THE URBAN CONTEXT

The Late Roman City

Before investigating individual cases of urban unrest, we should look briefly at the cities and the characteristics of urban society in the later Roman Empire. In particular, it is important to understand and appreciate the "quality and flavor of life" in the urban centers of the period, something which is difficult for any historical time and place, but which is especially complicated for a period such as this where literary sources are few and frequently disappointing. From the late empire, however, a good deal is known about the physical aspects of cities: archaeological excavations have revealed the plans of streets and the foundations of monumental buildings, contemporary laws allow further insights into the administration of the cities and the regulation of everyday life, and orators, letter-writers, and historians provide tantalizing glimpses into contemporary urban society. Even though they are often colored by a biased attitude toward the poor, who form an important subject of the present study, such narrative vignettes are most useful sources for capturing the spirit of daily life in a late Roman city. A good example is the well-known passage from Ammianus Marcellinus:

Let us now turn to the idle and slothful commons. . . . These spend all their life with wine and dice, in low haunts, pleasures, and the games. Their temple, their dwelling, their assembly, and the height of all their hope is the Circus Maximus. You may see groups of them gathered in the fora, the cross roads, the streets, and their other meeting-places, engaged in quarrelsome arguments with one another, some (as usual) defending this, others that. . . . As soon as the longed-for day of the chariot races begins to dawn, before the sun is yet shining clearly they all hasten in crowds to the spot at top speed, as if they would outstrip the very chariots that are to take part in the contest; and torn by
their conflicting hopes about the result of the race, the greater number of them pass sleepless nights.

In another passage the same author described a singularly unpleasant eating establishment in late fourth-century Rome:

The greater number of these gentry, given over to over-stuffing themselves with food, led by the charm of the odor of cooking and by the shrill voices of the women, like a flock of peacocks screaming with hunger, stand even from cockcrow beside the pots on tip-toe and gnaw the ends of their fingers as they wait for the dishes to cool. Others hang over the nauseous mass of half-raw meat, while it is cooking, watching it so intently that one would think that Democritus with other dissectors was examining the internal organs of dismembered animals and showing by what means future generations might be cured of internal pains.

The reaction of Ammianus to the plight of the poor was a familiar one. The only mark of condescension is when he made them the butt of jokes and it is revealing that he was able to laugh at the destitute waiting anxiously for their unappetizing fare. Some of the other perils and pleasures of the urban poor are illustrated in a story told by the church historian Socrates:

Now the bake-houses were built below ground level so they constructed taverns at the side of each, where prostitutes were kept. By this means [the bakers] entrapped many of those who went there, either for the sake of refreshment or to gratify their lusts. They used a certain mechanical contrivance to precipitate people from the tavern to the bakery below. This was done primarily to strangers; and those who were caught in this way were forced to work in the bakery, where they were imprisoned until old age. Their friends, meanwhile, concluded that they were dead.

In this case, the bakers made a mistake and caught a soldier, who proved to be more than the kidnappers had bargained for. He drew his dagger and the bakers fled. Afterwards the soldier reported his adventure to the emperor, who put an end to the practice.

These anecdotes, while accurate reflections of some aspects of late Roman urban life, clearly do not tell the whole story. Despite its harshness and occasional brutality, life in a late Roman city must have had an attractive side. Christianity made an important contribution along these lines, at very least by providing a common unifying experience for most members of society. Another example from Socrates may illustrate this point and provide a balance to the passages quoted above. While he was attending the spectacles in the hippodrome in Constantinople, Theodosius II learned that the tyrant John had been overthrown. He immediately asked the people if they would be willing to leave the entertainment and go to the church to offer thanksgiving to God.

The spectacles were forgotten at once and all the people filed out of the hippodrome singing praises together with him, as with one heart and voice.
When they arrived at the church the whole city became one vast congregation and they spent the rest of the day in prayer.4

In fact, the Roman state was normally concerned about the welfare of the urban poor, if only for political reasons: people do not normally starve to death peacefully. Also, the virtue of philanthropia had long been of importance as part of the imperial ideal and a good emperor was bound to take great pride in care for his subjects. This concern was practically reflected in the state control of the basic necessities of life.

Central to this was the free distribution of bread to the poor. This practice, or the forerunner of it, had begun in Rome in the time of Gaius Gracchus, and Constantine introduced it to Constantinople in 332.5 Shortly thereafter the dole appears to have begun in other cities of the East.6 Those who qualified because of their poverty were given a bronze ticket (tessera or titulus) with their name and the amount of bread they were to receive inscribed upon it. We do not know exactly what the requirements of poverty were, but a law of Valentinian I restricted the free bread to those “who have no other means of support.”7 Originally the alienation of tesserae was strictly forbidden, but this must have been impossible to prevent, and by the end of the fourth century large numbers of tesserae were being bought and sold openly.8 In Constantinople 80,000 people were originally entitled to free bread; by any reckoning this was a large proportion of the population and perhaps as many as one-quarter of the inhabitants of Constantinople were supported by this form of state “relief.”9 At a designated time, the prefect of the city ordered all those who held tesserae to assemble and the bread was distributed from a series of steps. The daily ration was six half-pound loaves, which was probably enough to sustain life at a minimum level, even if the individual had to support a small family.10

The desperately poor were not the only urban residents to benefit from the state largesse. In Constantinople and some of the other large cities of the empire, the government guaranteed the quantity and the price of grain. Those who did not qualify for the bread dole were assured that the price of bread would not rise above a certain level even in times of shortage. Granaries were built in the cities, and care was taken to organize and protect the shipment of grain from the centers of production to the centers of consumption. In the early fifth century, a special fund, administered by the praefectus urbi, was established in Constantinople to purchase grain in times of emergency.11 Shortages of bread were still all too common, but it must have been reassuring to city dwellers to know that the emperor had taken measures to assure their survival.

The great cities of the empire provided other necessities and amenities. The prices of oil, wine, pork, and fish appear to have been controlled and some cities may have distributed these items free to the poor.12
Monumental aqueducts supplied the cities with water, most of which was gathered in huge cisterns scattered throughout the neighborhoods or piped directly to where it was to be used; this water was apparently available free to all the citizens. The great public baths were also normally free of charge, and the luxury of these places of relaxation and refreshment must have added considerably to the quality of life for the urban dweller. The magnificent colonnaded streets, public squares, and official buildings which characterized all Roman cities reached the peak of their refinement and luxury in the later empire. These were a source of pride for the emperor and the local aristocracy; but they also provided air and open spaces amid the overcrowded residential areas, and they occasionally afforded temporary shelter for the indigent until they found more permanent housing.

As is generally known, the theatre and the hippodrome were important centers in any late Roman city, but increasingly the churches came to play a greater role in contemporary urban social and economic life. The churches, we should remember, were not merely places of worship, but large complexes where people might assemble for a variety of reasons, not least of which were refreshment and fellowship. It also remained for the Christians—John Chrysostom, Basil, John the Almsgiver, and many others—to make concern for the poor, the sick, and the aged a personal human virtue. They also institutionalized their concern, as bishops and monasteries founded poorhouses, hospitals, hostels, and orphanages on a large scale. These institutions must have done much to relieve the most serious social and economic problems of the urban poor, and in some ways such individuals must have been better off in late antiquity than they had been before.

Decline or Expansion?

The political and economic crises of the third century had serious consequences for the Roman city, and the urban centers which emerged into the early fourth century were much changed. Cities remained the basic element of social and political organization, but they appear no longer to have been the dynamic, restless, independent entities of earlier years. As Jones has pointed out, in the early empire the Roman government had to exercise all of its authority to control the independence of the cities, while in the later empire the state had to struggle just to keep the cities alive and functioning. Part of the difficulty of the cities was that the weight of the financial crisis fell particularly heavily on the urban aristocracy, the curiales, who had long been the mainstay of local municipal life. They were forced to bear the burden of the new system of taxation, and if the countryside could not meet its financial obligations, the curiales had to make up the
deficit from their own resources. As a result, many curiales could no longer contribute lavishly to the public life of the cities, and some of them even fled civilized society, abandoning the estates which could no longer meet the demands placed upon them. The state devised a number of expedients, none of them entirely successful, to restore the curiales to their traditional place as the leaders of local society, but in many cities the only alternative was imperial intervention, either by the appointment of government officials (such as the defensor civitatis) or by direct subsidy, especially in the construction of civic buildings.

Developments such as these have naturally led scholars to the conclusion that the cities of the later empire were "in decline," both in a qualitative and a quantitative sense. Support for this view may easily be found in the contemporary literary sources, but such laments should not be accepted without reservation. In the first place, many of the passages which seem to document the demise of urban life refer, not to the size and prosperity of the cities, but to the survival of classical urban forms and institutions. Certainly, no one would claim that the ancient city-state survived the third century with all of its parts unchanged and, as we have seen, the old aristocratic institutions such as the curia suffered the greatest. Nevertheless, this says little about the vitality of the cities as they emerged in a new form. In addition, much of the literary evidence comes from the period of crisis in the third century rather than from the period after Constantine.

Thus, a passage from Eusebius frequently used to document the decline of the city notes that in Alexandria: "those people between forty and seventy were then so numerous that the full total of the number is not to be reached now, when those from fourteen to eighty years have been registered and counted together for the public food ration." This information must originally have been based upon the official register for the grain dole of Alexandria, but the passage itself was not written by Eusebius but was a portion of a letter (from Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria) incorporated in the text of his history. The letter, thus, referred not to the situation in the fourth or fifth century, but to the middle of the third century. It shows that the population of Alexandria had declined in the third century, but it says nothing about the later period.

Now, as it happens, we have some information about the population of Alexandria in the late Republic: Diodorus (17, 52, 6), reports that about 60 B.C. the city could boast of 300,000 inhabitants. A. H. M. Jones, basing his calculation on the size of the grain supply and a statement of Procopius, estimated the population of the city at the time of Justinian as between 250,000 and 375,000 persons. In other words, if we accept this evidence, the population of Alexandria was of roughly the same
magnitude in the sixth century as it had been at the time of Caesar. The city may well have declined in size during the third century, but if this was the case, the fourth and fifth centuries witnessed recovery and rapid population growth rather than stagnation or decline. In fact, some of the literary authorities refer quite clearly to the efflorescence of cities under the later empire.\(^{18}\)

The archaeological record is difficult to assess, although it holds considerable promise for future research. Throughout the period under consideration, many of the cities of the empire responded to the barbarian threat by building defensive circuits for the first time in centuries. Frequently these late Roman walls were quite small by comparison with their classical predecessors, and they normally enclosed a settled area that was only a fraction of that from an earlier period. This would appear to be good evidence of population decline: either the urban area was actually less, or the cities of the later empire were simply unable to muster the manpower necessary to defend the expansive classical walls and so opted for shorter defensive circuits.\(^{19}\)

But let us examine a few examples in some detail. Athens was all but destroyed by the Herulian invasion of 267.\(^{20}\) Shortly after this disaster, the Athenians began construction of the so-called Late Roman Fortification, which enclosed a small area of about forty acres to the north of the Acropolis. For “perhaps as much as a century,” life in the city was constricted within these narrow limits, and the old urban center of the Agora lay deserted and desolate, serving only as a garbage dump.\(^{21}\) Toward the beginning of the fifth century, however, Athens witnessed a remarkable building boom, as fine public structures and impressive private dwellings sprang up outside the late Roman wall. The circuit of the Themistoklean Walls may even have been restored, perhaps as early as the time of Julian.

From the evidence of Athens and many other sites, it seems clear that the function of the wall had changed during the late Roman period, and we may not simply use the reduced circuit walls as evidence of population decline. Generally speaking, the walls built after the third century A.D. were not constructed to enclose the entire settled area, but rather to provide an easily-defended citadel and civic center to which the urban and suburban residents could flee in times of danger. The Late Roman Fortification in Athens was an example of such a structure, and it “seems to have enclosed an inner city, always ready for refuge. . . .”\(^{22}\)

While a constricted fortification circuit is not necessarily evidence of population decline, the construction of enlarged walls must certainly indicate population growth. Antioch is a case in point. According to Glanville Downey, the growth of the city into vacant regions and considerable building activity “suggest that there was some expansion of the occupied area during Theodosius I’s reign.”\(^{23}\) A short time later,
possibly at the time of Eudocia’s visit to the city in 438, the city wall was extended some distance to the south, enlarging the area of the city by a noticeable degree. It is not certain whether this new portion of the wall was built to accommodate growing population, or whether it was done to enclose an area which had already been built up, but the conclusion to be drawn is the same: the population of late Roman Antioch was not stagnant, but rather increasing. This is confirmed by Libanius, who stated that in his own time the city was being swollen by a steady flow of immigrants.

In all the great cities of the eastern part of the empire, the situation seems the same. In Corinth, Ephesus, Gerasa, and Alexandria, the urban population was constant or increasing, and the causes are not difficult to understand. The late fourth and early fifth centuries were, on the whole, a time of prosperity for the East, as the reforms of Diocletian and Constantine began to take effect. Although contemporaries cannot have known it, the worst of the civil wars and the barbarian invasions were over, and the prosperity of the cities had begun to return. Under such conditions it is likely that a certain amount of natural population recovery took place. In addition, there was undoubtedly substantial migration from the countryside and from the smaller cities less able to defend themselves, and it is a paradox that the unsettled conditions of the age may actually have contributed to the concentration of population in the larger urban centers. Further, the growth of the bureaucracy and its centralization in the main cities must have stimulated their growth, as the various bureaus, offices, warehouses, and factories drew large numbers of workers, traders, and litigants to the cities.

The most obvious case of urban expansion during this period was Constantinople itself. The legend of the founding of the city is a familiar tale: after his defeat of Licinius at Chrysopolis, the first Christian emperor, guided by an angel, led his astonished courtiers around a huge circuit, enclosing a territory three times that of the Roman city of Byzantium. By the time of the dedication of the city in 330, Constantinople was complete with most of the amenities of urban life and, lured by the presence of the imperial court and the prospect of employment (and perhaps the security of the Constantinian walls), people began to flock to the new capital. Within less than a century, the population of Constantinople had grown so large that built-up areas spilled out across the walls into the countryside. In order to accommodate this population and to protect the new suburbs, the Theodosian Walls were constructed in 413, increasing the area of the city again by at least one-third.

Any study involving early Byzantine cities and the people who lived in them will have to consider the phenomenon of general population growth, along with its attendant problems of crowding and social tension.
Within the large, bustling cities of the late Roman East, society was complex and not easily characterized. Nevertheless, many authorities have written as though three distinct classes could be discerned. Such an analysis is based partly upon the law codes which do make a relatively clear distinction between the top and the bottom of contemporary Roman society, between the *honestiores* and the *humiliores.* Humiliores—the lower classes—were subject to torture during inquisition and they might receive capital punishment for comparatively light offenses. Honestiores, on the other hand, were usually not tortured, and exile with confiscation was normally the most severe punishment they might expect. Furthermore, it has been argued that the shopkeepers formed a kind of middle class between the *honestiores* and the *humiliores.* The fiscal regulations of the state separated the merchants from the rest of the *humiliores* since they were required to pay the *collatio lustralis* (or *chrysargyron*).

Such a simplistic division of late Roman urban society is based in reality, but it raises many questions and says little that is really significant about contemporary life. It is clear that there was a group at the top of society which was allowed to maintain a privileged status through legal consideration. But this, after all, does not tell us very much: who were the *honestiores* and how large a portion of society did they comprise? The codes, unfortunately, do not give us a precise definition of the “more honorable” men—a suggestion that clear-cut distinctions did not exist. To be sure, senators, decurions, bishops, and important members of the army and the civil service were *honestiores,* but one does not know how far down the ranks such status went. Did, for example, “professional men” (teachers, lawyers, physicians), the lower ranks of the army, the civil service, and the church possess upper-class prerogatives? The answer seems to be: “sometimes”—“much was no doubt left to the discretion of the judge,” and the ability of the individual to bribe him. Presumably, an individual in any given situation knew where he stood before the law, but this seems rather imprecise evidence upon which to reconstruct the class structure of the later empire. Also, there must be some objection to labeling the *honestiores* as a “class.” Certainly, a low-ranking imperial official who was born and served in eastern Syria or upper Egypt would have little in common with one of the great senators of Constantinople—except his share in a legal distinction.

Concerning the shopkeepers and merchants, there is little reason to view them as a kind of middle class. As has frequently been pointed out, there were considerable differences in the economic standing of the shopkeepers; some were relatively wealthy, while others were almost desperately poor. The criteria used in formulating class distinctions...
must, at least, be consistent: in the case of the *honestiores* the distinction was in treatment before the law, while with the shopkeepers it was the payment of a special tax. If distinctions of class are to have any meaning, they must go beyond single attributes: merchants and *honestiores* must each have been significantly similar within their own group and dissimilar to all other groups in order for us to call them separate classes.

The whole question of social division in the later empire needs to be discussed in more sophisticated terms. Considerable evidence is available for such a study, and interesting results would surely be obtained. This is not the place to attempt a full investigation of this question, but some observations may be mentioned.

In the first place, one should focus on the reality of late antiquity regardless of any preconceived model. In this regard the simplistic expectation of a "three-class society" should probably be discarded and a distinction made between "class" and "social strata." The former term, which is more restricted in scope, refers to groups in society "which have developed or should develop some 'consciousness of kind,' that is, some sense of existence as a group attribute of society. Stratification, on the other hand, refers to a more complex differentiation which may or may not involve specific groups." Identification of class appears to depend on several criteria: objective status (for example, economic standing), accorded status (the perception of others), and subjective status (a person or group's view of itself). Using these criteria, it is easy to identify one true class in late Roman society: the aristocracy, or perhaps better, the traditional senatorial aristocracy. By all measurements, this very small group formed a class at the top of society. The senators possessed wealth and standing, they defended their own position and realized their own importance, and others throughout society generally accorded them the same prerogatives of honor. Entrance to this class was closed to those who did not already possess the appropriate wealth, heritage, and educational background.

Beyond this readily identifiable class—which was insignificant in terms of numbers—the "class" system of the later empire is difficult to reconstruct. We are forced, it seems, to go to one or the other extreme. Either we oversimplify and say that there were two classes: the aristocracy and everyone else, or we immediately find ourselves faced with many (perhaps scores) of classes. Possibly most significant in this regard were those individuals who rose to positions of power, but who remained outside the traditional aristocracy: generals of barbarian or provincial origin, eunuchs, monks, administrators, and many of the emperors themselves! Surely no one would group these people together with the senators, but some of them may have formed a class which would rank on a slightly lower level. Similarly, the *curiales*, the local urban aristocracy, formed a class which was clearly defined in legal theory and practice.
Given the present state of knowledge, it is reasonable to guess that many other classes existed in late Roman society: members of the army, day laborers, the lower clergy, the unemployed, widows, free peasants, coloni, slaves, and many more. Each of these groups presumably had their own place in society, and their members shared certain attitudes and legal and extralegal rights and obligations. When we examine particular events in Constantinople and the other cities of the empire, we should keep in mind the complexity of society and avoid the temptation to see social strife in a simple way as merely the rich against the poor. Among the rich, indeed, there were a number of different “classes,” each of which must have viewed the same issues in very different ways.

The complexity of late Roman society was in part a result of the economic and social mobility which characterized the period. While not every peasant’s son might “grow up to be emperor,” a surprising number did just that. In many ways, of course, society under the later empire was rigid and there was a tendency for people to remain in the occupations of their fathers, but many individuals found that the autocratic power of the emperor, the growth of the imperial bureaucracy, the spread of Christianity, and the shift of emphasis from the West (with its old aristocratic traditions) meant the opportunity for economic and political advancement.

At least as important as the horizontal divisions of late Roman society were the vertical ties which frequently bound diverse segments of the population into various communities of interest. Specific issues, of course, often cut across class lines: the poor of Constantinople, for example, joined with the educated aristocracy in perceiving a “Germanic threat” against which they had to act quickly and decisively. Likewise, a fear of natural disaster and a concern for Christianity served to tie different elements of society together and to prevent polarization along horizontal lines.

The age-old institution of patronage also played an important role in this regard. Throughout the ancient world much had always been accomplished through influence, and the situation did not change in the later empire. Nearly everyone without a position of power needed a patron of one kind or another and this was particularly true in dealing with the highly structured and hierarchically regimented imperial government. Furthermore, the recourse to a patron as a means to escape the demands of the tax collector is a familiar story, and whole towns and villages fell under the influence of powerful individuals. The reaction of the government to this development shows how pervasive and all-embracing patronage really was, for to neutralize the power of private patrons, the emperor could do no better than to appoint a defensor civitatis, who was to act as a kind of public patron. Even this
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expedient failed, however, and private patronage continued to be a normal part of everyday life.

We know most about patronage in the rural areas, but it existed in the city as well. The phenomenon served frequently to bind the interests of the rich and poor closely together, perhaps one reason why anything resembling class antagonism was all but unknown. An interesting example of urban patronage may be found in the institution of the bread dole. It is well known that the Roman state, from a very early time, used the distribution of foodstuffs as a means to establish and maintain a clientele among the urban poor. In the late Republic the dole had served the interests of the great party politicians. But in the course of time the institution had come to represent the emperor alone, and he was able to increase his popularity by lavish distributions and to hold out the threat of reduction if the people did not behave in the proper way.

Nevertheless, it is possible that some private patrons were able to use the distribution of bread for their own purposes. When Constantine founded his city and wished to have it graced by a large number of noble houses, he offered inducements for important people to make their homes in the new capital. Among these attractions was the so-called *panis aedium*, which was soon paralleled in other great cities.\(^{39}\) This institution provided free bread for those who built great homes (*domus*) in the city. Now, one may wonder why anyone rich enough to build a substantial house would need free bread. The homeowner might, of course, use the bread to help maintain his household, but we know that the right to receive the *panis aedium* might be assigned to others—an obvious opportunity for patronage. Probably the attraction of the *panis aedium* for the wealthy individual was not that it put bread on his own table, but that it allowed him an effective means to build up and strengthen his clientele.

We must ask what the urban patron hoped to gain from his clients. The prestige of having a large following was probably still important, but it is likely that, just as in former times, the patron hoped to gain something more concrete from his clients. It was no longer possible for clients to support their patrons with votes, but they may have discharged their obligation with their voices and their bodies. In examining the actions of the urban crowd, it is well to be aware of the possible effects of patronage, which would tie members of the "lower classes" more closely to the interests of their "upper class" patrons than to those of their peers.

In the later empire a new group of important patrons arose: the clergy and the monasteries. The bishops, especially, came to be very important patrons since they had significant judicial powers, and many commanded vast economic resources. One thinks immediately of the large number of charitable institutions—poorhouses, hospitals, hotels—belonging to the
church of Constantinople, and the economic power of the bishops of Alexandria was probably even greater. Many individuals came to work for the great institutional churches, and perhaps a larger number came to depend on their charities. In the hands of ambitious prelates, this power of patronage must have been considerable. Monasteries, too, shared in this development, as they began to acquire land and to build their own charitable institutions. A powerful abbot might rival a bishop in the size and importance of his clientele.  

One should be careful, however, not to overemphasize the economic aspects of patronage in the later empire. Just as the citizen needed a powerful protector to allow him to approach the court of the emperor, the ordinary believer often felt he needed a powerful spiritual patron to allow him to draw near to the throne of God. In this way bishops and monks and independent “holy men” played an important role in society, and many of them attracted large and devoted bands of followers.

By his bodily mortification, the ascetic had become detached from life as others lived it and had in fact entered into a unique relationship of familiarity with God (parrhesia). The power which he possessed, both in his own person and as a result of his closeness to God, allowed the holy man to play the role of protector and patron (prostates) of ordinary persons. The intervention of a holy man to prevent a natural disaster or to cure a hopelessly ill individual are the more spectacular forms of this phenomenon. But perhaps more characteristic were the beneficial advice the holy man frequently gave to both emperor and simple farmer and the effective intervention he was able to offer with the terrible God of judgment. With considerable insight and significance for the present study, Peter Brown has connected the rise of the holy man with the decline of traditional forms of secular patronage, and he has shown how classical institutions were replaced by individuals as the intermediaries between the known and the unknown in human experience. In this way, the holy man played an important role in the difficulties which beset the late Roman countryside, but the situation was much the same in the city. In fact, the farmer at least had the security of an attachment to the land he had always known, despite the fluctuations in human society. For the urban dweller, especially one who had recently come to a great city such as Constantinople, everything was new, and life itself depended on building and maintaining favorable relationships with others. In this regard, we should expect the ascetic to play an important role as patron in an urban environment.

Organizations and Institutions

Organizations of various kinds characterized life in the cities of the later empire, and some of these may have served as catalysts in urban
The best known of these organizations were the *collegia*, or guilds. Occupational groups of merchants and craftsmen had been common throughout antiquity, but they attained a particular importance in the period of the later empire, when they were organized to serve the needs of the state. In a time of fiscal insecurity, the state needed to be certain, first, that the taxes would be collected and, second, that essential public services would be maintained. Guilds of weavers, bakers, cattle dealers, shipowners, ragpickers, and many others served the state in a variety of ways. They collected the *chrysargyron* from their members, they manufactured and distributed essential goods (such as weapons, cloth, bread, and wood for the public baths), and they provided important public services (such as dredging rivers and repairing buildings). Often these services were provided free by the guilds, as a kind of corvée, and even when compensation was allowed, prices were carefully controlled.

Since the state depended on the *collegia* for these tasks, it was imperative that they be regulated in some way, and the codes provide detailed evidence of how this was done. All workers in a particular industry were required to belong to the appropriate guild, and membership was probably hereditary. At times, membership in a guild must have been restrictive for the individual, especially when it required financial loss or personal hardship. For example, the guild of the breadmakers was required to provide bread at a certain fixed price regardless of the market price of the grain; if the price of grain rose, the baker had to absorb the loss with his own resources. This must have caused some hardship and possibly even antagonism against the state, but we should not assume that the *collegiati* were an oppressed group only waiting for the opportunity to rebel against authority. Most of the repressive legislation concerning the guilds comes from the Western part of the empire, and there is little evidence of general dissatisfaction from the East.

Nevertheless, individual issues must clearly have affected the *collegiati*, and their organization gave them a unity and a power which must have been formidable. Unlike most other urban dwellers, the members of the *collegia* had become accustomed to dealing with the state on a collective basis, and although there was probably little general dissatisfaction among them, in a situation of stress the *collegiati* might well have provided leadership and organization for popular protest. Normally the function of the guild was to serve the interests of the state, but in certain circumstances the relationship might have been reversed, and the members of the guild had the ability to exert pressure on the government.

Other organizations which also will warrant the closest scrutiny are the circus factions and the theatre claque; both have often been cited in
connection with urban unrest in the later empire. Historians have long paid attention to the circus factions—the Blues and the Greens—especially because they were the instigators of the Nika Revolt in 532. The factions originated as the corporations which supplied the horses, chariots, and charioteers for the circus in Rome, and in the first century A.D. they numbered six. As time wore on, the number of factions was perhaps reduced to two, and the membership and composition of the factions became more difficult to estimate and describe. At their core, the factions were made up simply of the individuals who earned their living by supplying the necessities for chariot racing. They gained many loyal adherents, however, who did not actually work for the corporation, but who banded together to support the drivers by cheering at the races. These individuals, who may have numbered in the thousands, were mostly young. We know that by the middle of the sixth century, at least, they identified themselves in public by their strange appearance, which, according to Procopius, they called the "Hunnic look." They let their hair grow on their face and their head, except in the front where they cut it short across the forehead. The sleeves of their tunics were very full so that their appearance in the hippodrome made an impressive theatrical display as they clapped their hands in unison. The cheers and applause of the factions were carefully planned and staged, so a certain amount of organization was essential. Significantly, the members of the factions went about the city armed.

The leaders of these groups, experienced as they were in the techniques of crowd manipulation and slogan-shouting, might provide a nucleus around which popular discontent could rally for support and organization. Beyond that, some scholars have claimed that the factions represented different social and ideological groups. According to G. Manojlović, the Greens attracted the poor sections of society, the urban tradesmen and the unemployed, while the Blues were identified with the upper classes. Manojlović further argued that the Greens supported "oriental" ideas, including monophysitism, and the Blues maintained "western" traditions and eventually upheld the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon. The factions have also been equated with the demes (demoi), who were perhaps a kind of militia organized to defend the walls of the cities in the troubled times of the fourth and fifth centuries.

The views of Manojlović have won surprisingly wide acceptance, and they are repeated, with some minor variations, in many general texts. Perhaps the most extreme statement in this respect is the work of Jacques Jarry, who has seen factions and their supposed social and economic divisions behind most of the important phenomena in this period. The recent studies of Alan Cameron, however, have shown convincingly that the factions always were primarily sporting organizations which provided an outlet for the rowdy behavior of young inhabitants of early Byzantine
cities. As time went on, the factions became an integral part of ceremonies at court, and they were certainly involved in many of the disturbances which characterized the later fifth and sixth centuries. But there is little evidence for their activity in the early fifth century, the period encompassed by the present study.48

An institution similar to that of the factions was the theatre claque. This organization came into being as a result of the custom of providing regular rhythmic applause at the theatre. Actors paid the members of the claque for their support, and the claque responded by greeting performances with enthusiastic applause and long, drawn-out expressions of praise and admiration. The phenomenon, which probably originated in Alexandria, was brought to Rome by Nero, and by the time of the later empire the practice was widespread and all the notable cities of the empire had their own professional claques. Even some bishops, it is said, possessed a claque which responded loudly to the prelate's sermons.49 The claques were probably rather small in number (that of Antioch numbered 400), but like the factions, their organization and experience in dealing with the crowd might give them a position of leadership in a situation of difficulty and discontent. In Antioch, especially, the theatre claque has been held responsible for a number of disturbances in the late fourth century.50

Just as the cities of the empire were being exposed to new and increasing social and economic strains, the old measures for maintaining public security began to appear inadequate, and simple physical danger became one of the characteristics of the age. Not least important in this regard were the external threats to the city. Throughout the empire, cities which had been safe from foreign enemies suddenly found themselves face-to-face with Goths, Huns, and Vandals. As we have seen, smaller circuit walls and powerful bastions were thrown up, giving the city at times the appearance and the mentality of a fortress.51 Outlaws and bandits, sometimes organized into formidable bands, roamed various areas of the countryside, apparently at will.52

Within the city one should expect redoubled efforts to maintain public order: the city was the obvious place of refuge for much of society, and strong measures were called for to control the divergent interests of contemporary urban society. Nevertheless, police protection in the late Roman city seems to have been completely inadequate. Why this was so is something of a mystery. Indeed, the old means of security which had, more or less successfully, protected the inhabitants of Rome and the cities of the empire during the principate were disbanded during late antiquity, and no satisfactory replacement for them was provided.53

In every city there was apparently a kind of amateur night watch which patrolled the streets and which may have contributed to the prevention of crime. Their main function, however, was probably more symbolic than
real: according to John Chrysostom, the night watchmen of Constantinople “go around in the cold, shouting greatly and walking through the narrow streets.” They proclaimed the reality of the power of the state to the denizens of back alleys and tenement houses, and they broke the spell of the night with their voices and the light of their lamps. But this force—whose members were normally conscripted from among the guilds—was clearly impotent in the face of organized violence or massive revolt. The Notitia of Constantinople tells us that one curator, who was probably a senator, was appointed for each of the thirteen urban regions of the city. These curatores were to maintain some kind of order in their district, but they were aided only by one public slave and five vicomagistri, who were “entrusted with the care of the city at night.”

In Rome and Constantinople the praefectus urbi had overall responsibility for the maintenance of public order, and he was often forced to act when the night watch proved unequal to the task. Yet, the prefect himself was hardly any better equipped to deal with violence or crime. Like the curatores, the praefectus urbi was normally an aristocrat or a professional administrator with no training or experience in military or police duties. In addition, again like the curatores, the praefectus had no real police force at his disposal. At most he could hope for support from his officium, which was made up largely of clerical workers. On many occasions the prefect might be reduced to dire straits in the face of urban violence. Leontius, the prefect of Rome in the mid-fourth century dealt quickly with a difficult situation by riding bravely into a crowd of rioters and arresting their leaders, despite the trepidation of his officium. Other prefects were not so courageous or successful, and one was reduced to offering his children to the crowd as hostages, while another simply fled the city and sought safety in his suburban villa.

Beyond all this, of course, the state had an ultimate solution to urban crime and violence: the army. Whenever the situation got completely out of hand, soldiers would be summoned to put an end to the difficulty. The presence of the emperor in Constantinople, with the necessary bodyguards and palatine troops, increased public security in the capital. Likewise, the augustal prefect in Alexandria, because of the reputation of the city for unruliness, had some soldiers at his disposal. Other authorities (such as provincial governors and civic magistrates) were less fortunate. They probably possessed a few soldiers, but these could not hope to deal with large-scale violence. Detachments of soldiers were, as a rule, not stationed permanently within the cities themselves, and in the case of serious disturbance, troops had to be summoned from outside. It seems clear that the state could apply overwhelming force when this was necessary but it is noteworthy that this was done only as a last resort and in response to a serious situation. In most cities, everyday peacekeeping forces were singularly inadequate.
The cities of Constantinople, Ephesus, and Alexandria form the background for the events discussed in this study. They, along with Antioch, were the great cities of the Eastern empire, and all were important administrative, economic, and ecclesiastical centers which extended their influence far into vast hinterlands.

Ephesus was undoubtedly the smallest of the three; in the fifth century perhaps 50,000 people lived within the walls of Lysimachus, although many others probably made their homes in the immediate area, as a number of scattered villas and residential areas show. Nevertheless, Ephesus was an important city, and it had an impressive history as a point where the culture of the classical world met that of Anatolia. It was the site of a famous sanctuary of Artemis, to whom—as St. Paul learned to his discomfiture—the citizens of the city had been passionately loyal. The Artemesion had perished, perhaps in the Gothic incursion of A.D. 263, but the city found other patrons in Mary the mother of Jesus, and the Apostle John, both of whom were said to have been buried in or near Ephesus. The church of St. John—the Apostolion—had, in fact, replaced the Artemesion as an important religious center, and pilgrims visited it for oracular dreams.

Administratively, Ephesus was the metropolis of the diocese of Asia and the residence of the proconsul, the most important civil official in western Asia Minor. In the fourth and fifth centuries, the city was a bustling center of trade and communication. It was the entrepôt for all the produce of the rich Meander and Cayster valleys, and the important “southern highway,” linking the Greek cities of the coast with the hinterland of Anatolia and distant Syria, began at Ephesus. Likewise, the harbor of the city was filled with ships from all over the empire, with the route between Alexandria and Constantinople probably being most important. As one might expect in such a situation, Ephesus was also a manufacturing center (in the sense that concept can be applied to any ancient city), and its silversmiths and cloth workers had a wide reputation.

The city may have suffered in the difficult times of the third century but the subsequent years witnessed substantial prosperity and monumental building. A visitor to the Council of 431, for example, would have seen not only the Apostolion and the conciliar church of St. Mary, but also impressive secular and civic buildings. Perhaps most striking were the broad, straight marble-paved streets, lined with colonnades and statues, as cleared by the Austrian excavators over the past eighty years. The so-called Arcadiane, for example, extended some 600 meters from the theatre to the harbor; it was eleven meters wide, and on both sides there
were colonnades with rows of shops behind. In the southern part of the city another monumental street, the Embolos, ran from the Library of Celsus (transformed into a fountain), past the Square of Domitian, to the Magnesian Gate. Like the Arcadiane, the Embolos was eleven meters wide, and it was lined with numerous buildings restored in this period: the Basilica, the Pryteneum, and the Baths of Scholasticus (to which was joined a particularly sumptuous brothel). Scattered throughout the city were houses, some of them obviously for the poorer residents, while others were lavishly decorated with frescoes and mosaic floors. Not far from the harbor were the spacious Baths of Constantius, constructed in the mid-fourth century as one of the many indications of imperial beneficence toward the city. Statues of emperors and proconsuls were everywhere to be seen, as were honorific dedications, and it is difficult to know whether to attribute the obvious vitality of Ephesus during this period more to economic factors or to imperial patronage.

By the reign of Theodosius I, Ephesus had become a predominantly Christian city, and that character was reinforced not only by the association with Saint Paul and Saint John and the Virgin, but also by the miracle of the Seven Sleepers, in which Christian young men escaped persecution in the third century by falling asleep in a cave and awakening during the reign of Theodosius II. Throughout the city, excavators have found crosses scratched on walls and gates (and even on the foreheads of a number of statues), and a surviving inscription commemorates the erection of a monumental cross over one of the busiest intersections. Ecclesiastically, the bishop of Ephesus was the metropolitan of Asia and thus an important ecclesiastical figure who had jurisdictional claims to a wide geographical area. In the fifth century, however, his position was to be challenged more and more by the growing strength of the bishops of Constantinople.

Alexandria was, like Ephesus, one of the great cities of the empire, but it was larger and even more grand. From the time it was founded by Alexander, the city had been a showplace of culture and center of untold wealth based on the agricultural richness of the Nile Valley. Nowhere else in the dry Mediterranean world was there an area so well-watered and thus so productive as Egypt, and because of the geography of the country, Alexandria was predestined for a centralized control that was likewise unique. Even in the Pharaonic period, cities in Egypt did not develop in the normal sense, and the small villages along the river were administered by a strong government located in Thebes or Memphis or Amarna. With the founding of Alexandria in the fourth century B.C., this situation changed; a huge metropolis was established at the mouth of the Nile. Nevertheless, Alexandria never enjoyed the normal development or the typical institutions of a city in another part of the empire: it was always a
capital city, the seat of the governor or king who administered the rich countryside from that point.61

Thus, in a very real sense, Alexandria was not an Egyptian city. It was, from the beginning, a Greek city and Greek-speaking people made up the bulk of the population. Native Egyptians, of course, moved to Alexandria, but they probably remained a minority, and they lived in different quarters of the city away from the Hellenized inhabitants. Hostility naturally developed between the Greeks and Egyptians, and this frequently gave way to violent clashes. In addition, the settlement of large numbers of Hellenized Jews in Alexandria added another important element to the ethnic mix in the city, and the Jews frequently played a significant part in the turmoil which seemed to characterize life in Alexandria from an early date. Frequent riots and other confrontations gave the city a reputation for instability, just as its wealth created the impression of opulence, luxury, and wanton extravagance.

As we have seen, the economic basis of Alexandria was the agricultural produce of the Nile valley, and this was funneled to the city by means of taxation and the function that the city served as the entrepôt for the transport of Egyptian grain to Rome, Constantinople, and even the distant provinces of Gaul. Thus, the city was always full of traders and merchants, some of them operating on a very large scale, as well as sailors and others involved with long-distance trade. Furthermore, Alexandria was unlike most other cities of the ancient world in that it developed a considerable industrial base. In words attributed to the emperor Hadrian by the author of his life in the Augustan History,

The people are most factious, vain, and unruly; the city is rich, wealthy, and prosperous. Some are glass blowers, some are making paper, and others are engaged in weaving linen; everyone at any rate seems to be engaged in some occupation. The gouty, the circumcised, the blind, all have some trade. Not even the maimed live in idleness. They have only one god—money. Christians, Jews, everyone worship this divinity. Would that this city were endowed with better morals, a city which has the primacy of all Egypt in view of its size.

This document mentions industries in which the factories of Alexandria were preeminent: the manufacture of glass, paper, and linen cloth. Other centers of industry, particularly in Syria, Gaul, and Germany, competed with Egypt for markets in these products, but Alexandria remained the primary place of manufacture, especially for the Eastern trade. In large measure, this was because of the skill which Egyptian artisans had attained, but it was also connected with the resources which were plentiful in the Egyptian countryside. In addition, Alexandria was famous for its production of luxury goods, such as ointments, perfumes, and oils, and we may be certain that it possessed an important industry in jewelry, metalworking, sculpture, and the other arts.62
In fact, the economic difficulties of the later empire appear only to have improved the position of Alexandria as the leading city in the Greek East. During this period, the Nile continued to rise and fall and every year it renewed the agricultural wealth of the countryside. Everywhere throughout the empire, even in times of difficulty, people needed grain, and Alexandria could supply it. Likewise, the economic problems of the age clearly did not destroy the taste for luxury goods on the part of the substantial number of people who could afford them, and again, those in the markets and workshops of Alexandria were willing and able to meet the demand. Thus, by concentrating their production on either end of the financial scale—the cheapest (and most necessary) of goods on the one hand, and the most expensive on the other—the merchants, shipowners, and workers of Alexandria survived the crises which had plagued other areas.

During the later empire, the people of Alexandria found an important source of unity in the bishop of the city, and this naturally increased as Christianity spread among the citizens. Paganism had been strong in Alexandria, and its supporters offered a desperate resistance to the new religion; but by the beginning of the fifth century Christianity had all but triumphed. At the turn of the century, Judaism was still an important religion in the city, but the Jews also felt the power of the “pope” of Egypt, and they were expelled from the city. Thus, the antagonisms which had rent Alexandrian society from the time of its foundation seemed resolved, although violently, in the person of the patriarch. It is true that there was probably some animosity between the inhabitants of the city and the population of the rest of the countryside, but, with the support of the powerful monastic community, the patriarch commanded the allegiance of nearly every Egyptian. He personally controlled much of the economic productivity of the country (through the vast ownership of the church and its fleets of grain transport ships), and he rivaled and often overshadowed the authority of the Roman governor. It was thus with good reason that contemporaries frequently referred to the bishop of Alexandria as “Pharaoh.”

Constantinople was in many ways different from Alexandria and Ephesus. It had only recently become a great city, and it had no tradition of a long and glorious local history. The imperial city was certainly the heir of Rome, and it inherited most of the institutions and many of the traditions of the older capital. But the population of Constantinople was “new,” and many of the residents were immigrants from various parts of the empire who had (by the end of the fourth century) little opportunity to develop emotional ties to Byzantium. As we have seen, in the fourth and fifth centuries the population of the city was constantly increasing, and there must have been considerable social instability. On the other hand,
the continuous construction activity must have provided much of the employment necessary to support this increasing population. Probably by the beginning of the fifth century Constantinople had outstripped the other urban centers of the empire, and it had as many as 400,000 inhabitants.64

Like Alexandria, Constantinople was a center of trade and manufacturing. But, so far as we can tell, industry was fairly light since much of the heavy manufacturing which supplied the capital was located in the other cities of the vicinity: Heraclea, Cyzicus, Nicomedia. Constantinople was instead a center of small, luxury-oriented industry (textiles, jewelry, metal work), although many of the inhabitants must have been employed in supplying the basic necessities of daily life: bread and other foodstuffs, tiles, pottery, and tools.

The city and its economy were dominated by the presence of the imperial court. From the death of Theodosius the Great in 395 through the middle of the sixth century, few of the emperors of the East were warriors, and they rarely left Constantinople for any extended period. This brought large numbers of administrators, courtiers, and bureaucrats to the city, not to mention the throngs of litigants and petitioners who came to make their case before the court. In addition, as the emperors assembled famous relics in the city and built magnificent churches to grace the capital, Constantinople became an important center of pilgrimage, thus attracting thousands more people to the area. Many of the residents must have made their living in feeding, housing, entertaining, and robbing these visitors. Everywhere throughout the city there were inescapable reminders of the power of the emperors: towering columns, statue-lined streets, great churches, and frequent imperial processions. These physical accoutrements of power, as well as the burgeoning population and the new sense of self-assurance which accompanied the birth of the Byzantine world, must have contributed to the atmosphere in the city in the early fifth century.

The church of Constantinople, just as the city itself, was a newcomer in the ranks of high ecclesiastical politics. The bishop of Byzantium had earlier been subject to the bishop of Heraclea in Thrace, but he now found himself among the most important religious leaders of the empire. It was an established custom that the rank of a particular church was dependent upon the political importance of its city, and the status of the bishop of Constantinople—and his ambitions—increased along with the power and prestige of the capital. By the end of the fourth century, the bishop of Constantinople ranked second only to the bishop of old Rome, and he began seriously to encroach on the territory and prerogatives of his ecclesiastical rivals of the East, most notably the bishops of Alexandria and Ephesus.


4. Ibid. 7. 23.


9. At the time of its inauguration the grain dole must have been available to nearly half of the inhabitants of the city, but it is interesting that the number of recipients did not grow significantly as the population increased; so far as we can tell, approximately the same number of people were supported by state grain in 550 as in the fourth century, although the city was certainly much larger. See the interesting discussion in Gilbert Dagron, *Naissance d'une capitale* (Paris, 1974), pp. 530-41.

10. C. Th. 14. 15. 5. This regulation was given for Rome and it may not have been valid for Constantinople. Further, J. Le Gall, "Rome, ville de fainéants?" *Revue des Études Latines* 49 (1971), 226-77, and others, have claimed that the distribution of bread was not enough for a family to live on. The argument, however, is based on the evidence for the early empire when the amount seems to have been less.


19. See, for example, the arguments of J. C. Russell, *Late Ancient and Medieval Populations* (Philadelphia, 1958), pp. 7-8, 71-88.


28. Liebeschuetz, *Antioch*, pp. 52-54: “... there was a great social gulf between the tradesmen as a whole and the upper classes,” although “Libanius would always include the shopkeepers among the sound and respectable citizens as opposed to the riff-raff ...” On the issue of class in the Roman world, see MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations*, pp. 88-120.


37. See the interesting study of Martin Hengel, *Property and Riches in the Early Church*, (Philadelphia, 1974).


an ascetic as bishop is the refusal of the inhabitants of Cyzicus to accept a bishop chosen for them by the bishop of Constantinople. They preferred a monk instead (Socrates Hist. Eccl. 7.28).


43. A. Waltzing, Étude historique sur les corporations professionnelles chez les Romains depuis les origines jusqu'à la chute de l'empire d'Occident, 4 vols. (Louvain, 1895-1900); and A. Stöckle, Spätromische und byzantinische Zünfte (Leipzig, 1911).


48. Cameron, Circus Factions, pp. 221-29.


52. Like the restrictions placed on the guilds, rural violence may have affected the West much more than the East. E. A. Thompson, “Peasant Revolts in Late Roman Gaul and Spain,” Past and Present 2 (1952), 11-23; MacMullen Enemies of the Roman Order, pp. 192-241, 255-68.

53. Constantine disbanded the praetorian guard in 312; the demise of the cohorts of vigiles and the urban cohorts probably followed soon after. There is no evidence that such bodies were ever established in Constantinople. On the lack of public security in the later empire see Hans Peter Kohns, Versorgungskrisen und Hungerrevolten im spätantiken Rom. Antiquitas (Bonn, 1961), pp. 102-9; Jones, Later Roman Empire, pp. 692-95; MacMullen, Enemies of the Roman Order, pp. 336-37; and Dagron, Naissance, pp. 108-13.


55. Jones, Later Roman Empire, p. 694.


59. David Magie, Roman Rule in Asia Minor, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1950), pp. 46-47 (industry and commerce of Ephesus) and pp. 705-6 and 1566-67 (Goths); T. R. S.

60. Much of this description is dependent on Foss, “Byzantine Cities,” pp. 170-98.


64. For Constantinople see R. Janin, Constantinople byzantine, 2nd ed., Jones, Later Roman Empire, pp. 687-711; and Dagon, Naissance. Popular in scope and approach, but sometimes useful, are Glanville Downey, Constantinople in the Age of Justinian (Norman, 1960); and Dean A. Miller, Imperial Constantinople (New York, 1969). Concerning the population of the city see A. Andreades, “De la population de Constantinople sous les empereurs byzantins,” Metron 1 (1920), 1-56; D. Jacoby, “La population de Constantinople à l’époque byzantine: un problème de démographie urbaine,” Byzantion 31 (1961), 81-109; and Dagon, Naissance, pp. 518-41.
