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Foundation for Ancient Research & Mormon Studies

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Acclamatio
(Never Cry Mob)

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ACCLAMATIO

(Never Cry Mob)

In the winter of 1964 this writer was one of a party of three visiting Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Israel on an assignment which is nobody's business now, and had nothing to do with government. It was a bad time. Wherever we went there was rioting in progress, sometimes triggered by our presence as foreigners, for Nasser's agents were looking for any pretext to make trouble. We lodged at some distinguished houses and enjoyed pleasant chats and receptions with exalted personages. They were proud of their land and people, and displayed no rancor whatever against the noisy crowds in the streets, who for their part felt no personal grudges against them. Both sides seemed to be playing a game of power in which each was trying to get the advantage of the other with no holds barred and no hard feelings. Each understood the other's position. By day we went forth cheerfully taking pictures and mingling in conversation with the people who during the night had been chanting maladictions against us in the streets.

Was this a sign of the times? Not at all. Shortly after this enlightening filibuster I undertook to produce an article on Christian Jerusalem for the first edition of the new Encyclopedia Judaica, a labor requiring extensive search among the Christian and Pagan records of the Near East from the first century to the present; everywhere I met with the same old familiar mobs behaving in the same time-honored manner against the same official opposition. Thirty years before I had set out to write a thesis on the Roman mob and soon changed course when it became apparent that the actions of what I had thought to be a mob were actually the broad foundation on which all power and authority of the state rested, not just accidentally but officially and at all times. We are prone to think of Roman government as the last word in formality and legalism. Actually the power structure rested on the most elementary of institutions the acclamatio.

It was Mommsen who insisted that the Roman populace alone bestowed the supreme office of the state: "Dies Moment der Volkswahl ist das spezifische Kriterium bei magistratus wie bei honor." ¹ They did this by acclamation, shouting in unison with an elan that swept all before it. The acclamatio was spontaneous--any number of people could start shouting anything they wanted, to express their feelings and wishes. ² If the noise got loud enough it could take on the proportions of vox dei. Its transcendent powers of persuasion resided in the overwhelming majesty of the people speaking in unison, the acclamatio being most commonly compared with the chanting of a chorus. However insane such an arrangement may seem it was at all times accepted as traditional and formal. ² Public shouting in unison is not difficult to achieve; it is more difficult in fact to avoid once a few bold characters start chanting and clapping together, whereupon "...all with one voice about the space of two hours cried out, 'Great is Diana of the Ephesians,'" (Acts 19:34). The old Roman occentatio was a public "roasting" (malim ... forno quam foro) chanted clare et cum quodam canore ³ by groups of people and perhaps taken up by the whole street or market-place for the benefit of some embarrassed recipient. The experts disagree as to whether the occentatio was political or magical in its intent or just for fun; but no one doubts that its impact was most effective, for in time it was made a capital offense. ⁴ Usener saw in it a primitive "Volksjustiz." ⁵ The flagitatio was the same sort of thing, sung in antiphony fashion after a regular set pattern, closely resembling the "Wechselgesang der militärischen Spottlieder." ⁶

Large masses of people were able to recite whole sentences in unison without rehearsal by following a leader who would give them the necessary shouts and signals, as when in the days of the Republic at the trial of

Milo, Clodius rose up and shouted a series of questions to his supporters, who gave answer "clapping their hands responding like a chorus" in a play, when he gave them the signal by waving his toga.⁷ And at Caesar's funeral Antony was the choregos of the lamentations chanted by all the demos who like the "chorus in a play" carried on a musical dialogue with him.⁸ The Emperor Claudius "just like a stasiarchos" would lead the Plebs in shouting whatever interested parties asked him to.⁹ At the games throughout the Empire the factions were choruses and the insults they exchanged were on the order of antiphonal chants,¹⁰ the shouting being under the direction of a mandator.¹¹

But what could possibly endow mere unison of noise with the authority to bestow the dignity of office? The word stasiarch, leader of a faction or mob, gives us the clue when, in the opening chorus of the oldest Greek play the chorus hails their prince as "father, counsellor and satsiarch..."¹² He is the archetype of the ritual King, and the comparison of the acclamatio with the sacred chorus of the year-rites is no mere coincidence. Consider the nature and genius of the acclamatio. For all its spontaneity and license it was considered binding only when addressed to popular heroes on three occasions, triumphantes, recitantes in rostris, spectacula et ludos agentes.¹³

Whoever became a triumphator wore the kingly robe of Juppiter Optimus Maximus himself,¹⁴ but the title could be bestowed only by acclamation, first by the soldiers in the field, and then by the populace greeting the conquering hero as he returned to the world of men through the sacred gate which marked the transition between the world of men who recognized God's rule and the outer darkness where the new triumphator had engaged and overcome the powers of evil and of death.¹⁵ The triumph got its name according to Varro from the cry io triumphe, a signal to the Romans that they were free to shout anything they wanted to, as the people and the soldiers competed in happy exchanges of good-natured and ribald chants and obscenities about their hero.¹⁷ It was precisely because

the triumphator, a mere mortal, was imbued for the occasion with the divinity that doth hedge a Year-king that it was necessary to protect him from envious and evil powers by surrounding him with apotropaic charms,¹⁸ and from his own vanity by that servant who whispered in his ear all through the procession, hominem memento te--"Don't forget that you are human after all!"¹⁹ This medicus invidiae, as Pliny calls it, allowed the people to take unlimited liberties in addressing or describing their King, renewing the Saturnia regna of their first king, that Golden Age when all creatures were equal and licentia reverentiam amisit.²⁰

The triumph was a Year-rite, seasonal and formal, the universal recognition of the victorious leader--his acclamatio--being the rite of installation.²¹ It was celebrated with games which carried on the combat motif in the Campus Martius.²² The triumphal processions (or songs) show that all the rivalry and satyr-like street-play that went on belonged to the time-honored native Roman customs, writes Dionysius of Halicarnassus, "For the soldiers who take part in the triumphs are allowed to satirize and ridicule the most distinguished men." (E. Cary).²³ Not only did the emperors Nero and Caligula join the old Roman street-fights, but even the great Augustus took part in them as accepted Year-rites.²⁴ As the Emperor entered the Circus,

Huc omnes populi, pueri iuvenesque senesque
dant agmina plausus vox omnibus una,
mens aedem: nomen populis placet, omnibus unum...
'Tu vincas, Justine,' canunt ingensque tumultus
crescit, etc.²⁵

"Tu vincas" is the traditional cheer for the contestant in the arena, circus, or Hippodrome. Along with the good-luck wish feliciter it is also the war-cry of political contests, and scratched and painted all over the walls of Pompeii, it is a reminder of the old ritual sanctions giving the people an unrestrained voice in all public affairs.²⁶

The third situation calling for acclamatio was the recognition of a popular hero conversing with or showering donatives upon the people from

the rostrum. Such was the best-known of all acclamations when at the Lupercalia, the old Year-rite, Caesar stood pro rostris and was offered the kingly crown without the slightest reference to the Senate, while "somebody in the crowd" (quidam e turba) crowned his statue to the accompaniment of immodicas ac novas populi acclamationes.²⁷ Anyone scattering food or tokens to the people from the rostrum was appearing in the role of the dominus, the magnanimous paterfamilias, the beneficent donor of life, abundance, and fertility to all the world, in short as the old Year-king.²⁸

Needless to say the Conscript Fathers of the Senate, whose invading ancestors had imposed their will on the earlier inhabitants who still had to be kept in line by force, threats, and occasional concessions (for their services in the fields of peace and war were indispensable), looked with high disfavor, clothed as moral indignation, on such undisciplined and disorderly behavior, and used every legal ploy to brand as treasonable its various forms of expression, for it presented a constant threat to their power and wealth. Anyone making himself too popular with the multitude could routinely be accused of aspiring the title of Rex or accepting that of dominus, offenses deserving of death.²⁹ It was to their interest to prevent the king and the people from ever coming together again in their old understanding. When King Servius Tullius had a quarrel with the Senate, he went directly to the Forum and laid his case before the people, who "acclaimed him with joyful shouts, rhythmic chants and titles of honor and accompanied him to his house."³⁰ Professor Max Radin, chairman of the writer's committee when he discussed this long ago, stringently disapproved of the king's behavior. "Where did this meddling body get the right to interfere?" asked the dynamic dean of the Berkeley Law-school, "In all likelihood, they never had such a right and their interference was at all times a usurpation."³¹ Johann Schmidt held that even the formal

acclamatio of the Emperor by the age-old dancing college of the Arval Brethren, with all its quaintly archaic customs, was stolen from the Senate.³²

Unable to outlaw the acclamatio as such, however much it annoyed them, the Senators did their best to make it appear that the right of acclamatio was originally theirs alone, that only they could give it, and only to one of their own number. Though he cannot challenge the legality of the custom, Cicero is nettled that men of family should permit and even depend on shouting hosts of "men of the lower order" chanting for them in the streets at election time,³³ and even blend their voices with those of Senators and Equites in acclaiming a new Consul.³⁴

But the very nature of the custom belies its origin--the aristocrats would hardly have invented something they detested and feared so much, and nothing is plainer than that the acclamatio was made for the masses. When the Conscript Fathers adopted it to their campaigning for office and their deliberations in the Senate House the effect was simply comical; it made social stability impossible as each great man paraded through the streets with his hired supporters, pretending to be acquiescing to the clamorous will of the Roman people.³⁵ The result of these formal salutationes, the aristocratic version of acclamationes was, as the shrewd Epictetus observes, to keep Roman life in a perpetual uproar (thorybos).³⁶ Even more incongruous were the scenes in the Senate chamber, where the dignified patres would arise in a closed chamber and solemnly shout their wishes, censure or approval like a cheering-section at the games. Thus when they made the venerable Tacitus their ruler over his protestations of advanced age by rising and shouting: "Et Trajanus ad Imperium senex venit," ten times; "Et Hadrianus ad imperium senex venit" ten times; the same thing

ten times for Antony, and so on down the line of elderly Emperors after which: "We are making thee an Emperor, not a soldier!" ten times. You rule (jube); let the soldiers do the fighting!" thirty times, etc.³⁷

What offended the Senate when Caesar was offered the kingly crown at the Lupercal was ^{that it was} all done without them, and in the crowning of Augustus they tempered the popular privilege which they could not abolish. Augustus was declared Pater patriae first by the Plebs and after that by the Senate by a special arrangement, neque decreto neque acclamatione; both Senatorial and popular demonstrations were waived by having an individual speaker hail the new ruler: senatus te consentiens cum populo Romano consalutat patriae patrem,³⁸ conceding both that the Plebs in their own right could bestow the exalted title, and that the regular procedure called for an acclamation.

Giving the Patricians credit for originating the acclamatio is the exact equivalent of saying that the Synods of the church invented the laudes and then handed them over to the populace. Ferrarius assures us that there are countless examples in the Acts of the Synods of the bishops acclaiming the emperors in exactly the same words and cadences with which the populace had so long hailed them.³⁹ Like the Senate they elected their own members to the highest office by acclamation: Omnes omnes, placent omnia; dignus est; justus est; fiat! fiat! etc.,⁴⁰ acknowledges a prince of the church just as, "Probe Auguste, Dii te servant. Olim dignus et fortis, et justus, bonus dux, bonus Imperator, dii te servant, etc.⁴¹ recognizes the temporal ruler, and both of them have the same source. Consider St. Augustine's election to the office of Bishop: "The people shouted 'To God be thanks! To Christ be praise!' 23 times, 'O Christ hear us; may Augustine live long!' 16 times, 'We will have thee for our Bishop!' 8 times...!He is worthy and just' 20 times; and so on and on."⁴²

When the gentlemen of the Senate arose at the behest of a crazy Emperor and in solemn unison intoned "Paulus, first of the Secutors!" six-hundred times, are we to assume that they were following their own hallowed precedent which the common people basely "usurped" (pace Professor Radin) when they cheered the same Paulus for his skill in the arena?⁴³

Behind the license of the acclamatio there lurked the memory of the Saturnia Regna with its sacred Year-king. As the victorious Vespasian returned to Rome after finally subduing Jerusalem, the entire population poured for greeting him as "the Benefactor, the Savior, the only worthy Ruler (hegemonia) of Rome!"⁴⁴ It is a Jew who tells the story, and he is quite aware of the common nature of the Roman and the Jewish practice. The Talmud gives the injunction, "Let it be the concern of all to go forth to meet a King" with the explanation that "the earthly Kingdom corresponds to the Kingdom of Heaven."⁴⁵ The Romans would have understood, indeed Professor Y. Yadin has recently shown the surprisingly close resemblances between the Roman and the Jewish military mystique, identifying the heavenly with the earthly hosts.⁴⁶ The important thing is that it is the acclamatio that actually bestows or withdraws the divine authority of kingship. At the moment all the people shouted "God save the King" as Saul sat down on his throne, that hero "turned into another man," and when that acclaim was refused him upon his failure to bring victory he ceased to be King.⁴⁷

The Byzantine Emperors with their superb special effects brought to life the age-old spectacle of the heavenly king enthroned in the midst of all his creatures praising him all together in a single voice.⁴⁸ Such was the proper setting for transacting the business of government: "At all times," wrote Charles Diehl, "these dialogues between the prince and his subjects were customary."⁴⁹ Behind it all is the Roman idea of gloria.

Cicero and St. Augustine are both obsessed with the illusion that the measure of a ruler's gloria is the size, splendor and perfect accord of the cheering hosts whose acclaim both bestows and recognizes divinity. For St. Augustine this goes even for God; as one dissenting voice in the crowd could ruin Cicero's day, as one heckler could turn a triumphant peroration into a laugh and bring down a rhetorical masterpiece in ruins, so anyone failing to join his voice whole-heartedly with the chanting of the congregation in the streets (in quo et me! cries St. Augustine) is actually casting a cloud over the glory of God and for that show of independence (Gk. hairesis) no penalty can be too severe.⁵⁰ It was not the people who interfered in the age-old dialogue between the heavenly ruler and his people, but the nobility, always trying to get into the act and usually succeeding with unfortunate results. In the history of Egypt the relatives and "unique companions" of the Pharaoh could count on him to keep the people in line, but when they pushed a feeble king aside and tried to take things over the result was the complete collapse of society as described in some of the monuments of Egyptian "lamentation" literature.⁵¹

The Greeks saw in the Persian monarch the arch-type and model of sacred kingship, and indeed nowhere, not even in India, was the divinity of kings acclaimed with greater pomp and conviction through the ages, right down to modern times. Is it surprising then that a Shah who would temper royal divinity with western rationalism should forfeit his throne to an Ayatullah, ie. a visible sign (ayat) from God, a present incarnation of divinity firmly resting his absolute right to rule on the chorus of the millions shouting his name in the streets?

In her recent book on the status of the Jews in the world, Hanna Arendt contrasts the citoyen and the bourgeois as the dominant types in modern society.

The former thought of himself as "a responsible member of society in all public affairs," even to the point of disturbing the status quo and at times risking his life against the disciplined mercenaries of the rulers.

The bourgeois was every bit as dedicated and determined, but for another cause: "for the sake of his pension, his life insurance, the security of his wife and children (he)...was prepared to do literally anything."⁵

Of the two desperate parties which is the more dangerous, which the more superstitious, which the more treacherous, tyrannical or shifty? Such questions are purely academic, the fundamental issue being, which has prior right?

There can be no doubt about the answer at Rome, and as ancient and modern writers remind us, what was done at Rome ritually was done also by the Greeks, and what the Greeks did the Orientals did. A strict Roman governor acknowledged that the Oriental mob that called for Barabbas was within its legal rights, electing a Year-king in very much the same manner as the thing was done at Rome. It is significant that the word "mob" does not appear in our King James Version, for the good reason that the original texts make no distinction between the multitude as a pious band of followers, a body of citizens bargaining for their interests, or as a rioting throng. For us the way the crowd behaves is what makes it a mob--mobs are always "disorderly".

But disorderly does not mean rowdy, noisy or tumultuous: tug-of-war, rugby, seasonal contests and combats from the rustic roughhouse of countless peasant festivities to the unearthly splendor of the sacred games described by Pindar, all were violent and dangerous; "anything goes" was the rule of the Roman Saturnalia. A disorderly crowd is one that fails to follow any rule or order, and all of these kept to traditional and accepted patterns. Nothing could be more fiendishly brutal than a Roman army in action, but from the rites of the feciales which initiated a campaign to the triumph and games at the end of it, all was hallowed by pompous and time-honored formality. What made the mob was not its violence but

it unauthorized status.

But who authorizes whom? For years Clodius and Milo competed for the rule of Rome, each claiming to have the citizenry behind him, each holding duly bestowed civil and religious office, each condemning the followers of his rival as an unruly, destructive, depraved and unhallowed mob. Cicero's Pro Milone that tells the story is an exhaustive demonstration of the principle that "mob" is a relative concept. The multitude that followed Jesus and finally acclaimed him King of the Jews were a mob in the eyes of civil and ecclesiastical authorities, who yielded to the ritual legitimacy of the crowd that acclaimed Barabbas. Far more Christians were martyred under the eyes of Prefects, Governors and Emperors than by spontaneous mob action, but it was almost invariably done "for fear of the multitude", and the scene, according to the Acta Sanctorum, was nearly always a ritual gathering in the circus or theater. In following the tribulations of St. Paul we see how the rulers of the East, kings and governors, native and Roman alike justify their actions by the need to appease "the multitude."

The purest form of the mob is the lynch-mob. But when are such not acting as vigilantes defending law and order? What the Mormons call "the Missouri mob" were in their own eyes defending home and country as they marched under the leadership of duly constituted civil, military and ecclesiastical officers. Whoever incited the mobs always fell back on the excuse that they had no choice: in the end there is no appeal from acclamatio.

¹T. Mommsen, Römisches Staatsrecht (Berlin, 1887-8), I,44.

²Joh. Schmidt, "Acclamatio," in Pauly-Wissowa, Realenzyklopädie der Altertumswissenschaft, I,1,47-48.

³S. P. Festus, De verborum significatu (Ed. W. M. Lindsay), pp.190, 192. The root meaning is of course not "roasting" but "chanting," ab occentare. i.q. cantus, Thesaur. Ling. Lat. IX,2,iii,p.342. The quotation, malim isti modi amicos forno quam foro, is from Plautus, Pseudolus, 1145.

⁴C. Brecht, in Pauly-Wissowa, RE, 17:2:1759f.

⁵H. Usener, "Italische Volksjustiz," Rhein. Mus. LVI (1901), and Kleine Schriften Leipzig: Teubner, 1912), IV,367.

⁶Ib., p.397, citing Livy IV,53,11; Pliny, Hist. Nat. XIX,144.

⁷Plutarch, Pompey, c.48.

⁸Appian, Bel. Civile, II,20,146.

⁹Dio, Rom. Hist., 60 (61):31.

¹⁰See the description in W. G. Holmes, The Age of Justinian and Theodora (London, 1905), I,102.

¹¹Theophanes, Anno 524, ed. Niebuhr, I,279-281.

¹²Aeschylus, Suppliants, Lines 11-13.

¹³P. S. Ferrarius, "De veterum acclamationibus et plausu," in J. G. Graevius, Thesaurus antiquitatum Romanarum (Lugd. Batav., 1697), VI,134ff.

¹⁴G. Wissowa, Religion und Kultus der Römer (Munich: Beck, 1912), p.127. The triumphator bore the staff of Janus, god of the year and the gate, Mommsen, Röm. Staatsr., I,425, Janus as Year-king being the type and model of the triumphator, W. H. Roscher, Lexikon der gr. u. röm. Mythologie (1880ff), II:i:42. With his key and staff he is "the opener of the year-cycle," and the father of the race, ib., pp.38, 42.

¹⁵On the army in the field, A. Rosenberg, in RE 9:1:1140. For the significance of the gate, the triumphal arch, Livy, Hist., I:19; Lud. Deubner, "Janus Quirinus," in Römische Mitteilungen 36 (19), pp. 14ff; Wissowa, Rel. u. Kult., pp. 104-5. It is clearly a rite de passage, Cagnat, in Daremberg & Saligio, Dictionnaire, V,488.

¹⁶Only one could triumph who was returning from victory on foreign soil, Mommsen, Röm. Staatsr., I: 97, 103. The Campus Martius, scene of the martial games was also the outer world, and in entering it for the game the magistrate had to take the same auspices as in going out to war,

¹⁷Varro, Ling.Lat., VI,68; Dion.Hal., VII, 72, ed. Ribbeck, p.96.

¹⁸L. Preller, Römische Mythologie, 2.Aufl.,(Berlin, 1865), p.205; Radin, op.cit., pp.37f; F. Altheim, Terra Mater (Giessen, 1931), pp. 146, 141.

¹⁹Zonaras, Epitome Historiarum, VII,21 (ed. L. Dindorf, II,150); Terullian, Apology,

²⁰Pliny, NH, XXVIII,4,7. " Our quotation is from Statius, Silvae, I,43-45.

²¹This is clear from the content of the triumph salutations, e.g. Salva Roma, Salva Patris, Salvus est Germanicus, Suetonius, Caligula, c.6; Augeat imperium nostri Ducis, augeat annos, Ovid, Fasti, I,2; De nostris annis tibi Jupiter augeat annos, Tertullian, Apol., c.35; etc. Only "the holder of the supreme office," was eligible for such acclaim,Dion.Hal., VII,72, discussed by M.Büdingen, in Wiener Akkad. Sitzungsber., Vol.123³(1891); L. Friedländer, Sittengeschichte Roms, 8.Aufl. (Leipzig, 1910), II,299.

²²G. Wissowa, Religion u. Kultus, p.142.

²³Dion. Hal., VII,72,11.

²⁴Suetonius, Augustus, c.45; the theme discussed by H. Usener, "Heilige Handlung," Archiv für Religionswissenschaft, VII (1904), pp.297ff.

²⁵Corripus, De laud. Justini, ed. I.Bekker (Bonn, 1836), pp.345ff.

²⁶Ferrarius, in Graevius, Thesaur. antiq. Rom., VI, 178-9; CIL IV, p.241, refs. under "felix".

²⁷Suetonius, Caesar, c.79.

²⁸H. Nibley, "Sparsiones," Classical Jnl. 40 (1945), pp.524-530.

²⁹Ib., pp.522-526.

³⁰Dion.Hal, IV,37.

³¹M.Radin, "Imperium," in Studi in onore de Salvatore Riccobono (3.Abh. in Wiener Akad. Sitzungsber. v.182), p.30.

³²Joh. Schmidt, in Pauly-Wissowa, RE, I,i,150.

³³Cicero, pro Murena, 34; Plutarch, Gracchi, c.14.

³⁴Pro Murena, 33.

³⁵M. Gelzer, Die Nobilität der römischen Republik (Leipzig: Teubner,1912), p.80.

³⁶Epictetus, IV,4,36f; Cf. Cicero, F., III,7.

³⁷Historia Augusta, Tacitus, c.5.

³⁸Suetonius, Augustus, c.58.

³⁹Ferrarius, p.43.

⁴⁰St. Augustine, Epist. ccxll.

⁴¹Ferrarius, Col. 130.

⁴²Augustine, Epist. ccxiii, 3f.

⁴³Dio, Roman Hist., lxxii, p.1221.

⁴⁴Josephus, Bel.Jud., VII,69,71.

⁴⁵Babylonian Talmud, Berakhoth IX,iv.

⁴⁶Y. Yadin, Scroll of the War of the Sons of Light (Oxford 1962), pp.17,384 s.v. "Roman(s)".

⁴⁷I Samuel 10:24,6; 8:19; 11:12.

⁴⁸We have treated this theme in Western Political Quarterly 2 (1949), pp.343f.

It is the idea of the Byzantine Silentium,

⁴⁹Ch.Diehl, in Byzantium 1 (1924), p.210.

⁵⁰H. Nibley, "Victoriosa Loquacitas," in Western Speech 20 (1956), pp.60,68f,72;
Western Polit. Qt. 6 (1953), pp.643-646.

⁵¹This is the accepted interpretation of the Writing of Ipuwer, edited by A.H. Gardiner, The Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage (Leipzig, 1909), pp.9-16.

⁵²H. Arendt, The Jew as Pariah (N.Y.: Grove Press, 1978), quoted by L. Epstein in N.Y. Times Book Review, Jan. 21, 1979, p.10.