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Defeat on Display: The Public Abuse of Usurpers and Rebels in Late Antiquity

This paper examines the treatment of deposed emperors, defeated usurpers, and other political malcontents in Late Antiquity. During the period, such individuals, or their corpses, were occasionally displayed before the public in some of the major cities of the Roman Empire. While this phenomenon has attracted comparatively little attention in the historiography, this paper demonstrates that it can tell us much about late antique society. By studying these displays in detail, it explores the traditions and practices from which they emerged, how their nature and functions evolved over time, and the extent to which they affected the empire's inhabitants. Ultimately, the paper argues that their development during the period reflects a more autocratic political culture but one which still valued and solicited popular participation in the legitimization of power.

Roman emperors were perpetual winners. That, at least, was the dominant message of imperial ritual, which continually emphasized an ideology of victorious rulership through public celebrations and pageants. Of all such spectacles, one of the most striking was the exhibition of an emperor's vanquished rivals, either alive or dead, before civilian populaces. These often-gruesome displays had been a feature of the Roman world since the earliest days of the Empire. However, in his seminal work on imperial ritual, Michael McCormick suggested that they became more prevalent, or at least more visible, in Late Antiquity due to

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the increased frequency of civil war and the greater pressures on embattled emperors to assert their authority.[1] Yet despite their apparent significance during the period, there have been relatively few studies focusing on these displays in the later Empire. Subsequent work has tended to concentrate either on the fates of specific individuals,[2] or on particular types of spectacle such as civil war triumphs,[3] show executions,[4] and corpse exposure.[5] The issue of how such practices related to one another and how they developed in conjunction over time remains largely unanswered.[6] The aim of this paper, therefore, is to provide that synthesis, and examine within a single study the various forms of public abuse inflicted upon usurpers and rebels in Late Antiquity. In doing so, it attempts to discern what was specifically "late antique" about these practices and what they can tell us about the legitimization and delegitimization of imperial power.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first section outlines the evidence for such displays, focusing on the period from the reign of Constantine I (reigned 306 to 337) to that of Anastasius I (reigned 491 to 518). This expansive timeframe was chosen to examine how key political developments—such as the emperors' move away from Rome, the Empire's division between east and west, and the creation of new imperial capitals—impacted the public abuse of usurpers and rebels over the longer term. This issue is explored in the second section, which determines the content of these displays and the practices and traditions that informed them. Although this section will identify some strong continuities in emperors'

[1] McCormick 1986, chapters 2 and 3.

[2] Lunn-Rockliffe 2010; Kristensen 2016; Chauvot 2017.

[3] Wienand 2015.

[4] Mathisen 2014.

[5] Omissi 2014.

[6] See, however, Pottier 2016's concise but incisive study.

treatment of their political enemies, it will also demonstrate that there were some significant innovations in Late Antiquity that reflect its evolving political environment. In particular, it will point to the death of Theodosius I (reigned 379 to 395) as a crucial moment of transition, since it ushered in a period in which emperors no longer led armies on campaign and were compelled to find new ways to express their imperial credentials. Despite these developments, however, the final section contends that the motivations behind such displays remained broadly consistent throughout the period. It will show that they simultaneously acted as a mode of political communication, as a severe and exemplary form of punishment, and as a means by which an emperor and his subjects could be reconciled after a period of internal crisis. Ultimately, the paper argues that these displays ought to be seen as a prominent feature of late antique society and one that reflects an idiosyncratic political culture in which popular participation in imperial ritual helped renew and sustain autocratic power.

I. Evidence and Contexts

Between 300 and 500, there were twenty-five documented cases in which imperial VIPs—deposed emperors, defeated usurpers and their supporters, or disgraced high-ranking officials—were exhibited either alive or dead in public. To this figure, we could also add four individuals whose public display is implied but not explicitly stated by the sources, as well as a further six whose corpses were abused after they were lynched by crowds.[7] These cases were identified through a thorough analysis of the *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* and are all assembled, together with their corresponding references, in the appendix. They are typically found in narrative sources—histories, chronicles, and the like—but do also

[7] The latter instances are listed as acts of "collective corpse abuse" in the appendix.

feature occasionally in literary set pieces, such as imperial panegyrics or their antitheses, invectives. There seems little reason to doubt that such individuals were mistreated; the pre- and post-mortem abuse of disgraced individuals had long been a feature of the Roman world, and many of the episodes in Late Antiquity are recorded in at least two independent sources. This is not to say, however, that authors necessarily provided a detailed or accurate version of events. Inevitably, their accounts were influenced in very specific ways by the quantity and quality of information they had to hand, the conventions of the genre in which they were writing, and their wider literary agendas. Although this paper will occasionally discuss the implications of such factors for interpreting particular episodes, it is not intended to provide a detailed discussion of the treatment of any single individual. Indeed, in many cases the sources' extremely terse accounts render this impossible, while on the other hand some of the more notorious examples have been studied at length already.[8] Instead, the intention here is to bring together all the available evidence and look for reoccurring patterns in these displays and how they developed over time.

With that in mind, there is one further issue with the sources that must be dealt with before we can proceed. To what degree can we be sure that the instances identified in the appendix represent a complete body of evidence? While it is certainly feasible that some comparable cases are not documented at all in the source record, such omissions are unlikely to be numerous. The public display of a defeated rebel or disgraced official was an exceptional and newsworthy event, precisely the kind of high-level political drama that tended to warrant inclusion in histories, chronicles, and panegyrics alike. Even so, some episodes are barely noticed in the surviving material. For example, we only know of the exposure of the usurper Magnentius's corpse in 353 from a passing comment made by

[8] See note 2.

Ammianus Marcellinus.[9] In describing the usurpation of Julian seven years later, the historian records how a former *praeses*, Theodotus, asked the emperor Constantius II to send him the head of Julian after his anticipated victory, "just as he remembered that the head of Magnentius had been paraded about."[10] Although Magnentius's post-mortem treatment is not otherwise attested in the sources, this remark suggests that his head was sent around the empire in what, as we shall see, was becoming something of a tradition. Evidently, then, there is scope for some episodes to have gone undocumented, unusual though we might expect that to be.

Even allowing for such gaps in our data, however, it is clear that there were many possible candidates who were not subjected to these forms of public disgrace. It seems that the practice was almost always reserved for those we might call "imperial outsiders": men with no or, at best, marginal dynastic connections to the throne.[11] Such individuals were perhaps considered safe, even deserving, targets for abuse. By contrast, members of the current or former imperial dynasty were treated with a great deal more circumspection, with successful usurpers rarely exhibiting their defeated rivals. Indeed, the only "usurper" to break this convention during the period was Constantine, who paraded the head of Maxentius, son of the tetrarch Maximian, through Rome following the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312.[12] However, even this case is far from clear cut, since Maxentius had never been universally

[9] On Magnentius, see Drinkwater 2000.

[10] Amm. 22.14.4 (*Loeb* 315: 274): *ut Iuliani ad eos mitteret caput, perduellis ingrati, specie illa, qua Magnenti circumlatum meminerat membrum.*

[11] Victims with fairly distant dynastic connections to the throne include the usurper Procopius, probably a relative on his mother's side of Emperor Julian (see Lenski 2002, 69), and Nepotianus, who was the son of Eutropia, the half-sister of Constantine (see *PLRE* 1: 624, "Nepotianus 5").

[12] See note 47.

accepted as a legitimate emperor, and his position had only become more ambiguous after his father's failed plot against Constantine in 310.[13] These factors might explain why Constantine was willing to set aside the concerns that ordinarily protected reigning emperors and their relatives from such abuse. There were some individuals, no matter the magnitude of their crimes nor the enmity they inspired amongst those in power, for whom public humiliation, either before or after their deaths, was simply not an option.

II. Forms of Display and their Development

If we turn to the content of such displays, it becomes clear that there was no standard template that the authorities sought to replicate in every instance. Each was an improvised affair which responded to the specific needs of the moment and was influenced by variables such as perceived crimes of the victim, the topographical features of the city in which it was held, and the responses of the viewing public. But past episodes inevitably shaped the present, with particular elements of one display often repeated on subsequent occasions. This did not mean that they followed a linear evolutionary path, since several distinct patterns of abuse were employed throughout Late Antiquity, some rooted firmly in the Roman past while others reflected more recent political changes. Even so, it will be argued that there were two distinct phrases of development over the course of the period, which were separated by the succession of Theodosius I's young sons, Arcadius and Honorius, in 395. Their reigns ushered in a period in which emperors no longer led their armies on campaign and instead spent the majority of their time residing in a fixed capital. This fundamental change to the emperor's role necessarily had a significant impact on the ways they marked their victories,

[13] On the legitimacy of Constantine and Maxentius, see Humphries 2008.

as we shall see. First, however, we need to consider the practices that shaped the treatment of defeated usurpers and rebels prior to Late Antiquity.

Punishment Beyond Death

The exposure of criminals, both before and after their executions, had always been a common sight in the cities of the Roman world. In Rome itself, these displays often took place at or near the Forum, where criminals were presented to the public, killed in various ways, and left unburied, before eventually their corpses were dragged through the streets and disposed of, typically in the Tiber.[14] Elite offenders were usually spared these indignities, but not if they were convicted of treason. Under the Julio-Claudians, their corpses were exposed on the *scalae gemoniae*, a staircase, probably constructed during the reign of Augustus, which led from the Arx of the Capitoline Hill, past the Mamertine Prison, and down to the Forum.[15] The stairs continued to serve this purpose under later rulers, although William Barry has argued persuasively that their use became more problematic for the authorities after the site witnessed serious popular disorder in 69 CE.[16] Nonetheless, as late as the assassination of Gallienus in 268, the Senate decreed that his adherents should be executed and cast onto the Gemonian stairs, although it is unclear whether this action was carried out.[17]

These time-honored rituals of Roman criminal justice certainly influenced the treatment of enemies of the state in the fourth and fifth centuries. Much like in earlier periods, their corpses, or parts thereof, would be displayed in prominent locations and left to decompose, conveying the fact of their downfall to the wider public and serving as a warning

[14] See David 1984; Kyle 1998, 155–71, 213–24.

[15] David 1984, 133; Cadoux 2008, 217–18.

[16] Barry 2008.

[17] Aur. Vic. *Caes*. 33 (ed. Pichlmayr, *Teubner*).

to others.[18] Indeed, some of the sites that had hosted these spectacles in the early Empire continued to be used in Late Antiquity. In Rome, for example, Valentinian III arranged for the bodies of his overmighty generalissimo, Aetius, and the Praetorian Prefect, Boethius, to be exposed on the Forum after their murders in 455.[19] By disposing of his political rivals in this location, Valentinian was perpetuating a macabre tradition that stretched back to the days of the Republic. It sent a clear message to his subjects that these men had been killed as traitors and so in death deserved to be treated like common criminals.

However, despite the similar treatment meted out to both groups, the exposure of political malcontents operated somewhat differently to that of "ordinary" offenders. In part, this was because usurpers and rebels often met their ends in the field away from the urban centers where criminals tended to be executed. Even when they were captured alive, they were usually killed swiftly to quell any further resistance, instead of being transported to a civilian court to face justice. Consequently, while the bodies of most criminals tended to be exposed in a single location, usually at or near the sites of their executions, this was not the case for those of usurpers and rebels. Typically, their corpses would first be displayed at the place of their defeat, in the military camp of their vanquisher, before they were then transported to a civilian context to be seen by a wider audience.[20] In the early Empire, this civilian context was invariably the city of Rome, where emperors routinely received the severed heads of rebels killed in the provinces.[21] These heads would then be exhibited to the

[18] Examples in the appendix include Magnus Maximus, Eugenius, Constantine, Julianus, Jovinus, Sebastianus, Leontius, Illus, Longinus of Cardala, and Athenodorus.

[19] Prisc. fr. 30 (ed. Blockley 1983, 328).

[20] See note 74.

[21] This custom was itself an outgrowth of late Republican practices; see Richlin 1999.

public, again in the Forum or specifically the Gemonian Stairs.[22] This became such a common practice that it was enacted even when the emperor was absent from Rome, as he increasingly was over the course of the imperial period. Septimius Severus, for example, celebrated his victories over his imperial rivals, Pescennius Niger in 194 and Clodius Albinus in 197, by arranging for their heads to be taken to the capital and displayed on poles.[23] In 238, the reigning emperor, Maximinus Thrax, himself suffered a similar fate while he was attempting to crush a revolt in Italy. Assassinated with his son outside Aquileia, their severed heads were taken to one of Maximinus's rivals in Ravenna, before they were sent on for display in Rome.[24] Such cases thus demonstrate that during instances of civil conflict, the delivery of heads to the capital became a vital means of communication to the home front.

Well-travelled Heads

This grisly practice continued, and indeed may have proliferated, in Late Antiquity; we know of eighteen enemies of the state whose heads circulated the empire after their deaths during the fourth and fifth centuries.[25] However, there were some important differences in how the phenomenon played out in this period compared with the early Empire. Most notably, a greater range of cities received these heads, with some sent to multiple locations and travelling very substantial distances. For instance, in 366 the emperor Valens had the head of the usurper Procopius sent from Phrygia to Philippopolis in Thrace and then on to Paris to allow his brother Valentinian I to share in the glory of his victory—a trip of some 3,700

[22] Barry 2008.

[23] Niger: Cass. Dio 75.8 (*Loeb* 177: 180); *SHA Sev.* 9, *Pesc. Nig.* 6 (*Loeb* 139: 376, 422). Albinus: Cass. Dio 76.7 (*Loeb* 177: 212); Hdn. 3.7.7 (*Loeb* 454: 300–301); *SHA Sev.* 11, *Clod.* 9 (*Loeb* 139: 380–82, 456–58).

[24] See note 42. On Maximinus's assassination, see Drinkwater 2005, 31–33.

[25] See the cases listed as "peripatetic heads" in the appendix.

kilometers.[26] While it is impossible to construct detailed itineraries for each peripatetic head, table 1 depicts the frequency with which they appeared in different cities or regions. Rome continued to be one focus for such displays, despite it no longer functioning as the capital, presumably because it was still important for emperors to publicize their victories in the symbolic heart of their empire and especially to the politically important Senate. But the heads of their rivals were now also regularly delivered to other centers, such as the new imperial residences of Constantinople and Ravenna. North Africa also seems to have been an especially favored destination during the period, with Constantine sending the head of Maxentius there in 312,[27] and Carthage purportedly receiving the heads of no less than four western usurpers and two of their close relatives: Magnus Maximus (died 388), Eugenius (died 394), Constantine (died 411), Julianus (died 411), Jovinus (died 412/413), and Sebastianus (died 412/413). Some caution is warranted since this latter detail is known from only a single source, a fragment of Olympiodorus, which states that:

> Both the heads [of Jovinus and Sebastianus] were exposed outside Carthage in the same place where the heads of Constantine and Julian had been cut off earlier and where those of Maximinus [sic] and Eugenius, who had tried usurpation during the reign of Theodosius the Great, had met the same end.[28]

While the North African city is generally accepted as the destination for all six heads, some historians have put forward alternative suggestions, including J. B. Bury, who contended that in the case of Constantine and Julian, Olympiodorus may have confused Carthage with

[26] Amm. 26.9.9, 26.10.6 (*Loeb* 315: 636–38, 642) and 27.2.10 (*Loeb* 331: 10). On Procopius, see Lenski 2002, 68–115.

[27] *Pan. Lat.* IV(10).32 (ed. Mynors, *OCT*).

[28] Olymp. fr. 20, ed. and trans. Blockley 1983, 184–85.

Cartagena in Spain.[29] In spite of this uncertainty, however, there are good reasons why late antique emperors might have wished to expose their defeated rivals in North Africa. Control of Carthage—and with it the wider region—was crucial to the western imperial court, due to its immense wealth and the concomitant tax revenues that it raised.[30] By announcing the destruction of their opponents through the grim but memorable spectacle of their severed heads, emperors may have hoped to consolidate their authority over these distant but strategically significant territories. Overall, then, the wider circulation of heads in the later Empire was a consequence of its polyfocal political landscape, whereby power was shared across several key centers rather than concentrated in a single capital.

Table 1. The frequency with which heads of enemies of the state were received in different cities or regions between 300 and 500.[31]

City or region	Frequency
Constantinople	8
Carthage	6
Rome	4
Ravenna	4
Caesarea Mauretaniae	1
Paris	1
Philippopolis	1
Italy	2
North Africa	1
Gaul	1

[29] Heather 2005, 254. Bury 2012 (1923), 195, n. 2. See also Blockley 1983, 216, n. 50.

[30] On the strategic importance of North Africa, see Heather 2001, especially 10–14.

[31] For the cases used to construct this table, see the appendix below.

Somewhat more speculatively, these displays may also have grown less contentious in the eyes of contemporaries, or at least in those of the upper orders from whom our sources are drawn. In the early Empire, authors often praised or criticized emperors according to how they treated the corpses of their political enemies. Cassius Dio, for example, lambasts Septimius Severus's decision to display Albinus's head in Rome, stating that it "showed clearly that he possessed none of the qualities of a good ruler."[32] Conversely, he describes with admiration how Marcus Aurelius refused to look at the severed head of the usurper, Avidius Cassius, when it had been brought to his presence, and he remarks that instead of displaying it in public, the emperor immediately ordered it to be buried.[33] For Dio, therefore, an emperor's conduct towards his deceased rivals was a measure of his character: "good" emperors eschewed corpse exposure, while "bad" ones were eager to engage in it. Similar views can be found in other early imperial sources, not least Tacitus, who likewise regarded the mistreatment of corpses as a sign of tyranny.[34] But for Tacitus, these displays, beyond being morally objectionable, were also problematic because they encouraged popular disorder. He was particularly concerned with how the Gemonian Stairs—the preferred location for corpse exposure in the first century CE, as discussed above—became a site of political expression, where crowds vented their hatred towards members of the ruling classes. In his *Annals* he reports how a mob demanded the death of the senator, Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso, by dragging his statues to the staircase and dismembering them in public view, while he was on trial for the murder of Tiberius's popular nephew, Germanicus, in 20 CE.[35] Although in this case the crowd's violence was symbolic and broadly supportive of the imperial

[32] Cass. Dio 76.7 (*Loeb* 177: 212): ἐφ' οἷς δῆλος γενόμενος ὡς οὐδὲν εἴη οἱ αὐτοκράτορος ἀγαθοῦ.

[33] Cass. Dio 72.27 (*Loeb* 177: 46).

[34] See Tac. *Ann.* 6.19 (*Loeb* 312: 184–86).

[35] Tac. *Ann.* 3.14 (*Loeb* 249: 542).

regime, Tacitus also mentions more subversive incidents at the staircase, culminating in the lynching of the emperor Vitellius in the anarchy of 69 CE.[36] While Tacitus was hardly an impartial observer of the plebs' behavior, modern historians have supported the idea that these disturbances took inspiration from "official" practices, with crowds appropriating the rituals of state-sanctioned corpse exposure to legitimize their own actions.[37] It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that early imperial sources regarded the display of deceased traitors and rebels so negatively—it was distasteful, excessive, and worst of all, potentially destabilizing to the social order.

By Late Antiquity, however, attitudes seem to have softened. During the period, the exposure of usurpers' corpses, and the circulation of their heads, is often described in a much more matter-of-fact manner, with little comment on its appropriateness. To some extent, this development reflects changes in the nature of the source material, as the classicizing histories of the early Empire give way to the ecclesiastical histories and chronicles of Late Antiquity. Such texts were written by authors from very different backgrounds and with very different priorities to senators such as Tacitus or Dio, and so perhaps inevitably their views on corpse exposure differed. Even so, there does seem to have been a more fundamental change in attitudes, with later sources no longer associating the practice with despotic rule but instead framing it as a conventional ritual employed by all imperial regimes, both good and bad. This new perspective can be observed even in sources of a more traditional bent. Ammianus Marcellinus, for example, does not denounce Valens's mistreatment of Procopius's corpse, nor the sending of his head across the Empire, even though he was otherwise critical of that emperor's personality and reign.[38] Meanwhile, he specifically mentions how the *comes*

[36] Tac. *Hist.* 3.85 (*Loeb* 111: 476).

[37] Nippel 1995, 44–45; Barry 2008.

[38] See note 26. For Ammianus's views on Valens, see Matthews 1989, 190–228.

Theodosius displayed the corpses of the African usurper, Firmus, and his brother, Mazuca, after suppressing their rebellion in the 370s.[39] Given that Ammianus was writing during the reign of Theodosius's son and namesake, he perhaps would not have included this detail if corpse exposure still carried such negative connotations. Indeed, far from condemning the practice, Ammianus praises Theodosius's actions, noting that the head of Mazuca was received "to the great joy of all who saw it" after it was delivered to the city of Caesarea.[40] Such a change in attitudes is perhaps to be expected from our late antique sources, since, through time and repetition under several centuries of autocratic government, corpse exposure had surely lost some of its earlier contentiousness. Of course, the spectacle must still have provoked a range of emotions amongst individual onlookers, including feelings of revulsion, pity, and terror, but the legitimacy of the practice no longer seems to have been up for debate in the later Empire. It was clearly anticipated after the suppression of revolts, regardless of who was on the throne, and thus, far from being perceived as an abuse of power, it had seemingly become a routine part of the political process.

Parades of Infamy

These changes in attitude may have encouraged a new type of display that became increasingly common over the course of Late Antiquity. Instead of simply exhibiting corpses in public locations, emperors began to organize more elaborate spectacles in which their rivals, either dead or alive, would be paraded before urban populaces amid extravagant victory celebrations. In his masterful survey of late Roman and Byzantine imperial ceremony, Michael McCormick coined the arresting phrase "parades of infamy" to describe such

[39] Mazuca: Amm. 29.5.40–42 (*Loeb* 331: 270–72). Firmus: Amm. 29.5.53–56 (*Loeb* 331: 278–80).

[40] Amm. 29.5.42 (*Loeb* 331: 270–72): *Caput tamen eius avulsum residuo integro corpore, cum magno visentium gaudio urbi illatum est ante dictae*.

spectacles and suggests that they arose out of the greater instability of the period.[41] Triumphal rulership had always been a key component of Roman imperial ideology, but as grand victories over foreign enemies became few and far between, insecure emperors searched for new ways to promote their military achievements. McCormick argues that this encouraged the proliferation of victory rituals in which emperors celebrated the defeats of their internal rivals. The post-mortem treatment of Maximinus Thrax in 238 provides an early example of this trend, and one that appears to prefigure some of the spectacles we witness in Late Antiquity.[42] After his decapitation outside Aquileia, Maximinus's head was first displayed to the defenders of the city, who reacted by destroying his statues and images.[43] After it was sent on to Ravenna, the sources describe how the head was received across Italy by people waving laurel branches, a time-honored symbol of martial victory.[44] Further festivities awaited the head in Rome; once it finally reached the capital, it was paraded through the streets before a gleeful populace who responded with rapturous celebrations.[45] Compared with many earlier instances of corpse exposure, this episode seems to have been a more choreographed event of political theatre. The urban populace did not simply witness the display of the corpse but actively participated in its abuse and thereby legitimized the coup that had brought about Maximinus's demise. Although it was doubtless not the intention of Maximinus's enemies, who were merely responding in an ad hoc fashion to the

[41] See note 1. For his allusions to "parades of infamy", see McCormick 1986, 50, 96, 134, 142–43, 144–46, 186–87, 249, 257–58, 262, 303, 314, 326, 340. See also Koukoules 1949, cited by McCormick (134, n. 10) as the "basic study" of the parade of infamy.

[42] For discussion, see McCormick 1986, 18–19; Wienand 2016; Haake 2017, 364–69.

[43] Hdn. 8.5.9 (*Loeb* 455: 284); *SHA Max.* 23 (*Loeb* 140: 338).

[44] Hdn. 8.6.5 (*Loeb* 455: 288).

[45] Hdn. 8.6.7–8 (*Loeb* 455: 290); Zos. 1.15 (ed. Paschoud, *Budé*); *SHA Max.* 24 (*Loeb* 140: 340).

circumstances of his abrupt downfall, the parading of his head through Rome and other Italian cities may well have set a precedent that inspired later rulers.

Certainly, the fate of Maximinus looms large over the post-mortem treatment of the emperor Maxentius in 312. After leading his army to a disastrous defeat at the hands of his rival, Constantine, just outside Rome, his body was found on the banks of the Tiber, in which he had purportedly drowned during his retreat.[46] Several sources report that upon its discovery, Constantine's soldiers decapitated Maxentius's corpse and affixed his severed head upon a long pole.[47] As mentioned above, this gruesome standard preceded Constantine's entry into Rome and was paraded through the city's streets before huge crowds of spectators. Once again, the assembled multitudes reportedly celebrated with gusto, verbally and physically abusing the remains of the man who only a day earlier had ruled over them as emperor. Upon the completion of its display in Rome, Constantine arranged for Maxentius's head to be paraded through other cities in Italy before it was finally taken across the Mediterranean and exposed to African audiences, allegedly provoking further joyful outbursts from grateful provincials.[48]

Although this display clearly resembled those inflicted upon the corpses of usurpers and deposed emperors in previous centuries, there were some important differences. Maxentius's head was not the sole attraction but instead formed the focal point for a magnificent imperial procession involving Constantine and his army. In this way, the spectacle resembled a triumph. With a history stretching back to the heyday of the Republic, the triumph was the ultimate Roman victory celebration and usually involved a parade

[46] On the battle, see Barnes 2011, 82–83.

[47] *Pan. Lat.* XII(9).18.3 (ed. Mynors, *OCT*); *Pan. Lat.* IV(10).31 (ed. Mynors, *OCT*); Zos. 2.17 (ed. Paschoud, *Budé*); Anon. Val. I 4.12 (*Loeb* 331: 514–16). See also Kristensen 2016.

[48] *Pan. Lat.* IV(10).32 (ed. Mynors 1964, *OCT*).

through the capital featuring the successful general, his victorious soldiers, and a panoply of objects associated with the campaign, including prisoners of war and, whenever possible, the enemy commanders.[49] However, the inhabitants of Rome had traditionally been very uneasy about celebrating triumphs over fellow citizens, and usually emperors had sought to associate their successes in civil wars with foreign conquests.[50] This meant that allusions to the shedding of Roman blood were studiously avoided, and any captives displayed during the ceremony were, or were made to appear, manifestly not Roman by their dress and appearance.[51]

These triumphal taboos were first broken by the emperor Aurelian, when he paraded the renegades, Zenobia and Tetricus, through Rome in his triumph of 274. Although its historicity is assured by brief references in more reliable sources, the only detailed account of Aurelian's triumph is provided by the deeply suspect *Historia Augusta*, which describes a lavish parade that implausibly included a whole host of fantastical animals and barbarians as well as his two vanquished opponents.[52] It is unclear why Aurelian was willing to ignore the convention against exhibiting fellow Romans, but his triumph did take place in highly unusual circumstances following a period in which the essential unity of the Roman Empire had been fractured for the first time.[53] Nevertheless, Aurelian's display of captured Romans would have been controversial, as hinted at by the report in the *Historia Augusta* that the

[49] Beard 2007, especially 107–86.

[50] Lange 2012, 33–38; Wienand 2015, 89–95.

[51] Östenberg 2009, 128–63.

[52] *SHA Aurel.* 32.4–34.6 (*Loeb* 263: 254–58). See also *SHA Tyr. Trig.* 24.4–5, 30.3–4, 30.24–26 (*Loeb* 263: 126, 136, 142); Aur. Vic. *Caes*. 35.5 (ed. Pichlmayr, *Teubner*); Eutr. 9.13.2 (*MGH, AA* 2: 156–58).

[53] On the political background, see Watson 1999, 70–95.

Senate were saddened to see some of their number also exhibited as part of the triumph.[54] Of course, this remark may well have been another invention of the work's late fourth- or early fifth-century author,[55] but all the same, it demonstrates that the parading of captured citizens, even those who fought against their sovereign, remained deeply problematic into the later Empire.

This very fact has caused some historians to deny that Constantine's parade in 312 represented a "genuine" triumph.[56] As argued by Carsten Lange and Johannes Wienand, however, Constantine himself did not make such fine distinctions, and his propaganda machine worked hard to portray the triumph as authentic and in line with imperial practice.[57] Even so, the spectacle was considered unusual by contemporaries, since it lacked several elements of a typical triumph, including the parading of captured enemy soldiers.[58] Nor was it typical for corpses to be displayed during triumphal processions, even those of foreign enemies. Consequently, although the Latin Panegyrics emphasize the joy and revelry that accompanied Constantine's entry into the city, the sight of an emperor parading alongside the bloody remains of a rival may well have caused consternation in some quarters.[59] Significantly, it would be the last time for over a century that any Roman—either living or dead—would be exhibited as part of a triumph, suggesting that Constantine and his heirs appreciated that the spectacle in Rome had been controversial.[60] In this way, the display of

[54] *SHA Aurel.* 34.4 (*Loeb* 263: 258): *…et senatus (etsi aliquantulo tristior, quod senatores triumphari videbant).*

[55] On dating the text, see Thomson 2012, 37–53.

[56] For example, Barnes 2011, 83.

[57] Lange 2012; Wienand 2015.

[58] These absences did not escape the attention of contemporaries; see *Pan. Lat.* IV(10).31 (ed. Mynors, *OCT*).

[59] See *Pan. Lat.* XII(9).18.3 (ed. Mynors, *OCT*); *Pan. Lat.* IV(10).31–32 (ed. Mynors, *OCT*).

[60] The next Roman displayed during a triumph would be Priscus Attalus in 416/417, discussed below.

Maxentius represents a path not taken, or at least one that would have to wait until circumstances changed after the death of Theodosius in 395.

New Capitals, New Rituals

With the succession of Theodosius' young sons, Honorius in the west and Arcadius in the east, the imperial role fundamentally changed, since henceforth emperors were no longer responsible for leading troops on the battlefield. As historians such as Sabine MacCormack and Michael McCormick have already noted, the emergence of a more static court necessarily impacted on imperial ritual.[61] Many ceremonies that had previously been contingent upon the emperor's movements across the empire were corralled within the confines of the new imperial capitals. Victory celebrations, in particular, acquired an even greater importance than they had done in the fourth century, since they allowed emperors to claim the mantle of triumphal rulership despite their disinclination to go to war. Inevitably, these developments influenced the treatment of defeated usurpers and rebels, with the result that from the early fifth century onwards, infamy parades became increasingly common on the streets of the imperial capitals. These displays were now conducted before the imperial presence, suggesting that emperors were less squeamish about appearing alongside their enemies' corpses. There was also a renewed emphasis on attracting the participation of the crowd, as emperors combined these parades with other forms of entertainment, typically by centering them on the circus or hippodrome.

We see these trends particularly clearly in fifth-century Constantinople, where the sources record how severed heads would be processed through the city's streets, exhibited in the hippodrome alongside other spectacles, and finally left to rot in some prominent location.

[61] MacCormack 1981, 55–61; McCormick 1986, 91–100.

In 469, for example, the *Chronicon Paschale* describes how the head of Dengezich, a son of Atilla, was delivered to Constantinople "while chariot races were being held; it was paraded along the Mese and carried away to the Xylocircus and fixed on a pole."[62] This prolonged pattern of abuse was presumably intended to maximize the local populace's interest, and was seemingly successful, judging by the chronicle's comment that afterwards "all the city went out to view [the head] for a number of days." The exposure of traitors' bodies in the western empire may well have developed along similar lines, though this is difficult to substantiate, since comparable displays in the fifth century are described in extremely terse fashion by the surviving evidence. It is worth pointing out, however, that the *Consularia Constantinopolitana* and the *Annals of Ravenna* both record the precise date upon which the heads of usurpers were received by Honorius in Ravenna in the early 410s.[63] Evidently, these had been memorable occasions, noteworthy enough to warrant inclusion in sources that otherwise reported only on natural disasters or essential matters of high politics. This might suggest that the heads had been displayed in a particularly visible manner, perhaps in ways that paralleled the better-attested episodes in Constantinople. From the early fifth century, therefore, emperors in the east, and possibly those in the west, sought to transform the display of traitors' corpses into a more elaborate and agreeable spectacle that would titillate and engage the commons.

These concerns may have resulted in one final development to the forms of display: the exhibition of living victims, whose mutilation or execution marked the culmination of the spectacle. Such a shift can already be detected towards the end of Honorius's reign, possibly because the severe instability of his rule demanded ever more impressive victory

[62] *Chron. Pasch*. s.a. 468 (*CSHB* 11: 598), translated in Whitby and Whitby 1989, 90. See also the cases involving Gainas, Leontius, Illus, Longinus of Cardala, and Athenodorus listed in the appendix.

[63] *Cons. Const.* s.a. 411 (*MGH, AA* 9: 246); *Ann. Rav.* s.a. 412 (ed. Bischoff and Koehler 1939, 127).

celebrations. The first individual to suffer such a fate was the usurper Priscus Attalus, who in 416 or 417 was exhibited as part of Honorius's triumphal entry into Rome.[64] After being made to walk through the streets before the emperor's chariot, Attalus may have been subjected to the so-called *calcatio colli*, the practice in which victors ritually trampled upon their defeated enemies.[65] Injury was then added to insult when Honorius arranged for the fingers of Attalus's right hand (or alternatively his entire hand) to be amputated, perhaps, if Honorius followed the traditional triumphal route, in public view on the Forum.[66] This marked a significant departure from previous displays—not only was Attalus exhibited alive, but the spectacle was also incorporated into a triumph, the first time this had happened to a usurper, alive or dead, since Maxentius's severed head was carried into Rome in 312.

Attalus's unusual treatment set a precedent for Honorius's dealings with the final revolt of his reign, that of Maximus and Jovinus.[67] They were captured alive in Spain and brought back to Ravenna, where they were exhibited as part of the "sublime pomp of the spectacles" organized for Honorius's *tricennalia* in 422.[68] In the course of these festivities,

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[64] Prosp. Tiro s.a. 417 (*MGH, AA* 9: 468). For comment, see Wienand 2015 and Pottier 2016, 22–26. On the date, see Chauvot 2017, 743–45, who argues convincingly for 417.

[65] The text of Philost. *HE* 12.5 (ed. Bidez and Winkelmann 1972: 144) unfortunately has a lacuna at the crucial point, but McCormick 1986, 58, n. 76 suggests that the phrasing of the passage implies that the *calcatio colli* was about to be performed. However, see Chauvot 2017, 747.

[66] Philost. *HE,* 12.5 (ed. Bidez and Winkelmann 1972, 144) but see Olymp. fr. 14 (ed. Blockley, 1983, 174) and Oros. 7.42.9 (ed. Zangemeister, *Teubner*) which imply that Attalus's mutilation occurred in Ravenna after he had been brought before the emperor. For comment, see Chauvot 2017, 745.

[67] On Maximus's rebellion, see Kulikowski 2000, 123–26. Jovinus was perhaps a military commander who had supported the rebellion; see *PLRE* 2: 622, "Iovinus 3."

[68] *Marcell. com.* s.a. 422.2 (*MGH, AA* 11: 75); *Ann. Rav*. s.a. 422 (ed. Bernhard and Koehler 1939, 127); *Chron. Gall. 452*, no. 89, s.a. 422 (*MGH, AA* 9: 656): *sublimen spectaculorum pompam.*

the two rebels were put to death; the method and location are not specified, but the circus, which often served as a venue for the execution of criminals and prisoners of war, is a strong possibility assuming one already existed in Ravenna at this time.[69] Certainly, these arenas were used to display later victims, such as the western usurper Johannes, who was abused and dispatched in the circus of Aquileia in 425, and the Isaurian rebels, Indes and Longinus of Selinus, who were led in chains around the hippodrome of Constantinople in 498.[70] Similar displays involving living victims continued to occur in the eastern empire as well as the post-Roman kingdoms long after the terminus of this study.[71] In both east and west, therefore, the fifth century witnessed a shift in how usurpers were treated, insofar as they were no longer guaranteed a swift and private death after their defeat. This development should not be overstated; corpse exposure continued, and although not specified by the sources, we might guess that after their public display and execution, the remains of traitors such as Maximus, Jovinus, and Johannes were mistreated in the conventional ways. Nonetheless, it is striking that from the reign of Honorius onwards, emperors sometimes preferred to exhibit their rivals alive and to make their pain and humiliation an integral part of the ceremony.

Emperors seemingly made this change to magnify their prestige and to better associate themselves with victories that were now won by their generals. This was partly a matter of attracting larger and more engaged crowds. Without doubt, living victims made for a more interesting spectacle—there was, after all, only so much drama to be had from the

[69] On executions in Roman arenas, see Kyle 1998. Although one was seemingly constructed, the evidence for a circus in Ravenna is meagre, and the date and place of its construction unclear; see Deliyannis 2010, 59–60. Humphrey 1986, 633 suggests that the most likely date for its construction is sometime in the first or second decade of the fifth century, soon after Honorius had relocated the imperial court to the city.

[70] For references, see the appendix.

[71] McCormick 1986, especially chapters 4 and 8. See also Heher 2015; Perisanidi 2020.

display of a severed head, while the exhibition of notorious enemies of the state, whose fates were as yet unresolved, provided the event with a frisson of unpredictability. The significance of this entertainment factor should not be underestimated, especially as these parades often took place in the bounded environment of the hippodrome, where there was a plethora of other sights, sounds, and smells to distract spectators. But from a more ideological perspective, a living victim also underscored the central message of the ceremony: that it was the emperor, rather than his generals, who was ultimately responsible for military victory. Crucially, it put the power over life and death directly in the emperor's hands and made his decision over whether to punish or pardon the natural climax of the entire event.[72] By orientating the ceremony around his own presence in this way, an emperor could lay claim to the ideology of military rulership and demonstrate his mastery over his defeated rivals without ever setting foot on a battlefield.

III. Motives, Functions, and Impact

Defeated usurpers and rebels thus tended to be treated somewhat differently in the fifth century than in the fourth, and this was the result of the transformation of the imperial role. Yet despite these displays changing in appearance and form, the motivations behind them appear to have remained broadly consistent throughout the period. In what follows, I will discuss the most important of these factors—communication, punishment, and reconciliation—before considering the practice's wider impact on late antique society.

[72] Of those exhibited alive during the period, only Attalus was definitely spared from execution.

Communication

At their most fundamental level, these displays acted as a form of communication through which victorious emperors could publicize the defeat and deaths of their opponents and counteract the spread of rumor.[73] Corpse exposure has often served such purposes throughout history since, as long as its identity can be verified, a corpse provides irrefutable evidence of an individual's demise. In times of uncertainty and especially civil war, its public exhibition can act as a decisive confirmation of a political outcome. Indeed, in the Roman Empire these displays frequently began on the battlefield, with emperors presenting the remains of their vanquished rivals to encourage the capitulation of any remaining opposition.[74] Upon the successful conclusion of a campaign, emperors would then look to convey news of their victory to the civilian populace. Corpse exposure was an immediate and memorable way of achieving that goal, and its practical purpose explains common aspects of the spectacle, such as the focus upon the head of the deceased, their most recognizable feature; the affixing of the head atop a spear to maximize its visibility; and the displaying of the head at multiple sites, typically the major cities and information hubs of the empire such as Rome, Constantinople, Ravenna, and Carthage. Even when the spectacle was limited to a single city, communication remained an important motivating factor. In the imperial capitals, emperors were eager to ensure that as many of their subjects were able to view the show as possible, parading their enemies along the busiest thoroughfares, such as the *Mese* in Constantinople, and displaying them in the local circus or hippodrome, which could seat many thousands of spectators and where the promise of chariot races guaranteed a good turnout. Moreover, after such festivities, emperors ensured that corpses were exposed in prominent locations, such as

[73] Omissi 2014, 21.

[74] See Amm. 26.10.6 (*Loeb* 315: 642); Zos. 4.58 (ed. Paschoud, *Budé*).

at the forum or the major city-gates.[75] This would have also aided the dissemination of knowledge, as departing travelers would naturally have taken notice and brought news of the deceased's fate to those whom they encountered.

Yet these displays were about more than just communication. After all, a simple report either posted or read by a herald in the forum would have accomplished much the same effect and was probably how most citizens learned of the outcome of a civil war.[76] Such an announcement lacked the graphic immediacy of a severed head, but the latter was not necessarily a more authoritative form of communication. The meandering route taken by the head of Maximinus's son in 238 meant that by the time it reached Rome it was "black and dirty, wasted and running with putrid gore," suggesting that onlookers may well have struggled to recognize the young Caesar's features.[77] This problem was surely exacerbated in Late Antiquity, when the heads of usurpers might travel even greater distances. Clearly, these decomposing remains were not acting as a purely functional means of identification, and their significance presumably had to be clarified for the viewing public by accompanying oral proclamations or written reports.

Perhaps, then, these severed heads are better perceived as symbolic objects, which signaled to the civilian populace that the uncertainty was over and that it was time to respond with the appropriate ceremonies. There were various ways in which citizens might honor an emperor's victory in civil war, such as by organizing celebratory games and thanksgiving sacrifices, by destroying his vanquished opponent's statues, or by sending delegations to the

[75] In Constantinople, we know heads were exhibited at the Xylocircus and in Galata; for references, see the cases of Dengezich, Leontius, Illus, Longinus, and Theodorus in the appendix.

[76] On political communication in Late Antiquity, see Sotinel 2012.

[77] *SHA Max.* 32 (*Loeb* 140: 354–56): *ut etiam caput eius mortui iam nigrum, iam sordens, iam maceratum, diffluente tabo*.

emperor with the *aurum coronarium*, the supposedly spontaneous financial gift given in gratitude for imperial victories.[78] However, in order for these essential rituals to take place, an emperor's subjects required suitable encouragement, especially as such acts could be considered subversive if undertaken in the wrong context.[79] The circulation of severed heads may have acquired this function, triggering victory celebrations as the object passed through each city. More darkly, it may have also served as a catalyst for the purges that always followed in the wake of civil war. Eutropius, for example, reports that the parading of Nepotianus's head through the streets of Rome in 350 was accompanied by "terrible proscriptions and massacres of the nobles," presumably those who had backed the rebel in his revolt against Magnentius.[80] Such incidents suggest that victorious emperors employed the spectacle not merely to communicate news of their victory, but also to elicit the appropriate expressions of loyalty and vengeance from their subjects.

Retribution and Deterrence

We should not, however, lose sight of the victims of these displays, and in switching our focus to them, it becomes clear that the practice also constituted an extreme act of retribution and deterrence. These punitive aspects are most apparent in the fifth century in those cases when usurpers and traitors were displayed alive before the populace. In the status-conscious environment of the Roman Empire, it was a profound dishonor to be mocked in public, particularly for members of the elite classes to which these individuals belonged.[81] As well as emotional suffering, victims also had to contend with the intense pain of the physical tortures

[78] On statue destruction, see Stewart 1999. On the *aurum coronarium,* see Ando 2000, 175–90.

[79] See Magalhães de Oliveira 2017.

[80] Eutr. 10.11 (*MGH, AA* 2: 178): *…gravissimaeque proscriptiones et nobilium caedes fuerunt*.

[81] On the importance of honor in the Roman world, see Lendon 1997.

that might be inflicted upon them during the spectacle. This usually culminated in the victim receiving the ultimate punishment of Roman criminal justice: execution. Frustratingly, the sources do not always specify the precise method by which such individuals were killed. There is a substantial difference between the swift death of decapitation and the prolonged agony caused by the aggravated forms of execution often practiced in the Roman world. But whatever the precise means of execution, its highly public setting would have significantly intensified the punishment. Through their humiliation, physical pain and, in some cases, public execution, usurpers were—from the perspective of the Roman state—making amends for their most wicked crime of treason. At the same time, their horrific treatment clearly served as an example to spectators, reminding them of the fate that awaited them if they too were disloyal. This goes some way to explaining the barbarity of the treatment inflicted on those usurpers unlucky enough to be exhibited alive, since in order to act as an effective deterrent, their punishment had to arouse feelings of revulsion and terror.

The punitive aspects of such displays are less immediately apparent when the victim was already dead—after all, the deceased cannot suffer pain or humiliation. Nevertheless, even in these cases, the practice was still intended to act as a form of punishment. In order to appreciate the gravity of posthumous abuse, one must recognize the importance that mortuary rites held for contemporaries. While ancient views on the afterlife were diverse, it was broadly agreed that failure to carry out the necessary funerary rituals could have dreadful consequences for the deceased.[82] Significantly, in Greco-Roman cultural traditions, the soul was thought to retain the marks and mood of the individual at the time of his or her death.[83] Christians were similarly concerned about the need for proper burial, and due to their belief in somatic resurrection, they worried that mistreatment of their corpses could jeopardize the

[82] Toynbee 1971, chapters 2 and 3.

[83] Bernstein 1993, 50–83.

condition of their bodies at the Last Judgement.[84] The abuse inflicted upon deceased usurpers may have been influenced by such cultural beliefs, with the imperial authorities looking to preserve the shame of traitors' crimes for all eternity.

Furthermore, the denial of a funeral and, worse, the mutilation of the corpse represented a direct attack on the deceased's status. It prevented the vanquished usurper from taking his place amongst the honored dead, and instead treated him in a way that was usually reserved for barbarians and the worst criminals.[85] In this way, corpse exposure should be compared to the process of *damnatio memoriae*, a modern term for the array of measures inflicted upon traitors after their deaths, including the destruction and defacement of their statutes and portraits, the removal of their names from official lists, and even the marking of the anniversaries of their deaths with public holidays. While traditionally perceived as an attempt to purge all memory of the deceased from the collective consciousness, historians now argue that *damnatio memoriae* is better understood as a posthumous attack on social status through the desecration of the deceased's legacy.[86] Given that corpse exposure accomplished comparable results, this may help to explain why it is sometimes closely associated with *damnatio memoriae* in the sources, as we saw in the vivid description of the downfall of Maximinus Thrax and the destruction of his images by the defenders of Aquileia. Indeed, the pattern of abuse inflicted upon usurpers' corpses was remarkably similar to that exacted upon their statues and other likenesses.[87] Both forms of abuse were conceived as an extraordinary form of social dishonoring, which extended the punishment of usurpers beyond death and served as a stark reminder to the rest of the elite of the costs of rebellion.

[84] Kyle 1998, 242–55.

[85] Kyle 1998, 126–33, 155–71.

[86] Hedrick 2000, especially 89–130. Usherwood 2022, 1–38.

[87] Varner 2005.

Recognition and Reconciliation

Given their punitive qualities, one could be tempted to characterize these displays purely as acts of state terror by which the emperor reminded his subjects of their subordinate position within the hierarchy of power. While this interpretation undoubtedly contains an element of truth, it requires some qualification. Popular participation was a crucial, reciprocal element of the practice. The crowds who lined the streets and packed out the circuses during these displays were not merely passive observers; they, as much as the authorities, shaped the spectacle and determined the pattern of abuse. Quite apart from anything else, it provided an opportunity for the civilian populace to demonstrate its commitment to the new or restored regime. In this respect, these displays not only precipitated the standard repertoire of thanksgiving ceremonies but themselves evolved into a ritual that recognized and celebrated imperial success.

Such expressions of loyalty were of great significance to the imperial authorities, as they provided their rule with a measure of legitimacy. While military and political competence were usually the key determinants of power, popular consent was crucial to imperial ideology.[88] Accordingly, emperors continually solicited the civilian populace for demonstrations of support. This can be seen, for example, in the customary acclamations that were performed during *adventus* ceremonies, the ritual reception of emperors into cities.[89] Through their applause and collective statements of approval, the populace who greeted the arriving emperor expressed the rhetoric of *consensus omnium*, fundamental to late antique theories of legitimate government.[90] Similar agendas underlay the public displays of defeated

[88] Ando 2000, especially 175–205.

[89] On acclamations, see Roueché 1984.

[90] See Magalhães de Oliveira 2020, 10.

usurpers and rebels; as with *adventus* ceremonies, the engagement of the crowd was a fundamental part of the ritual, because their participation acted as a form of popular assent that validated the emperor's position. This aspect can be seen particularly clearly in Claudian's account of the lynching of Rufinus before the gates of Constantinople in 394, which prompted

> the citizens [to] leave the town and hasten exulting to the spot from every quarter, old men and girls among them whom neither age nor sex could keep at home. Widows whose husbands he had killed, mothers whose children he had murdered hurry to the joyful scene with eager steps. They are fain to trample the torn limbs and stain the deep pressed feet with blood.[91]

In this macabre scene, the entire citizen body—young and old, men and women—is depicted as expressing its allegiance to the emperor Arcadius through the symbolic repudiation of his disgraced guardian. When displays of this sort shifted into the more regulated environment of the circus and hippodrome, the unifying qualities of the practice can only have been further enhanced. In such arenas, spectators were already well accustomed to honoring emperors through collective acclamations.[92] Moreover, the circus personnel, by this time paid employees of the state,[93] would have been on hand to lead the crowd in their denigration of the victim, as we know occurred during the display of the usurper Johannes in the circus of Aquileia.[94] Ultimately then, these displays were a useful tool for the imperial authorities as it helped them create, or at least project, a façade of consensus after periods of crisis and division.

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[91] Claud. *In Ruf.* 2.427–32 (*Loeb* 135: 88), translation in Platnauer 1922.

[92] Cameron 1976, 157–92.

[93] Roueché 1993, 140.

[94] Procop. *BV* 1.3.8–9 (*Loeb* 81: 24).

The ceremony also held political significance for civilian populaces, as it enabled them to reassert their commitment to the imperial regime while disavowing any previous association with the defeated usurper. As we have seen already, the sources frequently describe the civilian populace as eager participants in the ceremony. Of course, such claims, especially when made in "official" sources such as panegyrics, can be read as imperial propaganda, since the willing participation of spectators reflected well on the authorities for reasons that have just been outlined. Nevertheless, the emphasis placed by many sources upon the fervor of the crowd probably had at least some basis in reality. There were, after all, various reasons why an individual might wish to engage enthusiastically with the spectacle. For many, its appeal will simply have been its entertainment factor, which provided a diverting, if rather gruesome distraction from the daily grind. The ceremony also offered a rare opportunity for less distinguished citizens to abuse one of their betters without fear of reprisals, and this inversion of social norms further helps to explain their popularity. However, while recognizing that these events could be enjoyable occasions, we must not forget that they took place following instances of civil war, when civilians and especially the aristocracy might feel driven to demonstrate their unshaken or restored allegiance to the victorious party. This was particularly important for those who had lived under the sway of the defeated usurper, and in such places the spectacle could act as a means of reconciliation, through which the populace might ostentatiously come to terms with its new or restored ruler. Imperial authorities seem to have recognized and encouraged this function, since they sometimes arranged for the remains of usurpers to be taken to places that had supported their rebellions. For instance, Constantine arranged for the head of Maxentius to be transported to North Africa, which his rival had only recently recaptured from another usurper, Domitius

Alexander, in 310 or 311.[95] Similarly, the *comes* Theodosius had the head of the African rebel Mazuca delivered to his old stronghold of Caesarea Mauretaniae.[96] In this regard, the practice almost resembles a scapegoat ritual, insofar as it allowed communities that had supported the usurper to expiate their guilt through the symbolic abuse of his corpse.[97] Little wonder, then, that civilian populaces were enthusiastic participants, as these moments offered them a vital outlet for establishing or recreating their relationship with legitimate imperial authority.

Significance and Subversion

Having identified the main functions of these displays, let us conclude this section by considering their wider cultural significance. This is a difficult topic to address, since we lack the kinds of "ego-documents" that would provide personal testimony of how they were received by members of late antique society. Given that they were only ever seen by a tiny proportion of the empire's inhabitants—mainly the civilian populace of a few major cities—we might assume they did not figure prominently in the minds of contemporaries. But such a view would be unduly pessimistic, and there is, in fact, some evidence that they "exerted a profound impact on the collective psychology of the later Roman population."[98] For instance, John Malalas assumes that the biblical David must have celebrated the killing of Goliath by marching into Jerusalem with the giant's severed head raised on a pole, much in the manner

[95] *Pan. Lat.* IV(10).32 (ed. Mynors, *OCT*). On Domitius's rebellion, see Barnes 2011, 71.

[96] See note 39.

[97] On scapegoat rituals, see Burkert 1979, 59–77.

[98] McCormick 1986, 63.

of how emperors marked their victories in Malalas's own time.[99] Perhaps even more illuminating are the pictorial representations of the practice. The so-called *Annals of Ravenna,* a consular list with brief historical notes covering the years from 411 to 454, was ornamented with illustrations depicting some of the events mentioned in the text.[100] This includes a depiction of the severed heads of three unfortunate individuals—the usurper Jovinus and his brothers, Sebastianus and Sallustius—impaled on stakes. Even more remarkable is a coin of Maximinus Thrax, crudely reworked after his fall, that depicts the emperor's head spitted on a lance and being consumed by a worm and a bird.[101] These lucky survivals may attest to a lively visual culture in which such displays were reproduced and disseminated to the public through different media. Although they were rarely witnessed first-hand, they seemingly left a deep impression on contemporaries.

Their cultural significance also ensured that these displays provided a ready source of inspiration for popular demonstrations during the period. As argued by the sociologist Charles Tilly, collective action is rarely wanton or arbitrary but instead proceeds according to "repertoires of contention": behaviors "that are learned, shared, and acted out through a relatively deliberate process of choice."[102] These repertoires are typically derived from existing cultural practices, which crowds appropriate and sometimes subvert for their own ends. Accordingly, when late antique crowds wished to express their hatred for particular individuals, they naturally drew on the patterns of abuse inflicted by the state against its

[99] Joh. Mal. 18.2 (*CFHB* 35: 354–55). The relevant biblical passage, in 1 Samuel 17, simply states that "David took the Philistine's head and brought it to Jerusalem."

[100] The surviving manuscript is from the eleventh century, but Bischof and Köhler 1939 argue convincingly that the illustrations were faithfully reproduced from a late antique original.

[101] Wienand 2016.

[102] Tilly 1993, 264. Here I am drawing on the use of this concept in Magalhães de Oliveira 2020, 25–31.

enemies. We see this, for example, in the destruction of statues, which were frequently targeted by urban mobs and subjected to treatment mirroring that inflicted upon traitors' corpses.[103] Indeed, it was often the images of those same traitors that were attacked by crowds, who, in the absence of the corpse, recreated its abuse in effigy in their own communities. Statue destruction did not always align with the authorities' interests, however, since it was also used as a form of protest. A particularly infamous episode took place in Antioch in 387 when tax impositions prompted the populace to take to the streets and attack various targets including the statues of the imperial family.[104] According to Sozomen, these images

> were thrown down and dragged by ropes through the city, and, as is usual on such occasions, the enraged multitude uttered every insulting epithet that passion could suggest.[105]

Here the crowd's subjection of the imperial likenesses to indignities usually reserved for the bodies of traitors was surely not coincidental. By mimicking imperial practices, the Antiochene rioters were making a clear political statement, that the current regime had acted unjustly and deserved the same kind of opprobrium which it inflicted upon its opponents.

While statue destruction may have been relatively common, late antique crowds were not always content to limit their violence to inanimate objects. Lynchings were another relatively frequent outcome of popular disorder, and they were similarly shaped by the spectacles organized by the state.[106] This can be seen during the so-called Trisagion Riots of 512, when the people of Constantinople protested against Emperor Anastasius's religious

[103] Stewart 1999.

[104] Browning 1952.

[105] Soz. 7.23 (*PG* 67: 1887–90), translation in Hartranft 1890.

[106] For examples, see Magalhães de Oliveira 2020, 47–48.

reforms.[107] While attacking the household of Marinus, a prefect who, they believed, supported the modified creed, the rioters lynched a Syrian monk and then proceeded to carry his severed head through the city on a pole while chanting "this indeed is the conspirator against the Trinity."[108] The parallels with official practice are telling, with the monk's post-mortem abuse clearly parodying that which had been inflicted upon traitors in the eastern capital, with some regularity, for more than a century. This deliberate imitation allowed the rioters to portray their victim as an appropriate target for violence *ex post facto*, and thereby legitimize their actions in their own eyes, if not in those of the emperor. Such claims to legitimacy were more pressing when crowds lynched representatives of the state, who could even include the emperor himself, as seen in the ignominious fate of Petronius Maximus in 455. After ruling for only a few months following the assassination of Valentinian III, Maximus was killed by a mob in confused circumstances while attempting to flee Rome before the arrival of the Vandals.[109] His corpse was then dismembered by the angry crowd, who "with shouts of triumph paraded his limbs about on a pole" before dumping them into the Tiber.[110] In this way, the Roman populace passed judgement on Maximus, demonstrating in no uncertain terms that they considered his rule to be illegitimate. Somewhat paradoxically, given that they targeted the nominal figurehead of the western empire, the crowd may thus have perceived itself as acting in line with government policy—in their view,

[107] Haarer 2006, 156–57.

[108] Evagr. *HE* 3.44 (*SC* 542: 530–34), translation in Whitby 2000, 196. See also Joh. Mal. 16.19 (*CFHB* 35: 333–34).

[109] On Maximus's reign and death, see Salzmann 2021, 151–54.

[110] Prisc. fr. 30 (ed. and trans. Blockley 1983, 333). For the corpse's disposal in the Tiber, see Prosp. Tiro s.a. 455 (*MGH, AA* 9: 484); Cass. *chron.* s.a. 455 (*MGH, AA* 11: 157); Vict. Tonn. s.a. 455 (*MGH, AA* 11: 186).

Maximus was a *tyrannus*, and by killing him and abusing his corpse they were merely pre-empting the fate that he was sure eventually to suffer at the hands of the authorities.

It is also possible to see the lynching of Petronius Maximus as part of a longer-term trend by which the empire's citizenry became more willing to engage in direct political action. To be sure, Maximus was not the first emperor to be murdered by a mob, and imperial history was punctuated by similar breakdowns in law and order.[111] However, Magalhães de Oliveira has recently argued that the lynching of officials may have become more common in Late Antiquity as "the rising number of laws authorizing capital punishment for cases of corruption and extortion by imperial representatives, emboldened ordinary citizens to take the law into their own hands."[112] The development of so-called infamy parades during the same period may likewise have contributed to this process. As we have seen, urban populaces were actively encouraged to engage in these spectacles and so became accustomed to abusing the state's political enemies. But more than that, because these displays were legitimized by, and drew meaning from, the crowd's participation, they may have fostered a sense that the people, just as much as the authorities, could evaluate the rectitude of imperial officials. Once they had internalized this message, it was only a small leap for the empire's inhabitants to take matters directly into their own hands without waiting for approval from above. Ironically, the display of defeated usurpers and rebels, although developed to project state power, may have helped facilitate the popular demonstrations that frequently erupted in the metropolises of Late Antiquity.

[111] Notable examples include Vitellius in 69, Pertinax in 193, and Elagabalus in 222. On such episodes, see Varner 2005.

[112] Magalhães de Oliveira 2020, 28.

IV. Conclusion

From a comparative perspective, the treatment of defeated usurpers and rebels in the later Roman Empire is not especially unusual. In many other societies, political malcontents were similarly exhibited to public audiences in painful and demeaning spectacles, and their mutilated corpses exposed as a form of post-mortem castigation. But while they are not unique, such displays are culturally distinctive. This article has, therefore, made the case that they can tell us much about late antique society and, in particular, its idiosyncratic political culture. On the one hand, we have seen that these spectacles reflect a more autocratic yet insecure style of rule. In all periods, Roman emperors very rarely spared their rivals, but by Late Antiquity they seem more willing to subject them to public abuse and were criticized less sharply by contemporaries when they did so. Many of the displays held in the fourth and especially the fifth centuries were also qualitatively different from the varieties of corpse exposure practiced in the Principate. They acted not only as a mode of political communication and an exemplary form of punishment but also as ritualized celebrations of military success. Indeed, these displays were increasingly held in conjunction with triumphs in which the exhibition of vanquished usurpers, either living or dead, played a significant role. This would have been unconscionable to the inhabitants of the early Empire, given their aversion to celebrating the defeats of fellow Romans. However, from the third century onwards, as civil wars became more common and major victories over foreign opponents less frequent, emperors were compelled to find new ways to promote their military credentials. Following the death of Theodosius and the transition to a sedentary monarchy, this compulsion was only strengthened, resulting in the ever more elaborate spectacles witnessed in both halves of the empire. The development of these displays thus reflects the abiding

importance of victorious rulership in the face of the greater challenges that confronted late antique emperors.

On the other hand, we have also seen that these displays demonstrate the persistence of popular participation in imperial politics. They gave all social classes, but especially the civilian elite who were perhaps their primary audience, the opportunity of repudiating a former ruler, of accepting or re-embracing a new one, or of expiating the guilt of treason. This function belies the notion that they were solely or even primarily acts of state terror. Instead, these spectacles sought to demonstrate unity, however temporary or illusory, between the emperor and his subjects through the shared denigration of a hated "other." Given their political import, it is not surprising that they seem to have occupied a prominent place in the minds of the empire's inhabitants. Their cultural impact was manifested in some surprising ways and, contrary to the authorities' intentions, they may even have inspired some of the forms taken by popular protest. But for emperors the benefits of these spectacles must have outweighed their risks, since they continued to hold them throughout the period and beyond. This reminds us of the extent to which imperial ideology remained indebted to its republican heritage, in that the construction of legitimate authority required the active support and recognition of the citizen body.[113] By displaying in a single ceremony both the supreme might of a triumphant sovereign and the validating role tenaciously claimed by his subjects, these displays reveal the paradoxical nature of imperial power in Late Antiquity.

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[113] For a stronger assertion of this argument, see Kaldellis 2015.

Appendix

Table 2: Enemies of the state displayed to the public, either alive or dead, between 300 and 500.

Names listed as, for example, *Calocaerus* are persons whose public display is implied but not explicitly stated by the sources.

Victim	Year	Identity or office[114]	Sources for display	Location(s) of display	Type(s) of display
Maxentius	312	Augustus	*Pan. Lat.* XII(9).18.3 *Pan. Lat.* IV(10).31–32 Zos. 2.17 Anon. Val. I 4.12	Rome Italian cities Africa	Urban procession (deceased victim) Peripatetic head Corpse exposure (civilian context)
Calocaerus	334	rebel	Aur. Vic. *Caes.* 41 Theoph. *Chron.* AM 5825	Tarsus	Public execution?
Hermogenes	342	*magister equitum*	Amm. 14.10.2 Soc. 2.13 Soz. 3.7 Jer. *Chron*. s.a. 342 (= Prosp. Tiro s.a. 342) *Cons. Const.* s.a. 342	Constantinople	Collective corpse abuse
Nepotianus	350	Augustus	Eutr. 11 Jer. *Chron.* s.a. 350 Joh. Ant. fr. 200.3	Rome	Urban procession (deceased victim)
Magnentius	353	Augustus	Amm. 22.14.4		Peripatetic head?
Theophilus	354	*consularis Syriae*	Amm. 14.7.5–6 Lib. *Or.* 1.103; 19.46	Antioch	Collective corpse abuse
Domitianus	354	praetorian prefect of the east	Amm. 14.7.15–17 Philost. *HE* 3.28 Zon. 13.9 *Art. Pass.* 13	Antioch - Gallus' residence - city streets - Orontes	Collective corpse abuse
Montius Magnus	354	*quaestor sacri palatii*	Amm.14.7.15–17 Philost. *HE* 3.28 Zon. 13.9 *Art. Pass.* 13	Antioch - Gallus' residence - city streets - Orontes	Collective corpse abuse
Procopius	366	Augustus	Amm. 26.9.9, 26.10.6, 27.2.10 Theoph. *Chron.* AM 5859 Joh. Ant. fr. 208	Philippopolis Gaul Paris	Corpse exposure (military context) Peripatetic head

[114] These descriptors were taken from the individual's *PLRE* entry.

Mazuca	c.374	brother of Firmus	Amm. 29.5.40	Caesarea	Peripatetic head Corpse exposure (civilian context)
Firmus	c.375	Augustus	Amm. 29.5.55	fortress of Subicara Sitifis (?)	Corpse exposure (military context) Urban procession? (deceased victim)
Magnus Maximus	388	Augustus	*Pan. Lat.* II(12).45 Olymp. fr. 20	Carthage	Peripatetic head Corpse exposure (civilian context)
Eugenius	394	Augustus	Olymp. fr. 20 Zos. 4.58 Joh. Ant. fr. 212.3	Frigidus Italy Carthage	Corpse exposure (military context) Peripatetic head Corpse exposure (civilian context)
Rufinus	395	praetorian prefect of the east	Claud. *In Ruf.* 2.410–40 Jer. *Ep.* 60.16 Philost. *HE* 11.3 Zos. 5.7 *Marcell. com.* s.a. 395.5	Constantinople	Collective corpse abuse
Gainas	401	*magister militum*	Phil. *HE* 11.8 Zos. 5.22 *Marcell. com.* s.a. 401.1 *Chron. Pasch.* s.a. 401	Constantinople	Peripatetic head Urban procession (deceased victim)
Constantine	411	Augustus	Olymp. fr. 20 *Cons. Const.* s.a. 411	Ravenna (?) Carthage	Peripatetic head Corpse exposure (civilian context)
Julianus	411	son of Constantine III	Olymp. fr. 20	Ravenna (?) Carthage	Peripatetic head Corpse exposure (civilian context)
Edobichus	411	*magister utriusque militiae* (under Constantine III)	Soz. 9.14		Peripatetic head
Jovinus	412	usurper	Olymp. fr. 20 *Cons. Ital. add. ad Pros. Havn.* a.413 Theoph. *Chron.* AM 5904 *Ann. Rav.* s.a. 412	Ravenna Rome Carthage	Peripatetic head Corpse exposure (civilian context)

Sebastianus	412	usurper (brother of Jovinus)	Olymp. fr. 20 *Cons. Ital. add. ad Pros. Havn.* a.413 Theoph. *Chron.* AM 5904 *Ann. Rav.* s.a. 412	Ravenna Rome Carthage	Peripatetic head Corpse exposure (civilian context)
Priscus Attalus	416	usurper	Philost. *HE* 12.5 Prosp. Tiro s.a. 417 *Marcell. com.* s.a. 412.2 Olymp. fr. 14 Oros. 7.42.9	Rome	Urban procession (living victim)
Maximus	422	usurper	*Chron. Gall. 452* no. 89, s.a. 422 *Marcell. com.* s.a. 422.2 *Ann. Rav.* s.a. 422	Ravenna	Urban procession (living victim) Public execution
Jovinus	422	military commander (of Maximus)?	*Marcell. com.* s.a. 422.2 *Ann. Rav.* s.a. 422	Ravenna	Urban procession (living victim) Public execution
Johannes	425	Augustus	Philost. *HE* 12.13 Proc. *BV* 1.3.8–9	Aquileia - circus	Urban procession (living victim) Public execution
Aetius	454	*magister utriusque militiae*	Prisc. fr. 30 (= Joh. Ant. fr. 224)	Rome - forum	Corpse exposure (civilian context)
Boethius	454	praetorian prefect of Italy	Prisc. fr. 30 (= Joh. Ant. fr. 224)	Rome - forum	Corpse exposure (civilian context)
Petronius Maximus	455	Augustus	Prisc. fr. 30 (= Joh. Ant. fr. 224) Prosp. Tiro s.a. 455 Hyd. Lem. 162 *Marcell. com.* s.a. 455 Cass. *chron.* s.a. 455 Proc. *BV.* 1.5.2 Jord. *Rom.* 334 Jord. *Get.* 235 Vic. Tonn. s.a. 455	Rome - Tiber	Collective corpse abuse
Dengezich	469	son of Attila	*Marcell. com.* s.a. 469 *Chron. Pasch.* s.a. 468	Constantinople - Mese - Xylocircus	Peripatetic head Urban procession (deceased victim) Corpse exposure (civilian context)
Justasas	484	Samaritan rebel	Joh. Mal. 382 *Chron. Pasch.* s.a. 484	Constantinople	Peripatetic head
Leontius	488	usurper	*Marcell. com.* s.a. 488.1 Joh. Mal. 389 Theoph. *Chron.* AM 5980	Constantinople - hippodrome	Peripatetic head Corpse exposure (civilian context)

			Joh. Ant. fr. 237.11 Jord. *Rom.* 353	- church of St Konon's in Sykai	
Illus	488	general of Leontius	*Marcell. com.* s.a. 488.1 Joh. Mal. 389 Theoph. *Chron.* AM 5980 Joh. Ant. fr. 237.11 Jord. *Rom.* 353	Constantinople - hippodrome - church of St Konon's in Sykai	Peripatetic head Corpse exposure (civilian context)
Longinus of Cardala	497	Isaurian rebel	Evagr. *HE* 3.35 Theoph. *Chron.* AM 5988 Joh. Mal. 394	Constantinople - hippodrome - Sykai	Peripatetic head Urban procession (deceased victim) Corpse exposure (civilian context)
Athenodorus	497	Isaurian rebel	*Marcell. com.* s.a. 497.3 Evagr. *HE* 3.35 Theoph. *Chron.* AM 5988 Joh. Mal. 394	Tarsus (?) Constantinople - hippodrome - Sykai	Peripatetic head Urban procession (deceased victim) Corpse exposure (civilian context)
Indes	498	Isaurian rebel	Evagr. *HE* 3.35 Priscian. *Pan.* 171–79	Constantinople - hippodrome	Urban procession (living victim)
Longinus of Selinus	498	Isaurian rebel	Evagr. *HE* 3.35 *Marcell. com* s.a. 498.2 Theoph. *Chron.* AM 5988 Joh. Mal. 394 Priscian. *Pan.* 171–9	Constantinople - hippodrome Nicaea	Urban procession (living victim) Public execution?

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