioters, unlike the calling of Tribonian.

⁵³ Greatrex 1997: 72

⁵⁴ Martindale 1992: 86-87

⁵⁵ Greatrex 1997: 70

⁵⁶ Cameron 1976: 276

Naming John the Cappadocian as the last officer to be removed falls somewhere between the certainty of Eudaemon and the arbitrary naming of Tribonian. His corruption was known within the city, both in terms of taxing and judicial appointments. As much as this hurt the lower classes, it doubly hurt the wealthy, from whom he was able to extort more coin and who would have been wealthy enough to bribe the judges and care about their rulings. John was also in favor of Justinian's economizing orders, such as preparing poor-quality rations to a force in North Africa in 533, which ultimately resulted in mutiny from the soldiers (Procop. *Pers.* III.xiii. 12-2). Although this event did happen a year after the Nika riot, it showcases an example contemporary to the riot of what John was willing to do. John the Lydian notes that when John the Cappadocian went out in the city and provinces to collect taxes he "had put on a bright-colored green garment and became clearly visible to all" (Lydus. *Mag.* 3. 62). Although this is not extremely explicit, such an overt display would signal to his contemporaries that he supported the Greens. Having been a supporter of the Greens, they could have felt betrayed and "unimpressed by his failure to obtain the release of the Green partisan held by the city prefect."⁵⁷ Another factor is timing. When the Nika riot kicked off in 532, John had been praetorian prefect for less than a year. He may have done some horrible things later in his career, but how much could he have done in this small time frame? However, Greatrex proposes a different answer: "like many praetorian prefects before him, he incurred wrath for the unpopular policies of the emperor, for which he may or may not have been responsible."⁵⁸ Instead of seeing John Cappadocian as a praetorian prefect who instituted some laws and tax reforms, Greatrex proposes that hatred for John comes from hatred for the emperor. Because the praetorian prefect was seen as the advisor to the emperor, the prefect would frequently take the fall for the failings

⁵⁷ Greatrex 1997: 72

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*: 71

of the emperor. Instead of looking at John the Cappadocian as a person, it may be better to look at him as his position.

As praetorian prefect under Justinian, John was tasked with a large overhaul of the tax system. From its inception the Byzantine empire, much like Rome, often faced financial difficulties. Upkeep of the army, incessant warfare, ruinous diplomatic practices, the extravagance of the court, and the magnificent buildings were all very costly. Seeing the need to resupply the empire's treasury, Justinian set out to reform the tax system as one of his first measures. Before him a system called *suffragia* was in place. This system allowed provincial governors to pay a large sum to the Emperor and the Praetorians, his personal guard, to ensure they received their position. Not only did this create a high amount of corruption within the government, but the governor would regain his losses by extorting extra tax money from his subjects. Under Justinian, governors were paid a salary from the state and were required to live in the province 50 days after their term ended so that he could answer for any charges that would be brought against him.⁵⁹

More often than not, these taxes helped fund Justinian's grand dream for a unified Rome. This took form both concretely and abstractly. He changed how the emperor and the imperial court interacted with the church. He unraveled hundreds of years of legal code, and as such laid the foundation for much of current Western judicial proceedings. He expanded the Byzantine Empire to its furthest reaches, becoming an emperor truly in legacy of Rome. These projects earned him the name of Caesar, but at a great cost to both manpower and coin.⁶⁰ As much as Justinian is praised for his sweeping reforms and overseas expansions, everything in life costs

⁵⁹ Haldon 2005: 27

⁶⁰ Haldon 2005: 28

money. The largest source of income the empire received came from land taxes. In the agrarian Byzantine system land owners could either pay with coin or, the more common option, grain.⁶¹

Because many landowners could only pay in coin in good economic conditions, the imperial coffers were always in danger of running out. This was doubly true with the gifts and bribes Justinian gave to foreign powers. He would give yearly gifts to the surrounding kingdoms, stretching from the Arabs in the east, to Huns to the north and to Goths in the west, to dissuade potential conflicts ensure these kingdoms focused on each other instead of Constantinople.⁶² Though this may seem like a crude and rough way of handling diplomacy, it worked quite well. The city's coffers were used, but in their stead the empire gained access to groups of soldiers from the various princes and a wide network of clients and allies to act as a buffer against any barbarian forces.⁶³ In addition to these gifts meant to be given as preventative measures, sums of money were also given as a reaction to other leaders. Emperor Anastasius built the city of Dara on the border with the Persians, which could be a violation of a treaty between the two powers. To help cover this up, Anastasius gave a large sum of money to the Persians, further decreasing the money in the treasury (Procop. *Pers.* I. x. 17). Similar accounts are seen when Justin, successor to Anastasius and uncle to Justinian, attempted to bribe a group of Huns with a large sum of money to attack the Persians. This bribe actually failed, the reason is not given why, and the emperor sent troops to help in fighting the Persians (Procop. *Pers.* I. xii. 6-9). Justinian had much the same mind for bribes as his predecessors, giving the Persian king Khosrau 110,000 pounds of gold as part of the terms of their "Eternal Peace" (Procop. *Pers.* I. xxii. 3-4).

⁶¹ Ibid.: 44

⁶² Diehl 1957: 55

⁶³ Ibid. 60

With whatever funds the government raised either being funneled into the pockets of a barbarian chief or one of Justinian's Constantinople projects, like the restoration of the Hagia Sophia, the common man had reason to dislike this renovation to the tax system. What good are Hunnic troops or a new cathedral if the people of Constantinople are starving? This became a reality later in Justinian's reign, where in 555 "a severe bread shortage lasted three months."⁶⁴ Sadly, no records still exist of the taxation or grain situation in Constantinople on the eve of the Nika riot.

However, I do not wish to propose that the Nika Riot was solely the product of money changing hands from the elite to the faction managers, or that the taxes played a minor role in these events. On the contrary, an account by John the Lydian puts the blame on both Justinian and John the Cappadocian. In his *De Magistratibus*, John notes some of the conditions that Byzantine people outside of the city faced: "Those subject to taxes, since they no longer had property nor had it been left to them on account of preemptions, forced labors, and the hardships from them were unpitied" (Lydyus *Mag* 3.70). Most of the reforms that Justinian implemented did indeed affect the system and bureaucracy itself, but the peasants still had to pay taxes. Most of the farmer peasants in the Byzantine Empire were part of the colonate, with each person being considered a *colonus*, "within the context of agricultural exploitation, as the successor to the tenancy of the Late Republic (when *colonus* was used for a tenant) and as the precursor of the tied serf of the Middle Ages."⁶⁵ Colonnate is just a general term, and could often refer to both free independent small farmers and tenants who worked on large scale operations. Since farmers living and paying rent on land owned by another was the majority at this time, it is these people whom will be referred to as the "colonnate." As the Roman Empire progressed, the farmers who

⁶⁴ Croke 2005: 69 Interestingly enough, this famine resulted in another riot by the circus factions.

⁶⁵ Sirks 2008: 122

rented from wealthy land owners progressively got less and less rights while the landowner tightened control over them. Although the Codes of Justinian did streamline the process of tax collection it did two things that worked to the detriment of the colonate. First, it gave more control to the governors of each region. Instead of having an intricate web of command and overlapping responsibilities, Justinian “subordinated all officials [in a region] to the governor.”⁶⁶ As mentioned above, overall corruption and taking private funds from the taxes were reduced, but the governor had nearly free reign within their jurisdiction.

Under the Code of Justinian, practices were introduced that limited the freedoms that the colonate had: “the status of these workers gradually declined and under Justinian a category of *coloni* is even compared to slaves.”⁶⁷ Children of *coloni* could be claimed by the land owners during the census and take on the debt of their parents; the estate owner could deny the ability for the *coloni* to become a priest or monk, and could extend the period of servitude, which already lasted a minimum of thirty years, if the *coloni* tried to run away.⁶⁸ Many *coloni* stayed on the farms and worked to pay off their debt, but John the Lydian points out how some ran away into major cities: “all were deserting the cities of their birth and were preferring to be idle rather than to labor seriously since they were not being allowed to do that, and filled the imperial city with useless mobs” (Lydus *Mag* 3.70). Here, John the Lydian links the migration of people to Constantinople to the system that Justinian and John the Cappadocian had set up. John the Lydian continues by noting how John the Cappadocian was to blame for the riot that would soon follow when “the masses rebelled... and burned down nearly the whole city. And the

⁶⁶ Atkinson 2000: 23

⁶⁷ Sirks 2008: 122

⁶⁸ Sirks 2008: 127-130

Cappadocian disappeared and the fire got its start from the gates of the Court...This, then, was the end of the wicked Cappadocian's first brigandage" (Lydus *Mag* 3.70).

Some issues arise if taking John the Lydian at face value. In this account it is never mentioned that these events he is mentioning are the Nika riot, and it is quite interesting how quick he is to directly accuse John the Cappadocian of causing this. As to the event, later in the account John the Lydian mentions how "up to fifty thousand" had died in the mob (Lydus *Mag* 3.70). Although this is much higher than the modern estimate of thirty thousand, the Nika riot was the only event in Constantinople with a body count close to this. John the Lydian's accusation of John the Cappadocian should also be taken with a grain of salt. In the *De Magistratibus* 1.20, 3.21, and 3.38, John the Lydian denounces the Cappadocian, but he does not give justified reasons for this, often judging him on his character and personal relationship instead of his job as praetorian prefect. Though John the Lydian did have some personal prejudices against John the Cappadocian, as it seems almost everyone did, his account matches up with that found in Procopius and is still a valid source for information from this time.

This section from John the Lydian helps shed light on the situation of the Nika riot. Those in the faction might not have cared or been too much affected by the tax reforms of John the Cappadocian, but those members of the colonate, who became the restless mob from the country, certainly would have. As for the make up of the crowd, specifically who were genuine members of the factions and who would be *coloni* is uncertain. With the free food that was typically offered during the midday break of the chariot races, along with an opportunity to be heard by the emperor, the *coloni* certainly made up a sizable portion of both those in the Hippodrome during the Nika riot.

Chapter 3: Battle Born

This chapter will synthesize the two previous chapters which covered different topics. These two concepts, chariot racing and the Byzantine social and political climate, come to a head at the Nika riot. This event is perhaps the most famous in Justinian's rule, for better or worse. Through its long history, the Byzantine Empire faced many riots, both inside Constantinople and in cities spread through the empire. One riot in particular shows many similarities to the Nika riot: the Antioch riot of 387. In this chapter I will show how the Antioch riot of 387 acts as a precursor to the Nika riot and how the later factions absorbed members from theatre clagues and gained insight into inciting a crowd from these clagues. This will be done by showing how each riot was brought on by similar motivations, led by similar groups of people, and went about in a similar structure and timing of events.

Although the Antioch riot happened first chronologically, the first part of this chapter will be about the Nika riot. This will help in transitioning from the previous two chapters, which were about racing and causes of the Nika riot and will provide a mirror to which the events of the Nika riot can be compared. The events of the Nika riots start on Saturday 10th January 532.⁶⁹ Though Procopius is the primary source for the events of the riot, he does not give a full account of how it starts. The chronicler Theophanes notes that the riots started because a member of the Blues and a member of the Greens were both to be hanged, but the rope broke saving them both (Theophanes 184.4-15). This is not how Procopius records the events, instead stating that "the members of the two factions... seized the prisoners and then straightaway entered the prison and released all those who were in confinement there" (Procop. *Pers* 1 xxiv 7). There is disagreement

⁶⁹ As for the actual events of the riots, we have three main sources: Procopius, John Malalas, and Theophanes. Since Procopius investigates the details and events of the riot further than either of the other two, I will focus on his narrative, but add parts from the other sources if they are missing from the account of Procopius.

as to which narrative is correct, but classicists see that Theophanes's account is more accurate. Procopius showing the factions in a more aggressive, negative light may have acted as propaganda to justify the later bloodbath of the rioters in the hippodrome. Next Procopius tells how the city went into a panic, where "all the attendants in the service of the city government were killed" and "fire was applied to the city" (Procop. *Pers* 1 xxiv 8). Soon after this Justinian, along with his close advisors went inside the palace to hide, after which the rioters gave their demands: to remove both John the Cappadocian and Tribonian from their political positions: praetorian prefect and tribune respectively. Justinian agreed to these, since he did not want to see either man die, and appointed a man named Phocas to John's position and Basilides to Tribonian's (Proc.*Pers.* I. xxiv 17). This did not stop the riots, and on the fifth day Justinian sent two men, Hypatius and Pompeius, back to their homes. Neither of these men claimed to have desired the crown, but suspicion had overpowered Justinian (Procop. *Pers* 1 xxiv 19). These two men were nephews to a previous emperor, Anastasius, and Justinian feared these two might try to seize power during the chaos (Procop *Pers* 1 xxiv 37-38). The crowds recognized these two men as heirs to the previous royal line and seized Hypatius to proclaim him emperor. Members of the senate who had been left outside the palace assembled and talked about a course of action, some wanted to move Justinian out of the city and away from danger but many, seeing what the situation was like, went to the hippodrome with Hypatius. Going to the hippodrome might not seem like too important of an action, but as was explained in chapter one, the Hippodrome was the center of cultural life for Byzantines and where the emperor was accustomed to interface with his people directly. By going with the impromptu emperor Hypatius to the hippodrome, those senators showed which of the two emperors they supported.

Those inside the palace with Justinian were in a similar dilemma, either to stay in the besieged palace or flee. While many thought to leave the city, Theodora, Justinian's wife, gives an empowering speech ending with "as for myself, I approve a certain ancient saying that royalty is a good burial-shroud" (Procop. *Pers.* 1 xxiv 32). Thankfully for the royal court, fortune favored Justinian this moment. At the time of the riots, Belisarius, the commander of the army against Persia, and Mundus, with the armies from Illyricum, had both been called to Constantinople. After escaping from the palace, Belisarius made a charge with the men who stayed loyal to the emperor against the crowd in the hippodrome, with Mundus leading others shortly after. This was enough to fight back the rioters and soon Hypatius was captured. Both Hypatius and Pompeius were taken by the emperor and executed the next day. Procopius notes that over thirty thousand people died in the riots that day (Procop. *Pers* 1 xxiv 54-55).

To break down the riot, so that it can be more easily compared to the Antioch riot, first there was a change to the status quo, that being the saving of the faction partisans. Next there was an appeal to the authority figure, here being Justinian. When he refused the request, they start to riot and Justinian retreats into the palace. There is a turning point, when Hypatius is crowned emperor, Justinian realizes that extra action needs to be done. Finally, military force is sent to drive off the rioters, which requires the soldiers to slaughter the people in the hippodrome.

The two sources we have for the riot in Antioch are Libanius's *Orations* 19-23 and John Chrysostom's *Homily to the People of Antioch* concerning the Statues. Libanius gives an account of the events as they are happening, so that the listener might hear what happened in the city during the riot. Chrysostom gives a different account, instead relating the fear that the citizens of Antioch hold because of what the Emperor might do to the city. He notes how he and others

watch how “the wrath of the Emperor is expected to come as a fire from above” (Chry. *Antioch* 2.3).

The Antioch riot started at the announcement of new taxes from Emperor Theodosius. Libanius does not say specifically what the taxes were for, but scholars posit that it most greatly affected tradesmen, merchants, and landowners.⁷⁰ The council of the leading men of the city, the *boule*, and others who had a stake in these taxes approached the archon to reduce the proposed taxes (Lib. *Or.* 19). Upon his refusal, this crowd now went to the bishop, whom they did not find at his house. This crowd then returned to the residence of the governor to cut down the street lamps from a nearby bath and tear down the statues of the emperor.⁷¹ At this point the mob had set fire to the house of a wealthy citizen and were ready to spread the riot further in the city. The upperclasses, consisting of *honorati* and *curiales*, began to leave the city, fearing for their lives. During this time the commander of the local garrison had been trying to rally his troops, but they had not been ready for this. Eventually the soldiers are armed and ready, stopping the fire and separating the crowd (Lib. *Or.* 19).

Here, instead of circus factions being present, Libanius notes that it was a group of outsiders not native to the city who led the riots, specifically members of the city’s theater *cliques* (Lib. *Oration* 19. 28). These were groups of performers who would travel around the empire and be paid to give applause and praise to a performer or official. It may seem that these *clique* members were actually circus partisans, as was noted in chapter one: circus factions did become intimately involved with theater organizations within the Byzantine Empire, but this is not them. Cameron notes “the circus colours were definitely absent from the theatre and

⁷⁰ Browning 1952: 14

⁷¹ Browning notes that the street lamps were fueled by oil taxed from the citizens, which would have been an additional weight to the poorer citizens whom did not benefit from the lamps located at the bathhouse (Browning 1952:15).

amphitheatre before the fifth century.”⁷² He comes to this conclusion by noting the extent to which circus factions are noted being present at the races and the *clagues* being present at theater performances, but not a crossing over of the groups. Modern scholars can only place faction involvement in the theaters after the fifth century. Although these theater *clagues* leading the riot of Antioch are not the same as circus factions, they act as a close analog; both act as cultural centers for their city and mostly employed foreigners, people not from Constantinople or the surrounding area. Cameron also makes a comparison between the factions and *clagues* by considering them “exact parallels.”⁷³ An additional similarity that applies specifically to these circus factions and theater *clagues* is their increase in power. Cameron notes that at the time of the Nika riots, the circus factions were at the height of their power, both in terms of political sway and membership numbers. Despite being outsiders and having no *de facto* political power, Browning points out how they could sway the public opinion of the crowds: “they are powerful because they can stimulate popular demonstrations against anyone they dislike, and make trouble for them.”⁷⁴ This group is analogous to planted audience members at public forums during political campaigns, who have an agenda to portray the people on stage in a certain light.

Cameron notes that “the Blues and Greens of the eastern cities were unquestionably *clagues*.”⁷⁵ He continues by noting that just as the circus factions absorbed the theater factions, so too did they take up the *clagues*. Cameron explains that these faction-*clagues* would very often use applause and acclaims to coerce and pressure officials. When a new politician came into the theater, the *claque* members would quiet down the rest of the crowd and wait for the politician to make an announcement. If it was favorable, the crowd would cheer; if not, the

⁷² Cameron 1976: 195

⁷³ Cameron 1976: 243

⁷⁴ Browning 1952: 16

⁷⁵ Cameron 1976: 237

crowd would boo or otherwise ignore his presence until he changed his announcement and the claque approved of him.⁷⁶ In a way, the factions adapted the techniques of the claque to fit their needs, but this time it did not work. The emperor did not mind the lack of imperial acclamations that typically was given to the emperor at the races.⁷⁷

This riot has a similar structure to the Nika riot, despite over one hundred years separating the two events. First, a problem arises, for which the crowd appeals to an authority figure, the archon. When this does not work, the faction or claque members then incite the crowd to take it to the palace, where nearby structures are defaced and buildings burnt, namely the statues and the house. When it seems that the crowd itself will not disperse on its own, military force is used. Comparing this summary of events to the previous one of the Nika riots shows that they are extremely similar. Both of these are parts of a larger series of riots within the respective areas, where Nika or Antioch was the only one headed by a faction or claque.⁷⁸

To further show the similarities, the taxation of the rioters is brought up in both cases. It is explicit when looking at the Antioch riot, but slightly buried in the Nika riot. Procopius notes that the rioters wanted John dismissed because of the corruption he brought to the tax system (Procopius *Pers* I xxiv 13-14). Some scholars disagree with this claim, seeing that John had only been in office for a short amount of time when the riots took place.⁷⁹ While this is true, since the crowds do cite taxes as a problem and since John was in charge of collecting taxes, who else were they to blame? The anger might not have been for John directly, but the nature of his post put him within the aim of the mob.

⁷⁶ Ibid 239

⁷⁷ Ibid 245

⁷⁸ On Antioch see Browning 1952: 13 and on Constantinople see Greatrex 1997: 63

⁷⁹ Greatrex 1997: 71

Conclusion: Day & Age

Every work of writing, and by extension every writer, tries to answer the question of “so what?” Looking at how two riots within the Byzantine Empire were similar certainly was an interesting exercise, but does it hold any weight in our current culture, nearly 1500 years divorced from either event? Recent years have seen an increase in the amount of protests and walks in the United states of America. Is there something that modern protesters can learn from the ancient examples of Nika and Antioch?

Looking at both of these situations can help to answer the question: “why do people riot violently?” In both situations, it would be common sense that if a mob of people start to get violent and destroy property, then there is a chance they could get killed. The two partisans that sparked the Nika riot had been charged because they had killed others in a previous tussle. At the Nika riot it was clear that if things escalated enough anyone rioting might either be imprisoned or killed. The same is true for the Antioch riot, where tearing down statues to the emperor and burning the house of the governor had some repercussions. Was a peaceful negotiation even a concept to the people of Constantinople or Antioch? Did either group know about picket lines or walk outs?

In our cultural understanding, nonviolent protests have been a relatively new construct. We understand that Gandhi was the first person to do it with much success, and then Martin Luther King Jr after him. This might be true of the modern world, but some examples exist from the ancients. The first comes from the ancient Romans themselves in 494 BC. During a period which became known as the Conflict of the Orders, the plebeians felt that the aristocrats were treating them unfairly in the new republic; they were not receiving enough representation for what they were expected to do. As a response, “the plebeians staged the first of several mass

walkouts from the city, a combination of a mutiny and a strike, to try to force reform on the patricians.”⁸⁰ Not only did these protest work in the immediate sense, as this is the event which created the position of tribune of the plebs, but by the middle of the Republic very few political privileges existed for the patricians that was not also given to the plebs.

Another example, closer to the Byzantines, comes from Jews under Roman Rule. Jewish resistance to the Romans under Tiberius is portrayed as violent and bloody, but before the Jewish-Roman Wars of the first century AD Josephus writes in *The Jewish Wars* of Jewish priests asking Pilate to removed images of Caesar from the city (Jos. *Jewish Wars*. 2. 170). When he refused, they fell down and did not move from outside his house. The next day he summoned them to give an answer and surrounded them with soldiers. He told them to accept the images or be cut down (Jos. *Jewish Wars*. 2. 173). In response they bared their necks to Pilate, and seeing this, he removed the images (Jos. *Jewish Wars*. 2.174). Both of these examples show that nonviolent forms of protest worked in the ancient world. Since these are some of the only examples we have of nonviolent protest, why were they so infrequent? The first thought that comes to mind is how antithetical nonviolent protesting would seem. If a group of people wanted change would they not try to get it done as soon as possible, instead of sitting on a hill or outside a house until their demands were met? It is only after extreme action that both authority figures in these examples yielded: the priests willing to risk their lives and the majority of the city’s populace leaving and shutting down production for multiple days. So does the immediacy of a violent protest outweigh the potential cost on one’s life? Not fully, but there is still one thing to consider: the strengths that each group could leverage.

⁸⁰ Beard 2015: 147

In each of these examples it is important to think about who those rioting were. In the two examples given here, some planning was involved. The priests knew that their small group would never be able to fight off Pilate's guard, and so they took an avenue that played to their strengths and in a show of absolute religious fervor, would kill themselves for their faith and what they believed. The plebeians may have outnumbered the patricians, but they would not be as well equipped for combat if it came to blows. Instead they turned their numbers into an advantage and effectively shut down the city of Rome for a few days until the patricians realized how hurt they were by this walkout. It is important to note that each group lent itself towards a nonviolent form of protest. If the priests had been in a larger number or if the plebeians were as well armed as the patricians each event could have turned out violent. The success of these protests came down to the ability for each group to recognize their unique strengths for the opportunity at hand and take advantage of them.

Since neither the Antioch nor Nika riot would be considered non-violent, what strengths did the Antioch and Nika rioters have that drove them towards violence? For Antioch it would have to be their expediency. All of the events of that account escalated quite quickly, all happening within one day. In Libanius's letter, he tells the emperor that the commander of the garrison was not ready for the riot and was delayed multiple times. Once the commander does show up the riot loses its steam and dissipates quickly. The main advantage of those in the Nika riots would be twofold: their numbers and history. If at least thirty thousand died in the Hippodrome, the number actually partaking of the riot must have been magnitudes greater, so much so that the normal city guard was unable to stop them and it was fortunate that both of Justinian's armies had recently returned from campaigns abroad. Being led by the circus factions also gave this group a history of riots. None of those previous, contemporary riots had been as

largescale as the Nika riot, but they knew how to “conduct a riot,” if that can be an applicable term. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the factions had absorbed the theater claques by this point, so members of the factions would be quite skilled at riling up a crowd.

In addition to this, both groups did have a modicum of nonviolent protest at the beginning of each event. Before anything turned to violence in Antioch or Constantinople, both groups approached their respective figurehead and tried to negotiate their demands. This form of nonviolent protest was not as extreme or complete as the other examples, but violence was not the first answer for either group. This is not to say that either the Antioch or Nika riots could be considered nonviolent, but each of the crowds tried to appeal to authority and persuade to whomever they were talking before starting the arson.

Each group of rioters in Antioch or Nika played to the strengths of that group, even if those rioting did not realize it. Surely there were not protesters in the Hippodrome in 532 thinking that since their circus factions had absorbed theater claques they would have a greater chance of inciting those that might not initially want to join. When the elders first retreated from the governor in Antioch, none of them calculated how much damage they could cause in a single day before the commander was able to outfit his troops. These advantages naturally revealed themselves as the riots progressed and helped shape the route that each event occurred.

Can this same philosophy be applied to our modern world? With America, among other countries, becoming increasingly partisan politically and socially, the country has seen an increase in the amount of protests: on both sides of the aisle and ranging from political to cultural concerns. One issue is that all of these play out similarly. It starts as a movement on social media where everyone agrees to meet on a date. People gather at agreed upon locations, often largely

centered around the National Mall. Throughout the day these groups chant and wave around signs, but go back to their homes at the end of the day.

Certainly government officials see how many people care about these causes, but opponents of these positions know that the chanting and gathering of people will disperse at the end of the day, so they only have to put up with it in the short term. Donald Trump, at a rally in December 2017, brought up marches protesting against him. He notes that these protesters hold their signs and chant without much effect, much like I did above. This has the affect of rallying his supporters even harder to his side, entrenched against what the protesters stood for. To those politicians, like Trump, who are the targets of protests these groups are just unconscious mobs out to get him. Each of the four ancient examples continued protest until the protest was broken up or their demands were met. In addition to this, the different groups that have protested within the last several years may overlap, but they are not the same. As a result, this same rote formula of protest will not work, as each group's strengths are not being taken advantage of. I do not know what these would be, but unless their tactics change and follow the examples of these ancient forms of protest, then all of our marches will just appear to be a half-hearted grouping of people without the drive and determination of other protests.

An important point to mention with all of these protests and riots is the power dynamics between the protesters and those being protested. In all the examples, both ancient and modern, those protesting hold less power than the protested. This power can take many forms. The Jewish priests were both outnumbered and unarmed. The circus factions did not have the organization nor arms that the army did. Modern marchers are subject to the laws of the President, whom they are asking to change the laws. This also goes the other way through looking at those in power who are being protested. As is the case in the Nika and Antioch riots, the authority figures

thought they held so much power that the concerns of the crowds were beneath them and initially did not give the protesters a response. In a sense, the protest and riot attempt to even out or even invert the established power dynamic. The successful protests are able to invert the power dynamic and make the protested weaker. When the priests prostrated themselves to Pilate they changed the contest from one of strength to one of morals and faith, and the unwavering faith of the priests won over Pilate. The opposite of this is the Nika riot, where the rioters attempted to overpower the emperor with force, but bigger army diplomacy always works itself out and Justinian overpowered the crowd.

Maybe this is how modern protests can become more effective: by finding an axis by which they can change the power dynamics of the situation. This issue is too big to explore in the conclusion of this paper and warrants its own thesis topic, but could shine a light on how we engage with our politicians.

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