'A kingdom of iron and rust:' identity, legitimacy, and the performance of contentious politics in Rome (180-238CE)

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Abstract

Of all the crises that Rome experienced during its long and illustrious history, arguably none was greater than the accumulation of external and internal conflicts during the third century CE. Most scholars date this crisis from the accession of Maximinus Thrax in 235CE, yet the processes that chipped away at the Augustan system of stable imperial authority were set into motion years earlier. In particular, the years between the accession of Commodus in 180CE and Gordian III in 238CE saw increasing authoritarian rule, demographic change and economic instability. During this time, Rome hosted a dramatic escalation of politically motivated violence, including riots, demonstrations, street battles, vandalism and repeated performances of popular justice rituals, as the city's main political actors, the emperor, urban plebs, Senate, and Praetorian Guard, made public claims against each other using both established and innovative forms of collective action. The extreme was arrived at 238CE in the form of a revolutionary situation: a deep split in the control of the imperial regime's coercive means during which every actor's interests were at risk, prompting many of them to mobilise for action. Such extra-institutional, political activity is the hallmark of 'contentious politics,' which will be the focus of this dissertation.

The clustering of collective action in Rome during this period tells us much about political engagement and exchange, and how shifting conceptions of imperial legitimacy and the polarisation of collective identities framed both support and resistance for imperial regimes. While previous works have shed valuable light on how social networks, political relationships and the symbolism of urban spaces aided mobilisation and the performance of Roman collective behaviour, the structures, processes, and mechanisms by which people publicly collaborated are less understood. This thesis seeks to identify and assess those very structures, processes, and mechanisms that facilitated the escalation of contentious political interaction in Rome between 180-238CE. Three key concepts form the basis of this study's analysis: the formation and evolution of political actors, the political opportunity structures that both facilitated and constrained urban contentious behaviour, and the social and

spatial aspects of the contentious performances and repertoires that defined Roman collective action.

Abbreviations

References follow OCD formatting (4th ed.) Additional abbreviations are as follows:

AJPhil   American Journal of Philology

ANRW   Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt

BHAC   Bonner Historia-Augusta Colloquium

BMC   British Museum Catalogue of Coins

Chron. Pasc.   *Chronicon Paschale*

CIL   Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum

Cyp. *Ad Dem*.   Cyprian *Ad Demetrianus*

Galen: *De alim*.   *De alimentorum facultatibus*

ILS   Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae

Luc. *Alex*.   Lucian of Samosata *Alexander*

Marc. *Dig*.   Marcian *Digest*

P. *Oxy*.   Oxyrhynchus Papyri (Grenfell and Hunt *et al*.)

P. *Ryl*.   Catalogue of Greek Papyri in the John Rylands Library

PIR   Prosopographia Imperii Romani (1973-)

Plut. *ad Princ*.   Plutarch *ad Principem ineruditum*

Polyb.   Polybius

RIC   Roman Imperial Coinage

RG   *Res Gestae*

SHA *Cara*.   *Caracalla*

SHA *Elag*.   *Elagabalus*

SHA *Gord*.   *The Three Gordians*

SHA *Macr*.   *Macrinus*

SHA *Max. et Balb*.   *Maximus and Balbinus*

TAPA   Transactions of the American Philological Association

Mos. et Rom. legum. coll.	[Ulpian] *Collatio legum Mosaicarum et Romanarum*
Veg.	Vegetius

Introduction

Ancient Rome experienced a variety of crises over its long and illustrious history. As Olivier Hekster, Gerda de Kleijn, and Daniëlle Slootjes argue, crises were integral not only for the creation of Empire, but also for numerous structural changes along the way. The transition from Republic to Principate was one such watershed, and the so-called 'third-century crisis' that precipitated the transformation of the Principate to the Dominate of Diocletian was another.[1] Arguably, however, it was the third century that accommodated a greater number of detrimental socio-political outcomes. Most scholars date the 'third-century crisis' from the accession of Maximinus Thrax in 235CE, yet the processes, structures and mechanisms that chipped away at the stable continuity of the Augustan system of imperial authority were set into motion decades earlier.

Despite being long overshadowed by the turmoil of the later third century and the relative stability and prosperity of earlier years, the years between the accession of Commodus in 180CE and Gordian III in 238CE are a worthy topic of research. It was a period of increasing authoritarian rule, demographic change and economic instability. As a result, Rome hosted a dramatic escalation of politically motivated violence from the late second century onwards. If we begin at the apex of political power, of the fifteen recognised emperors between 180-238CE, twelve were assassinated. Only Septimius Severus indisputably died of natural causes. Four emperors met their fate at the hands of the Praetorian Guard, and three others by soldiers. There were also more usurpations in the three decades between 192-222CE than in the preceding two centuries. Four emperors lost civil wars, and other incumbents had to fight off numerous challengers.[2] Instability and conflict were not restricted to the corridors of power either. Among the wider population, collective action also increased significantly. Riots, demonstrations, street battles, vandalism, and repeated performances

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[1] Hekster, Kleijn, and Slootjes (2007) 3.
[2] Those killed by praetorians: Pertinax, Elagabalus, Pupienus and Balbinus. Those killed by soldiers while on campaign: Caracalla, Alexander Severus and Maximinus Thrax. Defeated in a civil war: Didius Julianus, Macrinus, and Gordian I and II. Potential usurpers/challengers: Pescennius Niger, Clodius Albinus (Severus); Seleucus, Uranius, Gellius Maximus (Elagabalus); L Seius Sallustius, Taurinus, Ovinius Camillus (Alexander); Magnus, Titus Quartinus (Maximinus Thrax).

of popular justice rituals make the period a fertile ground for an investigation into questions of power and urban social dynamics.

The beating heart of these socio-political changes was the city of Rome. Politics begins with conceptions of place, and the Empire's territorial extension aside, Rome as *urbs* remained the preeminent landscape of power.[3] Fundamentally, the urban environment constituted and structured social, political, and cultural life, often simultaneously. Rome's temples, *fora*, monuments, streets, and spectacle spaces were repositories of lived experience intertwined with imperial ideologies that offered mnemonic cues for the city's communities. As such, urban space was inherently political and open to contestation by different groups. What happened within the capital, therefore, had a greater impact on collective identities, memories, and ideologies than similar events elsewhere.

Given the significance of Rome and its built environment, the clustering of collective action within the city tells us much about political conflict, engagement and exchange, social and spatial routines, and the identities that framed both support and resistance. What made the collective behaviour of this period so consequential was that it was, for the most part, politically motivated activity that went beyond institutional bounds. The city's main political actors, the emperor, urban plebs, Senate, and Praetorian Guard, made public claims against the government and each other using both established and innovative forms of collective action. Such extra-institutional, political activity is the hallmark of 'contentious politics,' which will be the focus of this dissertation. A great deal of work on the Roman political environment and associated collective action has been principally concerned with the actions of those who held power but since ordinary people often initiated episodes of contentious action, such a narrow focus risks missing the essential drama and mechanisms of political interaction.[4] It is true that there have been some fundamental studies conducted on Roman collective behaviour that accounts for the activities of both powerful and subaltern groups. However, most of these have concentrated on the Late Republican era or Early Imperial period, an understandable focus given the relative plethora of source

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[3] Therborn (2006) 509.
[4] Hanagan, Page Moch, and te Brake (1998) ix.

material.[5] In contrast, despite frequent references to the urban violence of the late second and early third centuries CE, a focused analysis of Roman collective behaviour during this time has been remarkably neglected.[6] Cyril Courrier's mammoth work concludes on the death of Domitian, and there is to date no comparable sociological study on a turbulent period that demands further investigation. Moreover, while previous works have shed valuable light on how social networks, political relationships and the symbolism of urban spaces aided mobilisation and the performance of Roman collective behaviour, specific questions are left unanswered without a more comprehensive interdisciplinary approach. For example, how did civilians, soldiers, and political elites frame and perceive opportunities to act in situations that could be personally risky? Why did political actors prefer some types of collective action over others, and why would action be taken in some cases but not others despite ongoing or worsening socio-political issues? The processes and mechanisms by which people publicly collaborated are thus less understood in the Roman context. This thesis seeks to identify and assess those very structures, processes, and mechanisms that facilitated the escalation of contentious political interaction in Rome between 180-238CE.

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[5] For instance, the political engagement of the *plebs urbana* with the city's political apparatus has received excellent treatment. Millar (1998), and Mouritsen (2001) have provided insightful analyses of the nature of popular participation in Republican politics. The studies of Lintott (1999), Brunt (1966), and Vanderbroeck (1987) have a strong emphasis on the political violence of the late 50s BCE. Yavetz (1969) examined the nature of the emergent relationship between the Julio-Claudians and the urban plebs but did not specifically address sociological and psychological aspects of plebeian collective behaviour. Recent research by Magalhães de Olivera (2012), and Courrier (2014) has proven more fruitful. Magalhães de Olivera's study on the urban plebs of Late Roman African cities incorporated archaeology, epigraphy, papyri, legal sources, and Christian texts to conclude that collective behaviour was a process of political negotiation with authorities, and thus an expression of the populace's broader socio-economic and political expectations. Courrier examined the composition and collective culture of the urban plebs in Rome between 133BCE-96CE, determining that urban collective identities remained politicised under the Flavians, whilst also marking the importance of spatial and economic sub-groups as effective mobilisation units for political action and collective behaviour.

[6] Ménard's 2004 study of public order between the second and fourth centuries CE, including a detailed discussion of violent collective action, is an exception.

(i) Connecting Roman collective behaviour and contentious politics

Collective behaviour includes a vast range of social actions, but for the purposes of this study, the analysis has been restricted to the public, political interactions between emperors, members of the imperial administration, senators, soldiers, and civilians. To that end, I have identified a phase of escalating political contention between 180-238CE from a database I have compiled containing 358 episodes of collective action between 78BCE-238CE.[7] The data identifies political actors, patterns of contentious activity, and often the spaces used for contentious performances over centuries of social and political change, which provides a useful comparative base for the events of the late second century onwards. This dataset clearly shows a distinct acceleration, and then decline of contentious behaviour between 180-238CE in particular, which can best be interpreted as a cycle. Sidney Tarrow defines a protest cycle as a phase of conflict across the social system of higher frequency and intensity than average, with rapid diffusion of collective action from more mobilised to less mobilised sectors, the creation of new or transformed collective action frames and discourses, and intensified information flows and interaction between challengers and authorities.[8] What this means is that those living in Rome during this period witnessed, and in many cases were participants in, a spiral of contention. A succession of claim-making threatened the interests of previously inactive political actors, and thus provided opportunities for them to make their own claims. The extreme was arrived at 238CE in the form of a revolutionary situation: a deep split in the control of the imperial regime's coercive means during which every actor's interests were at risk, prompting many of them to mobilise for action.[9]

To that end, three key concepts form the focus of this study's analysis: the formation and evolution of political actors in Rome, the political opportunity structures that both facilitated and constrained urban contentious behaviour, and the performances, repertoires and physical spaces that defined Roman collective action. In order to assess politically oriented collective action, this study uses the work pioneered primarily by Charles Tilly, Sidney Tarrow, and Doug McAdam, as a starting-point for its conceptual framework.

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[7] See Appendix.
[8] Tarrow (1998) 142.
[9] Tilly (2006) 44.

Contentious politics is an approach centred on public collective action that is political and of a non-institutional form. The three main components of contentious politics, interactions, claims, and governments, have proximate effects such as the reorganisation of social relations, re-alignments of relationships between participants, changes in the character of repression, and changes or displacements which occur as a consequence of the realisation of claims. Together, they produce political and social effects beyond the immediate outcomes of collective activities.[10]

The vast literature on contentious politics speaks to the importance of the topic, yet research in this field has focused mainly on contemporary issues, side-stepping contention from different times and regime contexts. Tilly, Tarrow, and McAdam view contentious politics as an interdisciplinary field, stating that 'our principal goal is to encourage a crossing of the various boundaries—disciplinary, historical, geographic, and between different forms of contention—that divide the field of contentious politics.'[11] Applying this framework to the ancient Roman context is, therefore, precisely the type of historical analysis that Tilly, Tarrow and McAdam envisaged. However, applying an interdisciplinary scaffold necessitates the setting of clear markers that are uniform and cohesive across different periods. For instance, to define political culture, a critical component of contentious politics, we need to have a sense of the collective processes by which people attributed meaning to the events and issues that intruded on their everyday lives. Moreover, we cannot provide a comprehensible model without detailing the contentious events that took place within the broader socio-political environment. This research, then, will not only provide fresh insights into Roman political identities, but it will also anchor political contention within a wider sociological and historical framework, contributing to a broader understanding of contentious politics across both cultural and temporal contexts.

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[10] McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2009) 263; Tilly (1997) 51.
[11] McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2009) 260.

The public performance of political contention is only one part of the puzzle. In his ground-breaking work on the moral economy of the eighteenth century CE English crowd, E.P Thompson argued that focusing on the most explosive types of collective action (*i.e.*, riots) as demarcative events runs the risk of obscuring the broader political context of these protests.[12] To be sure, it was not just rioting and violence that emperors and their imperial administration had to worry about. The public jeers and contempt for Didius Julianus and Macrinus, for example, precipitated the fall of both emperors as vividly portrayed by Herodian in the first instance, and Dio in the second.[13] In other words, relatively innocuous, non-violent claim-making could produce outsized effects. Why this would be so when power was an asymmetrical reality has much to do with how conceptions of collective identity were closely intertwined with cultural norms and expectations and with the specific nature of Rome's built environment. The boundary between 'public' and 'private' space and discourse was a permeable one, and when the 'hidden' strands of identity and informal communication were realised in the open, it was the tip of an iceberg of formed resistance. James Scott's concept of 'hidden transcripts' for instance provides insight into the 'invisible' discourses that underpinned popular resistance and participation in contentious politics. He notes that 'most of the political life of subordinate groups is to be found neither in the overt collective defiance of powerholders nor in complete hegemonic compliance, but in the vast territory between these two polar opposites.'[14] The established practices actors usually employ in off-stage social settings, including rumour, gossip, and rituals are the hidden transcripts that are the *loci* of both political support and resistance.[15] What this means is that official discourse and action could be re-interpreted and independently framed by local communities, generating specific grievances and opportunities for collective claim-making.

Associated with Scott's transcripts is the centrality of Rome's civic spaces to significant socio-political processes. Space and time together form the ethical horizon of the political and politics, which in Nigel Thrift's estimation, is a latent world that creates both contextual background and provides the means to produce foregrounds.[16] Diane Favro points out that

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[12] Thompson (1971) 76-136.
[13] Hdn 2.7.2-3, 2.7.5; Cass. Dio 79.20.
[14] Scott (1985) 136.
[15] Scott (1992) 137.
[16] Thrift (2006) 561.

the stage-like nature of imperial public spaces encouraged the populace to see themselves as active participants in the urban landscape, and the importance of space in Roman political contention can be summed up in two key points. [17] First, the cultural implications of space contribute to the formation of political actors, because it provides people with categories to make assessments of what battles are worth fighting for, whom to cooperate with, and whom to contend against.[18] Besides, when contention is a deliberate act of conflict, those who engage in such collective action are likely to try and manipulate, defend or subvert places that contain symbolic meanings for them and those they are contending against. Second, the physical aspects of public sites shape social interaction and mobility, which in turn shape the types, possibilities, and consequences of contention. The vast capacity of Rome's spectacle spaces encouraged mass contention and formation of collective identities and memories that guided communal action and promoted performances that were more likely to be successful. The Circus Maximus, for example, was a crucial site for contentious performances. Its religious, social, and political aspects meant that it contained overlapping conceptions of place that allowed the emperor and his subjects to reaffirm social hierarchies, but it also provided an ability for audiences to subvert and break down these power structures. As the third century dawned, it was increasingly used in innovative ways, and become a symbolic location for popular resistance. As contention diffused in spatial and social terms, other spaces such as the praetorian *castra*, streets, and even the Curia became locations for conflict as the relationships between Rome's political actors broke down. Space, place, and time were therefore integral to the processes by which the political was formed and reckoned.

As such, spatial analysis will provide a deeper understanding of the practice of urban contentious behaviour. Performative political protest had long been an integral part of the Roman psyche, and it was embedded in the dynamic interactions between actors and the spaces in which they protested. It is these interactions that will constitute the focus of the analysis, not protest *per se*.[19] As contentious politics encompasses not just rioting and public displays of defiance but also other forms of non-institutional activity including non-

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[17] Jaeger (1997); Favro (1996).
[18] Nicholls (2009) 80.
[19] Kriesi (2015) 2.

violent and permitted forms of collective behaviour, the inclusion of a spatial lens will allow for a broader analysis of the collective processes by which Romans attributed meaning and significance to changing social and political conditions.

A reasonable question at this juncture might be, why is contentious politics relevant? One could argue that popular collective action and contentious politics had long been a feature of urban Roman politics. However, contention has extensive socio-political consequences. As Tarrow points out, 'cycles of protest are the crucibles in which moments of madness are tempered into the permanent tools of a society's repertoire of contention.'[20] In other words, the cumulative effects of contention generated new social actors and identities and propelled the emergence of once-hidden beliefs into new public transcripts. What lay behind the expression of contentious politics also reveals much about Rome's political actors. For a group to act collectively, identity is crucial. Identities help shape perceptions of the world and how issues are accordingly framed as just or unjust, and the extension of collective action frames and the politicisation and polarisation of collective identities is a fundamental driver of political conflict examined in this study. The expression of such beliefs and perceptions in a new language was anchored in new or adapted social networks constructed during periods of intense activity. From the point of an imperial regime, these new transcripts and identities must either become institutionalised or be repressed to retain authority.[21] Each of these outcomes, as Tarrow argues, 'implies an indirect and a mediated effect on political culture, which is why we need to look beyond great events and crises to the cycles of protest they trigger in order to observe their effects.'[22]

The study of the outcome of contentious politics is, thus, exceptionally complex. In terms of the causes of political conflict, both endogenous and exogenous factors played dual roles in generating opportunities for collective action. For those who lived in Rome and were dependent on a thriving urban economy, repeated grain shortages, unemployment, war, disease, and other natural disasters had an enormous impact. Also, since Rome was the political and cultural heart of the Empire, instability affected its population

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[20] Tarrow (1993) 284.
[21] Zolberg (1972) 206.
[22] Tarrow (1993) 301.

disproportionately. The emperor was the chief patron of the city, and his relationship with its inhabitants was a symbolic, performative one that linked all urban political actors together as a polity. Consensus was a two-way street: political actors accepted legitimacy claims in return for the provision of social goods, a 'moral economy,' that in essence defined their identity. However, as the Praetorian Guard and broader military assumed greater power as regime members, traditional power dynamics shifted. Continuous external threats, civil wars, and universal citizenship sparked comprehensive changes in military recruitment patterns that eventually led to a noteworthy increase in the power of ethnic networks in the Roman army, particularly during military campaigns.[23] Shifts in these relationships, environments and structures in turn affected how issues and events were framed, whether claims were accepted, how civic spaces were used, and how contention was performed. Together, these strands offer a more profound understanding not only of the late second-early third-century political environment, but also of the networks, identities, perceptions, and cultural norms that bound Rome's inhabitants, plebeian, senator, and soldier alike, as performers on the urban political stage.

(ii)   Scope and structure

The scope of this study is restricted by both time and space to activity in Rome from the sole accession of Commodus in 180CE to that of Gordian III in 238CE. First, it was during Commodus' reign that political contention began to spike. Likewise, after Gordian III's accession, claim-making decreased precipitously, although the source material becomes exceedingly sparse and unreliable from 238CE onwards: Herodian concludes here; Dio earlier during the reign of Alexander Severus in 229CE. After this point, as Kemezis notes, 'we are at a loss to understand in complete detail the stormy history of the century's middle and later decades.'[24] As the third century progressed and the Empire creaked under the pressures of constant invasion and warfare, emperors spent less and less time in Rome. The city had lost its place as the Empire's political apex long before Constantine moved the capital to Constantinople in 330CE. Therefore, while 238CE is not a definitive date as such, it was the end of an era when contention between the *plebs urbana*, soldiers, Senate, and emperor took place face-to-face with such far-reaching consequences. Second, this study

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[23] Speidel (2016) 359.
[24] Kemezis (2006) 2.

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focuses on contention performed in Rome. While contention was performed elsewhere in the Empire (notably in other large metropoles such as Alexandria or Antioch), Rome was the symbolic and political heart of the Empire, and while its population may have only constituted a tiny proportion of the Empire, the emperor had to retain control of the city and the majority of its political actors to secure legitimacy.

A detailed picture of the cyclical nature of late second-early third century CE contentious politics will be built up across four chapters that unfold in chronological order. The first part of Chapter One is dedicated to introducing the key concepts and definitions of contentious politics that will support the analysis of collective behaviour in the following chapters. The second section will establish clear links between theory and evidence, offering a detailed analysis of the imperial political system and its political actors. The demonstrable connections between legitimacy and moral economy, spectacle spaces and contentious performances, and the underlying power of hidden transcripts before 180CE will provide a comparative framework for later chapters.

Chapter Two investigates how exogenous factors and regime change provided opportunities for 'early risers' to make contentious claims under Commodus. A sharp escalation of political conflict in 193CE shifted political opportunity structures, allowing the deployment of collective action frames and innovative mass protests around questions of imperial legitimacy and justice, although Septimius Severus provided a period of normalisation and containment in terms of collective action. His decision to favour the military, however, weakened senatorial and popular legitimation structures, making it harder for his successors to apportion state resources and retain the support of one group without losing the consensus of others.

Chapter Three maps the formation of opposing civilian and military collective identities after the death of Severus. As the old equilibrium between the Senate, military, urban plebs, and emperor was replaced with a military dictatorship, the hierarchies, norms, and identities attached to the previous *status quo* also shifted. Each political actor faced additional threats or opportunities depending on which side of the power equation they occupied. Some mobilised to either expand or protect their benefits, and collective identities, and the

boundaries that separated groups from each other became more salient as a result. The second part of this chapter will analyse the violent outcomes of these framing and identity processes that included a politicisation of separate civilian and military identities.

Chapter Four details how the themes identified in the preceding chapters converged to produce the violent and innovative contention of 238CE. Collective action framing, new legitimacy claims, and shifts in opportunity structures all played vital roles in opening political space for new and independent centres of power. A constructed contrast between soldier and civilian, 'barbarian' and Roman led to an outpouring of hidden transcripts and violent contention as opportunities opened for resistance. In the space between opposing identities where only one group could emerge victorious, each traditional claimant-object pairing – emperor-people, Senate-people, people-praetorians – turned violent in what ultimately became a zero-sum game.

Chapter Five contains a brief overview of the key developments associated with the late second-early third century contentious cycle, in which urban claims shifted substantially from mostly contained contention to entirely transgressive forms of collective action including the riot. Although the increase in rioting can be attributed in part to changing political opportunity structures, three related processes also contributed: the declining frequency of imperial consensus rituals, the autocratic, closed and militaristic nature of early third century regimes, and changes in claimant-object pairs. Secondly, the sustained nature of the interaction between the people and the regime and other political actors indicates that a short lived social movement emerged during the violence of 238CE.

(iii)   Sources

The three most important literary sources for the late second and early third centuries CE are Cassius Dio, Herodian, and the *Historia Augusta*. Although the exact period covered by each narrative differs, all three at least cover the period between the accession of Commodus in 180CE and the end of Alexander Severus' reign in 235CE. As much of the epigraphical and numismatic evidence, although useful, forms part of the official script and therefore reflects the aims and ideologies of each imperial regime, the literary sources remain our best available evidence for the contentious events of the time. Together, Dio and Herodian provide corroborating accounts of substantial political change driven by conflict among Rome's main political actors. As Andrews has noted, the seeming corroboration of two contemporary narratives is a rare phenomenon at any point in the ancient world, and their shared outlook has therefore been highly influential regarding modern evaluations of the period.[25]

A second-generation senator, Dio had a successful political career including two consulships in 205/6 and 229CE. His eighty-book *Roman History* covered events from Rome's foundation down to his second consulship in 229CE. Unfortunately, most of what we have is only preserved in epitomes by Byzantine monks John Xiphilinus and John Zonaras in the eleventh and twelfth centuries respectively. A separately preserved manuscript (the *Codex Vaticanus*) however gives us nearly all of Book 79 and the start of Book 80, covering the rise and fall of Macrinus and parts of the preceding and following reigns.[26] Dio's perspective is instrumental, as he was an eyewitness to many of the events in his later books. He stresses his diligent approach in gathering accurate information:

> I also will narrate events from this point, or as many of them as is necessary, just as they became known to the public (ὥς που καὶ δεδήμωται)**,** whether as they really happened or some other way (εἴτ᾽ ὄντως οὕτως εἴτε καὶ ἑτέρως πως ἔχει). In addition, however, something of my own opinion will be added where possible, from the great amount that I have read, heard and seen (ἀνέγνων ἢ καὶ ἤκουσα ἢ καὶ

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[25] Andrews (2019) 15, 191.
[26] Kemezis (2006) 12. For a summary of the state of preservation of Dio, see Millar (1964) 1-4.

εἶδον) that allows me to form a judgement over and above the general rumour
(μᾶλλον ἢ τὸ θρυλούμενον)[27]

Dio's proximity to imperial politics has led to his reputation as a reliable witness, but his narrative cannot be adequately understood without appreciating how strongly he self-identified as a member of the senatorial order.[28] In Dio's eyes, the Senate and the continuity and tradition it stood for were the essential parts of what it meant to be a Roman.[29] He also displays an anti-military bias, not surprising given the rise of soldiers at the expense of the old senatorial guard, and his struggle with the Praetorian Guard near the end of his public career.

We only have one surviving work from Herodian: his eight-book history that covers events from the death of Marcus Aurelius to the sole accession of Gordian III in 238CE.[30] Unlike Dio, we have little exact information regarding Herodian's career. The only clue Herodian directly provides is that he was involved 'in imperial and public service.' It is usually agreed that he was not a senator and was therefore probably employed in the lower tiers of the imperial administration.[31] Like Dio, he claimed to have been an eyewitness to some events and was hostile to the ascendency of military power.[32] However, if Dio was concerned with the senatorial experience of contentious social change, Herodian's focus was on the changing dynamics of imperial power, and the conspiracies, conflicts and crises that shaped the political landscape. For instance, he expands narrative time around the political events he sees as pivotal. Book 2 is almost wholly concerned with the few months of extreme crisis

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[27] Cass. Dio 53.19.6.
[28] Clifford Ando's comments are representative of current historiographical attitudes when he describes Dio as 'a remarkably well- placed observer,' and 'a diligent researcher', who proves himself to be 'an exceptionally clear-headed and percipient observer of imperial government.' Ando (2012) 19; Andrews (2019) 12.
[29] Kemezis (2006) 8.
[30] For the debate on composition date: see Kemezis (2006) 240-244; Sidebottom (1997) 271-276 (including an extensive bibliography on earlier discussions of the date). Polley (2003) rebuts Sidebottom's dating.
[31] Hdn. 1.2.5; Ward (2011) 6. Alföldy (1989) 255-63, argues that Herodian was most likely from western Asia Minor and lists other posited backgrounds (Greek, Egyptian (Alexandria) and Syrian) with further bibliography. For the western Asia Minor view, see also Whittaker (1969) xxvi- vii.
[32] Hdn. 1.1.3, 2.15.6. Herodian claims that he only uses corroborated evidence (*historia*), and deliberately contrasts his evidence to the *historia* (1.1.1) of writers who incorporate *muthos* in order to generate pleasure and a reputation for education (*paideia*). Several times Herodian explicitly connects the soldiers with *tyrannis* (*e.g.* 2.5.1, 2.6.2, 7.1.3).

in 193CE; most of Book 7 and all of Book 8 are devoted to the events of 238CE. In contrast, the first decade of peaceful rule under Severus is hurried through in a few sentences.[33] Criticism of Herodian has long been the norm.[34] Whether it is warranted depends on how one intends to interpret the information and viewpoints he espouses. *Quellenforschung* dominates the modern studies of Herodian, and while it is clear that he used Dio on a variety of occasions, he also had independent source material and eyewitness evidence.[35] Furthermore, while Dio's narrative is instrumental in reconstructing government policy and the position of elites, contentious politics, as we shall see, is most often generated by the unofficial script. 'It is said' (*legousi*, *phasi*) frequently occurs in Herodian's descriptions of events, and his incorporation of rumour and opinion helps us to reconstruct the hidden transcripts that propelled popular political contention.[36]

There are also significant temporal and spatial elements of Herodian's narrative unremarked on by Dio that reveal essential information on how contentious episodes unfolded in the city. In sections where the narrative expands, the actions of many political actors and their movement through and within Rome's civic spaces are described in detail. Alföldy perhaps sums up the value of Herodian's work the best when he states that his history, 'notwithstanding his lack of exactness in reporting facts, is our best source for the views of the lower social groups about history in the mid-third century.'[37] Certainly, for the later years under consideration, Herodian is to be preferred. Dio spent much of Severus Alexander's reign away from Rome and was not an eyewitness to events that occurred in the city. His history also finishes at the beginning of Alexander's Parthian campaign around

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[33] Andrews (2019) 195; Hidber (2007) 210. Chronological span of each book: Book 1=13 years; Book 2=6 months; Book 3=17 years; Book 4=7 years; Book 5=5 years; Book 6=13 years; Book 7=3 years; Book 8=approx. 3 months.

[34] Hohl (1954) 5, dubs Herodian 'the Levantine wind-bag;' Šašel Kos (1986) 282 calls him a 'mediocre recorder,' while Echols (1961) 6, claims his history is 'repetitive and derivative.' Nor has Herodian's historical analysis fared any better, with Kemezis (2014) 24, describing it as 'superficial and banal,' and Sidebottom (1998) 2812, pronouncing Herodian's understanding of history as 'neither profound nor original...[but] at least it is coherent.' The most extensive summary of recent responses to Herodian is found in Hidber (2006) 45-71.

[35] Sidebottom (1998) 2780-2, 2786. Herodian claims to have used material such as the speeches and writings of Marcus Aurelius (1.2.3), the writings of those who wrote about Marcus Aurelius (1.2.5), and the autobiography of Severus (2.9.4).

[36] See Whittaker (1969) xxxii-xxxv for a good discussion on Herodian's use of rumour, material evidence and eye-witness information.

[37] Alföldy (2014) 95.

229CE.[38] Herodian may be particularly hostile towards Maximinus, but considering that he was likely resident in Rome during his reign, his bias may reflect lived experience as much as his obvious prejudice against 'barbarians.' His vivid narrative of these years is therefore a probable eyewitness account of what was a culmination of long-simmering social tensions between rich and poor, Senate and plebs, and soldier and civilian.

The third source, the *Historia Augusta*, is a series of thirty imperial lives beginning with Hadrian and ending with Carus and his sons (around 285CE). It claims to be the work of six different authors writing under Diocletian and Constantine, although most scholarship now agrees that it is the work of one author writing in the latter half of the fourth century.[39] The unreliability of this work is well-noted; Syme dubbed it, 'without question or rival the most enigmatic work that antiquity has transmitted.'[40] While some of the *Lives* appear to be mainly fiction, those covering Hadrian through to Caracalla appear to be based on reliable source material, like the lost imperial biographies of Marius Maximus.[41] Fabricated documents, and dubious detail aside, the problems with the *Historia Augusta* are in Ward's opinion, 'nowhere near as numerous as the proposed solutions.'[42] It is the most complete Latin source for the period, and it is useful where there is supporting literary or archaeological evidence.[43]

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[38] Cass. Dio 80.1.2: 'Thus far I have described events with as much accuracy as I could in every case, but for subsequent events I have not found it possible to give an accurate account, for the reason that I did not spend much time in Rome.'
[39] Syme (1972). For recent scholarship on the *SHA*, see Savino (2017); Rohrbacher (2016); Thomson (2012).
[40] Syme (1971) 1.
[41] Kulikowski (2007) 244-256; Barnes (1978).
[42] Ward (2011) 8-9.
[43] Hekster (2008) 8: Recent finds of coins minted by the usurper Domitian II who had, until these coins were found, been thought to be a fabrication of the *Historia Augusta* (*Gall*. 2.6*)* show that one can also be overcautious.

Chapter 1: What are they shouting about? Contentious politics and Rome

Theoretical framework

Whether one looks at a cheering crowd, demonstration, riot, civil war, or revolution, the mechanisms and processes behind each are similar across both culture and time. We can compare episodes within the Arab Spring of the early 2010s, the anti-slavery movement in 18th century England, and the political violence of Late Republican Rome, and while each may indeed have had very different goals and outcomes, there are still clear parallels between them. Each time frame contained clustered episodes of public contention by networks of ordinary people who utilised existing forms of collective action and created new ones by taking advantage of political opportunities, space, and collective identity to advance their claims.[44]

The literature on the causes of collective action offers two broad theories: one grievance-based, the other political-processes. Grievance-based theories posit that it is perceived grievances related to political or economic factors such as structural inequality that create a gap between expectations and reality that generate resentment and feelings of solidarity and thus cause 'justice seeking' collective action.[45] Political-process theories, on the other hand, contend that perceived grievances are a more or less permanent feature of the political landscape and cannot fully explain why collective action occurs in some places and times, but not others. Instead, these theories attribute variations in collective behaviour to the political environment, opportunities and resource availability.[46] That does not mean we should understand perceptions of opportunity and grievance as two mutually competing categories, but political-process theory can provide a clearer framework for explaining how grievances can be translated into collective action. Contentious politics is a political-process theory that also accounts for the role that grievances, emotion and identity play in political conflict. It is defined by Tilly, Tarrow, and McAdam as; 'public, collective, episodic interactions among makers of claims when a) at least some of the interaction adopts non-

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[44] Tilly and Tarrow (2015) 4.
[45] Taydas, Enia, and James (2011) 2631.
[46] Shadmeh (2014) 621.

institutional forms, b) at least one government is a claimant, and object of claims, or a party to the claims, and c) the claims would, if realised, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants.'[47]

Essentially, a claim is an irregular form of public political interaction between a claimant and object that includes verbal or physical action as part of the conscious articulation of the claim. Claims run the gamut from the positive and optimistic (cheering, throwing flowers, singing) to the negative and potentially destructive (defacing, attacking, cursing). Non-institutional interaction describes public claim-making where at least some participants involve themselves for the first time as political actors and/or employ some innovative form of collective action.[48] Routine politics such as voting or non-competitive elections within an authoritarian regime are institutionalised, regular components of a political system, so contentious politics encompasses the behaviour that falls outside these boundaries.[49] A publicly presented petition by people who do not usually identify themselves as political actors is an example of an episodic, non-institutional, and thus contentious, form of political interaction. Contentious politics, then, brings together three important elements of every-day social life: contention, collective action and politics. Separately, these three elements can be inconsequential and routine but when they converge, they take on great significance.

Claims can also be categorised as contained or transgressive. Contained contention occurs when established political actors employ recognisable and permitted means of interacting with their government. Depending on the time and place, such contention encompasses many different forms of interaction, such as acclamations, pro-government rallies or even certain forms of protest. In general, though, contained forms of claim-making usually neither rock the boat nor elicit significant governmental change. Transgressive contention, on the other hand, falls outside of an institutional framework and occurs when at least some parties employ innovative collective action, a term that includes claims, objects, new political actors, methods of collective self-representation or means that are either

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[47] Tilly (2006) 121. For the evolution of the field and related approaches, see McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2009) 7-14.

[48] Tilly and Tarrow (2015) 5; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2002) 7.

[49] Gomza (2014) 56.

unprecedented or forbidden by the regime in question.[50] It is important to note that contentious politics often overlap with conventional forms of political expression, and undoubtedly most episodic, non-institutional political interaction falls under the umbrella of contained contention. However, it is episodes of transgressive contention that are understood as being crucial in significant short-term political and social change, principally because transgressive contention often arises from existing forms of contained contention (and thus shapes future behaviour), and because it is almost always a response to governmental threats, opportunities, and constraints.[51]

(i)   Regimes, frames, and opportunity

In order for contentious politics to occur, there needs to be some relationship that exists between claimants and their government. These relationships hinge on the type of access that a political actor has to a government and its resources: for instance, polity members who enjoy routine access have a different location in a political setting than other political actors who lack routine access and other structural advantages.[52] Thus, a government must negotiate different relationships with groups that it claims to represent, and the recurrent interactions between each constitutes a regime.[53] The form that a regime takes is highly variable – Aristotle in his *Politics* enumerated at least six different types, and although he restricted his discussion of political contention to revolutions, he saw regimes as having their own characteristic forms of contention.[54] It is worth noting Aristotle here even if only in passing, for his and Plato's conception of political systems loomed large in Graeco-Roman thought: the notion of a 'mixed constitution' in terms of Rome's political system occupied Polybius and Cicero centuries later.[55] Such categorisation and dissection gave later imperial regimes a form of guidance, for no emperor wanted his rule to be perceived as tyrannical. Nevertheless, while traditional concepts of governance supplied many of the entrenched means by which rulers and subjects engaged in contentious politics, regime type still

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[50] McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2002) 7-8.
[51] McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2002) 8.
[52] McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2002) 12. Another category: outside actors (groups or individuals, including other governments, that are outside the jurisdiction of the government), is not applicable to the period covered in this study.
[53] Tilly (2006) 19.
[54] Arist. *Pol*. 3.7; Tilly (2015) 424-5.
[55] Pl. *Lg*. 3.680a3-e4, 681c7-d5, 681d7-9, 683a4-8. Mixed constitution: Pl. *Lg*. 4.756e-757a; Polyb. 6; Cic. *Rep*. 1.54, 3.46-7.

strongly affected its rulers' approach to generating and controlling claim-making, particularly of the transgressive variety.[56] Political regimes differ not only in the types of political actors and relationships they encompass but also in the degree to which any particular individual, the ruler, has power. In Imperial Rome, power was personalised, and executive power concentrated.[57] Access to the corridors of power was highly dependent on who the emperor was and whether he preferred to rule cooperatively or in a more closed, autocratic fashion. The arbitrary and potentially restrictive nature of imperial politics meant that any successful claim-making by Roman political actors relied on three key mechanisms: framing, repertoires of contention, and political opportunity structures.

Framing is a process by which political actors locate, identify, and label issues that are important to them. For example, one section of a population may view an issue or event as unjust, another group may view it in opposite terms, and often how something is framed has much to do with existing expectations of how authorities should behave. Truth is less important than perception, and the privileging of one particular perspective over another is an integral part of power relations. Furthermore, the meanings that people attach to specific events are, as Janis Grimm argues, above all discursively mediated and thus traceable in their effects through an analysis of contentious discourses.[58] As the diagnostic and prognostic abilities of a recognisable frame, such as justice, not only identifies a problem and offers a solution, it can redefine as unjust and immoral what was previously seen as unfortunate but perhaps tolerable. Successful framing can, therefore, motivate collective behaviour since a perception of injustice can inspire individuals to act collectively in response to the threat.[59] Framing theory also shows how grievance and opportunity, public and private are inextricably linked by acknowledging how culture and emotion can drive mobilisation in conjunction with resource availability and opportunity.

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[56] Tilly (2006) 20.
[57] Márquez (2016) 62.
[58] Grimm (2016).
[59] Khawaja (1993), 47-71; Benford and Snow (2000) 615; Snow and Benford (1992) 137. In Snow and Bedford's conceptualisation, framing 'refers to an interpretative schemata that simplifies and condenses the 'world out there' by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one's own present or past environment.'

Consequently, how frames and grievances are articulated as collective action is grounded in the lived experience and memory of participants. In any given time and place, contention is a product of learned, culturally grounded performances. Theoretically, there is an infinite array of actions and spaces a collective could employ in the making of claims, yet people tend to stick with a limited number of performances that are known and able to be executed by participants and are considered culturally acceptable and expected behaviours by the rest of society. Episodes of contention create a history – a collective memory – of interaction between parties providing each with information about the propensities and tactics of the other. Therefore, effective claim-making relies on a recognisable relation to its setting, including framing, existing social relations, and previous uses of that form of claim. This 'script' of recognisable action defines a contentious performance, and its repetition between the same claimant-object pairs, like the theatre, is a repertoire that defines the nature of that contention in time and space. Accordingly, a repertoire is simultaneously a cultural and structural concept, involving not only what people do during episodes of contention, but how they know what to do and what others expect them to do, which restricts most claim-making to established repertoires and performances.[60]

How groups of people draw on repertoires depends on the flexibility of available performances – repertoires can be weak, strong, rigid, or even non-existent.[61] What identifies the relative strength of a repertoire is the familiarity of a past performance and the likelihood that such a performance will be repeated in a similar situation. Certainly, concessions by a government to a specific action make it easier for actors to press claims using a similar method.[62] Since a repertoire varies by time, place, social class, the issue under contention and the reasons that bring a crowd together, it can tell us much about the social, economic and political context and the interests of involved groups, as collective claim-making has a coherent relationship to both the social organisation and routine politics attached to the physical environment.[63] This relationship also means that contention can transform alongside political and demographic changes. Tilly's general argument is that in

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[60] Tarrow (1998) 32.
[61] For a discussion of repertoire strengths, see Tilly and Tarrow (2015) 15.
[62] Tilly (2006) 39, 57.
[63] Tilly (2006) 51.

regimes with relatively stable governments, strong, flexible repertoires prevail, but during periods of political, economic or social crises, we can expect to find a degree of innovation in claim-making performances.[64] In fact, even established repertoires can be become modular, in that a performance usually confined to a specific claimant object pairing can in times of instability be employed against different targets, in different locations, and for different issues.[65]

(ii) Political opportunity structures

Since a repertoire fundamentally exists because of a shared history between claimants and objects, the success or failure of actions rests, in many cases, upon the level of mobilisation and organisation of the claimants, the likelihood of repression, and the vulnerability of claimants to that repression. Political opportunity structure (POS) is an approach that argues that the success or failure of contentious politics is affected by the opening or closing of opportunities. Tarrow defines political opportunities as the 'consistent but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national signals to social or political actors which either encourage or discourage them to use their internal resources to form social movements.' [66] The nature of threats and opportunities depend on several factors summarised in the table on the following page:

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[64] Tilly (2006) 116; Tilly and Tarrow (2015) 12.
[65] See Wada (2012) 544-571 for a comprehensive discussion.
[66] Tarrow (1998) 54.

Fig 1: Political opportunity structures[67]

Category	Increasing Opportunity	Increasing Threat
openness of regime to new actors	*regime becomes more open*	*regime closing down*
multiplicity of independent centres of power within a regime	*increasing divisions among elite, new power centres form*	*increasing solidarity of regime members*
stability of political alignments	*rising instability*	*increasing stability*
availability of allies	*new allies available*	*potential allies disappear*
repression/facilitation	*increasing facilitation, decreasing repression*	*decreasing facilitation, increasing repression*
decisive changes to above	*acceleration in any of the above*	*deceleration in any of the above*

As the table outlines, opportunity structures either inhibit or facilitate collective action by expanding opportunities for a group by lowering the costs of action and animating existing social networks and collective identities into action around shared issues.[68] Changes in opportunity structures strongly affect the viability of different performances and repertoires: essentially, the character of political contention. Shifting threats and opportunities according to political instability, availability of allies, changes in governmental openness, and repression, for example, encourages some actions and discourages others.[69] Tarrow neatly sums up this relationship between political opportunity and episodes of contentious performances:

> People engage in contentious politics when patterns of political opportunities and
> constraints change and then, by strategically employing a repertoire of collective
> action, create new opportunities, which are used by others in widening cycles of

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[67] Tilly and Tarrow (2015) 59.
[68] Tarrow (1998) 20.
[69] McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2002) 43-45.

contention…The outcomes of such waves of contention depend not on the justice of the cause or the persuasive power of any single movement, but on their breadth and on the reactions of the elites and other groups.[70]

In general, changes in political opportunity structures induce those in power towards more rigid repertories and claimants to more flexible ones, as, once a performance gains visible effectiveness, it can become a ready model for future events. From a government's point of view, contentious repertoires can have a serious impact on its programme. Repression or facilitation of contention either by prescribing, tolerating or forbidding performances therefore aids the formation of political opportunity structures, and how a government deals with contention obviously depends on its capacity to manage said structures. The interrelated network of threats, opportunities, and responses by both claimants and governments means that a contentious repertoire is uniquely tied to its context: the social and political identities of claimants, the character of the regime, identity and framing processes. Repertoires of contention, then, are sensitive not only to learning and innovation during times of political crisis, but also to the history, culture, and transformation of regimes.

All these factors explain why collective action does not necessarily occur every time political actors hold a grievance or an issue is framed as unjust. For example, although there were attested food shortages on average every five years during the Republican and early imperial period, we only have three explicit references to food riots and sixteen total episodes of contention relating to food issues during this time.[71] Opportunity structures and framing processes provided actors with the ability to mobilise at specific points, while threats constrained action at other times. When collective action did occur, extant repertoires guided participant's actions towards those that were culturally understandable and thus more likely to be successful. For example, when Republican crowds made public claims relating to food issues, they intimidated politicians, threw stones, and occupied

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[70] Tarrow (1998) 7, 19.
[71] Garnsey (1988) 193-217; Virlouvet (1985) 73-4.

symbolic spaces in and around the Forum, actions that mirrored the open air, communal political processes of the time.[72]

As a methodology, contentious politics allows an analysis of collective behaviour to go deeper than a mere descriptive discussion. Instead, it provides the means to reconstruct narratives of political conflict, a useful tool when dealing with difficult or sparse source material. Certainly, by situating collective behaviour, especially subaltern action, within a contentious politics framework, we are able to gain a better comprehension of the cultural, spatial, and temporal factors that shaped the interaction between political actors, and as a result, the ability to relate the resulting narratives to wider historical themes.[73] As we shall see, urban Rome had specific, recognisable contentious performances and repertoires that were reflective of collective memory and identity, regime type, and evolving political opportunity structures. While the extensive and diverse field of contentious politics encompasses some structures and mechanisms not directly pertinent to the Roman context, political contention theory is a valid and appropriate method for analysing the nature of collective action in Rome. Having outlined contentious politics as a methodology, the next step is to apply the framework to the imperial political system. The constituent components of Roman regimes, the cultural importance of legitimacy claims and 'moral economy,' and the spatial and social templates that formed 'hidden transcripts' together motivated and shaped many of Rome's recorded contentious performances. By understanding these processes, relationships, and power dynamics, we will be able to identify, categorise and comprehend the scale and impact of political contention between 180-238CE.

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[72] For instance, physical intimidation: Cic. *Har. resp*. 22-26; *QFr*. 2.1.3; *Att.* 4.1.6-7; *Dom.* 6-7, 10-16; Cass. Dio 39.9.2; 39.27.3-29; Plut. *Pomp*. 48.7, 49.2; Asc. 48C. Stone-throwing: Plut. *Cic*. 30; Cic. *De or*. 2.197; Asc. 58C. Occupation of space: Cic. *QFr*. 2.1; *Sest*. 34, 85, 79-80; *Mil*. 38; *Red. sen*. 7.
[73] Hanagan, Page Moch and te Brake (1998) ix-x.

Imperial regimes, capacity, and 'democracy'

> Capital cities are important places; it is where decisions are made, where
> governments are installed and where governments lose their power…[They are] are
> settings of power, exercise and contest… [and] are the centre of political debate
> about what needs to happen in the country [and] where national differences are
> made. As seats of power, capital cities owe their site to the spatiality of power
> – Göran Therborn.[74]

Understanding who had political power and how it was exercised is vital to explaining how
political opportunity structures and collective identities worked in the performance of
contentious Roman politics. The 'inner core' of the Empire comprised the city of Rome,
which housed and was directly governed by a whole set of political bodies and office
holders. It was the seat of the emperor. The imperial court, Senate, and Praetorian Guard
were all located there. Despite the vast expansion of its dominions, Rome kept its
constitutional form as a city state; only Rome was called *urbs*.[75] As the challengers of 69CE
understood well, obtaining control of the city was the key to controlling the Empire, no
matter where an emperor may be acclaimed. Accordingly, Rome was the heart of
contentious politics.

In his *Res Gestae*, Augustus proclaimed that he had won the consent of all the people
(*consensus universorum*), and his political revolution successfully constructed political
stability as part of a centralised, autocratic regime that appropriated the vast majority of the
political powers previously held by elite and non-elite alike.[76] By the time of the Antonines,
the emperor had almost complete control of all imperial ceremonies, games, public
building, and material distributions in the city. Such control can be quantified in terms of
regime capacity and relative levels of democracy, and as any good Aristotelian would
expect, both had a profound effect on the quality of Rome's contentious politics.[77] Regime
capacity is defined as the degree of control a government and its agents exercise over

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[74] Therborn (2006) 513, 521.
[75] Neumeister (1993) 22.
[76] *RG* 34.
[77] Tilly (2006) 28.

people, activities, and resources within their jurisdiction. Democracy, meanwhile, is measured by the breadth and equality of polity membership, and the degree to which the collective will of polity members can influence governmental personnel, policy, and resources.[78] Accordingly, mechanisms such as direct rule, capacity to monitor and repress, ability to carry out intended policies, and standardisation of state practices and identities will produce a high capacity regime. While the capacity of imperial regimes did fluctuate, on the whole, they clustered toward the high end of the spectrum, especially when compared to the low capacity nature of the Republic. Each regime's ability to mobilise labour and resources through a centralised administration, maintain domestic order, and standardise practices and identities that tied inhabitants together under one cultural umbrella, bolstered Rome's domestic capacity. [79]

Capacity can be increased without the outward form of government appearing to change drastically, but democracy levels are far more sensitive to tradition and models. The Principate was a 'non democracy,' in terms of political inequalities, but its reality was masked by the retention of some of the oligarchic norms and institutions of the Republic. When Augustus formalised his tenure of the Republican power of *tribunicia potestas* in 23BCE, he assumed leadership of the Senate and the role as protector of the people. Membership of the leading priestly colleges along with the assumption of the title of *pontifex maximus* gave succeeding emperors the right to appoint other pontifices, and responsibility for the entire Roman state cult whose collective ritual practices quickly became centred upon the emperor and his family. This political and religious power was also combined with the emperor's possession of *imperium maius*. As chief priest, commander in chief, head of Senate, and patron of the plebs, the emperor thus dominated all three elements of the old Roman constitution, but this domination was cloaked in familial imagery that presented the emperor as father rather than tyrant.[80]

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[78] Tilly (2006) 78-9.
[79] Jenkins (1995) 23. He also includes one more variable, international support, a variable more applicable to the modern context. See also Márquez (2016) 5-6.
[80] Pollard and Berry (2012) 37-38; Stevenson (2015) 196.

The low degree of democracy inherent in imperial regimes remained relatively static over the years. Polity membership was restricted, and to a great degree relied upon the emperor's favour. In terms of collective consultation, the relationship between the Senate and emperor was publicly one of co-operation and respect. In reality, power was concentrated in the hands of the emperor, codified by the time of Vespasian if not earlier. The *lex de imperio Vespasiani* formally provided the emperor with the backdated power to do 'whatever he deems to be in the interests of the commonwealth or in accordance with the dignity of Roman affairs, both secular and religious, public and private.'[81] To be fair, the *lex* did not innovate or expand the emperor's powers, but Vespasian's act certainly codified the emperor's expansive legal authority. By the mid-second century, the long established senatorial procedure whereby the emperor would address the Senate, followed by a debate then the crafting of a motion and decree had been abandoned. An inscription detailing Marcus Aurelius' response to a petition reveals there was no deliberation. The emperor put forward an omnibus motion, which the Senate immediately approved.[82] Real influence had long been entrusted instead to counsellors and court insiders who served at the behest of the emperor, and the centralisation of all authority, ceremonial and practical, in the hands of the emperor was complete.

Modern research has shown that strong capacity tends to enhance regime stability in both autocracies and democracies, but what primarily matters in autocracies is who has the monopoly on violence.[83] In terms of repressive capacity, emperors had active urban military and policing units. The imperial bodyguard (*equites singulares*) looked after the emperor's personal security. The urban cohorts were primarily tasked with policing duties. It was the Praetorian Guard, though, who would become the most powerful. Initially, three out of a total of nine cohorts, each of approximately five hundred praetorians were stationed in the city under the command of one or two prefects who directly answered to the emperor.[84] By the close of the second century, the size of praetorian cohorts had swelled to fifteen

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[81] Clause VI: *CIL* 6.930 and 31207=*ILS* 244. The only clauses conferring specific powers on the Princeps that do not list precedents (clauses III and IV) seem to reflect past imperial practice. See Brunt (1977); Griffin (2000) 11-12.
[82] Ando (2012) 9.
[83] Andersen, Møller, Rørbæk, and Skaaning (2014).
[84] Nine cohorts were created in 27/26BCE, numbered I-IX. Two prefects were appointed in 2BCE. Southern (2007) 115.

hundred men, which meant that the soldier-to-civilian ratio in Rome was higher than that in most modern cities.[85] Augustus may have forbidden the soldiers to wear military dress inside the city, but their presence became more visible and forboding under his successors. Under Tiberius all praetorian cohorts were housed together in a new *castra* on the north eastern outskirts of Rome, transforming a praefecture that was in Dio's words 'until now of slight importance' into one that inspired fear in 'everyone.'[86] Indeed, the Guard's rapid assumption of specialised military tasks and various administrative duties such as assisting the *vigiles* in firefighting, and acting as security at the games allowed them a visible and potent degree of power that at times heightened tensions and created conflict with the city's other social groups.

Of course, the rise of the praetorians was inextricably linked with the rise of the army. Vespasian dated the beginning of his reign not from 21 Dec 69CE when the Senate confirmed him as Augustus, but from 1 July when he was acclaimed by his soldiers in Alexandria.[87] That is not to say that soldiers were meant to be deployed as a repressive force in Rome. Only Caligula and Vitellius used soldiers to repress verbal contention in the early imperial period publicly, and their methods were met with hostile incredulity.[88] Nevertheless, the threat of physical violence by an elite military force was apparent not just to the average citizen, but also to those with better resources: the violence of 69CE was ample evidence that the support of the praetorians was crucial even for candidates who had other sources of support.

Why capacity and democracy matters in terms of contentious politics is due to two main reasons. First, the ability of imperial regimes to influence the everyday lives of their subjects and enforce policy meant they could both generate and control contentious politics. Such oversight impacted repertoire content, since a fear of repression, relative levels of regime openness, and coherence of polity members all determined which, if any, contentious

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[85] Fuhrmann (2012) 118 claims that by 6BCE Augustus had 1 soldier per 100 urban residents. To compare, in the 1890s, the ratio in Paris was 1/285; Berlin 1/313; and both London and Vienna approx. 1/435. Washington D.C in 1998 had a ratio of 1/150. Roman 'police' coverage also exceeded that of Singapore and Hong Kong in the 1980s.
[86] Tac. *Ann*. 4.2; Cass. Dio 57.19.6; Bédoyère (2017) 65; Southern (2007) 117.
[87] Omissi (2018) 7.
[88] Cass. Dio 59.28.11; Suet. *Vit*. 14.

performances were worth launching. Secondly, the administrative structures and repressive instruments needed to maintain regime capacity meant that those who filled said structures and instruments would be consequential political actors. If, however, one does not have full control over repressive capacity, independent centres of power can develop, opening political opportunities for potential challengers. The establishment of a separate, fortified and highly visible praetorian *castra* meant that the independence and latent power of the Guard was now expressed spatially. It also meant that the force was under the direct control of their equestrian prefects, an office that quickly emerged as one of the dominant administrative and advisory positions in the state. A prefect could assume considerable influence over civil apparatus if an emperor was away, indisposed or disinclined to personally oversee judicial affairs or other urban matters. Moreover, as the conduit between the praetorians and the imperial court, prefects could use their influence with both sides to gain personal power and benefits.

Unsurprisingly, as praetorian prefects played intimate roles in the accession or death of several emperors (Tiberius, Caligula, Nero, Otho, Domitian, and Nerva certainly), their soldiers also inserted themselves into the political sphere. They played a decisive role in Nero's death by refusing to accompany the emperor into exile, and their opposition to Galba and Vitellius, and support for Otho were pivotal. The mutiny of the Guard in 97CE (spearheaded by their prefect Casperius Aelianus), in part to secure the execution of Domitian's assassins was referred to by Pliny as a 'snatching' of Nerva's authority; it was surely no coincidence that the ageing emperor officially adopted Trajan as his heir a few months later to safeguard his position.[89] The actions of the Guard against Nerva also demonstrated that the unit had gained a sense of collective identity independent from the politics of their prefects. Such independence was a threat to any emperor since his main urban repressive capacity could be used by others against him, or it could act as a challenger in its own right. It was necessary then, not merely to 'own' capacity, but to retain it by winning consensus from Rome's main political actors and consequently establishing a legitimate right to control all state resources. Accordingly, while the relatively low democracy and high capacity of imperial regimes influenced where and when contentious

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[89] Plin. *Pan*. 6.1.

politics could be performed in Rome, how the relationships between the city's main political actors were constructed and maintained is a crucial component of understanding how political opportunity structures could either facilitate or constrain contention.

Legitimacy, consensus, and the imperial moral economy

As with contentious performances, political opportunity has a strong cultural component since opportunities for collective action have two sides: an institutional side which refers to the access actors have to the political system and how power is structured and a discursive side which refers to the public visibility and legitimacy of political actors and their claims and identities. The downside of a restrictive regime is that those denied real access to power, and in the case of Rome, the overwhelming majority of inhabitants, must be persuaded to cooperate. The discursive strategies of emperors then were crucial in constraining opportunities for popular contention.

In the larger political equation, elites and urban troops made up only a small fraction of the people resident in Rome. An emperor may have cohorts of praetorians on hand, but Rome was a city of approximately one million inhabitants who had a long history of political participation. Their acceptance was vital for an emperor to establish and retain control of the city and by extension, the empire. Paul Veyne articulated the relationship between Rome's major players as a triangle connecting the emperor, *plebs urbana*, and Senate, although Egon Flaig is closer to the mark in his conception of power relations as a parallelogram between emperor, *plebs urbana*, Senate, and citizen soldiers.[90] Perceptions were everything, and a fine juggling act was needed to win and retain the *consensus universorum* of the city. A constant dialogue developed, both real and symbolic, between the emperor and his subjects in which each interacted with each in a highly prescribed manner. As part of this communicative process, the emperor dispensed specialised benefits in return for public displays of consensus, upon which acceptance ultimately rested.[91]

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[90] Flaig (2015) 89; Veyne (1976) 589-729.
[91] Owen and Gildenhard (2013).

Unquestionably, Augustus' claim to have achieved the total consensus of the citizen body compelled his successors to adhere to behaviours considered to be both 'legitimate' and 'traditional.'[92] A mark of his success was that the legitimacy of his Principate was not contested during the first three centuries of imperial rule. Even when an emperor was overthrown, the autocratic system remained undisturbed. This sense of legitimacy that underpinned the regime as a whole can be termed as diffuse support. Generally viewed as a continuum, when diffuse support is strongly held, people feel themselves as an integral part of the political system and believe it has a rightful claim to their loyalty.[93] Such support is critical – a large body of theoretical research conducted since the 1960s suggests a strong association between diffuse support for the governmental system and political stability.[94]

The Principate as a political system was thus considered legitimate by all its participant actors, but there is an important distinction to be made between the enduring legitimacy of the imperial office itself, and the acceptability of the person who occupied it.[95] Legitimacy has long been understood as the uncontested right to govern, and the ability to do so without the possibility of this right being revoked. The emperor's subjects could only bestow this right, and the military, Senate and urban plebs all expressly declared their consent as part of the accession process.[96] Acclamation by troops was the first and most politically important act of legitimacy, followed by the legal bestowal of powers by the Senate and finally, the approval of the populace. Despite their role in the accession process, the Senate and people in reality had little say in who would be emperor; their acclamations were an acknowledgement of a decision already made by soldiers.

This was only the first step, however; legitimacy had a finite shelf life. In a practical sense, it could best be understood as a quality of the relationship between an emperor and his subjects, centred around popular expectations that his regime served a common good or at least met cultural norms of how power should be exercised. Whenever an emperor lost his

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[92] For an excellent discussion on this topic, see Lobur (2008).
[93] Citrin, McClosky, Shanks, and Sniderman (1975) 3; Easton (1975) 445; Seligson (1983) 3.
[94] Seligson (1983) 1.
[95] This is a distinction made by Egon Flaig who differentiates between the secure legitimacy of the imperial system and the 'acceptance' each emperor had to win from his subjects. Flaig (2015) 82.
[96] Flaig (2015) 82, 85.

'right to rule', that right was not taken away from him by the decision of an institution; he lost the acceptance of Rome's political actors by being unable to craft or maintain persuasive legitimacy claims. The influential research of Max Weber has been the starting point for much of our understanding of legitimacy theory. His framework for understanding legitimacy revolves around three types of authority claims that a regime had to employ to acquire broad acceptance: tradition, positive proclamation, and personal charisma.[97] More recently, Christian von Soest and Julia Grauvogel have elaborated on Weber's criteria, identifying six types of claims, five of which are applicable to the Roman context: foundational myth, ideology, personalism, procedures, and performance.[98] A foundational claim rests upon a ruler, elites, and associated parties acknowledging their roles in the state building process. Ideology-based claims derive from narratives regarding the justice of a given political order. Personalism is akin to Weber's conception of charisma in that personal leadership qualities legitimise a ruler's authority, but von Soest and Grauvogel also view the discursive mechanisms that emphasise a ruler's centrality to notions of national unity, prosperity, and stability as a crucial component of personalism claims. Procedure based claims rely on the following of rule based mechanisms for the transition of power, while performance claims are based on the relative success a ruler has in fulfilling the expectations of his main constituents.[99]

Imperial legitimacy claims encompassed many, if not all, of von Soest and Grauvogel's criteria. The employment of foundational myth, ideology, and the personal characteristics of each emperor were celebrated in architecture, coinage, and art. As commander in chief, religious leader, ultimate patron, and apex member of the social order, the emperor occupied an office created from and nourished by traditional ideologies and hierarchies. Likewise, the performance aspect of legitimacy went hand in hand with personalism. As Andrew Wallace-Hadrill has so amply demonstrated, while some emperors articulated their social distance from the rest of the city through ceremony, most attempted to bridge this gap by acting the part of the *civilis princeps*, thereby retaining a sense of continuity with the

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[97] Weber (1962), 81-83.
[98] von Soest and Grauvogel (2017) 290. The sixth claim, international engagement, is more applicable to a modern or globalist context.
[99] von Soest and Grauvogel (2017) 290-291.

ideals of a Republican past that still lingered in collective memory. Such civility reinforced the traditional social hierarchy through its acknowledgement by the emperor and strengthened his autocracy by implicitly grounding his persona to the existing social structure.[100] In particular, the imperial title of *pater patriae* that positioned the emperor as a father wielding absolute authority, was firmly rooted in traditional conceptions of hierarchy. Indeed, Andreas Alföldi essentially views the title of *pater patriae* as a legitimacy claim that placed Rome's citizens under a child's obligation to his father.[101] This sense of obligation, directly rooted in the concept of *pietas*, had to be bolstered by providing each of Rome's major political actors with specific benefits. The social prestige and public deference accorded to the Senate along with expanded opportunities to seek distinction via higher office for its members earned their base consensus. Although the institutionalised co-operation of the political elite constrained political opportunities and ensured a relatively stable political environment, their tiny size and lack of collective resources meant that senatorial consent and compliance could not entirely grant the regime the legitimacy it needed to rule. The consensus of the praetorians and the urban plebs was far more critical.

The chief mechanism to earn and retain the loyalty of the Guard and wider military was through the gifting of a *donativum* at the beginning of each reign. Unsurprisingly, this cash payment was set according to Augustan standards. Augustus left his praetorians 1,000 *sesterces* in his will, which ensured the Guard's loyalty to his successor Tiberius. Over the years (and after some contested regime transitions), the size of *donativa* increased. By the time of Marcus Aurelius' accession in 160CE, praetorians could expect a whopping payment of 20,000 *sesterces*.[102] As the most elite of the empire's troops, praetorians also received benefits above and beyond the ordinary soldiery. Their pay was double that of the urban cohorts and almost three times that of an average legionary.[103] Each praetorian had the same rank as a centurion in the regular army, as they had the privilege of carrying a

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[100] Wallace-Hadrill (1982) 47, 48.
[101] Stevenson (2015) 189, 196; Alföldi (1971).
[102] Although Marcus Aurelius did refuse to give a *donativum* to the soldiers after the victorious battle against the Marcomanni (Cass. Dio 71.3.3).
[103] Bédoyère (2017) 275. Based on the figures supplied by Tacitus, Dio and Suetonius among other attested sources (Tac. *Ann*. 1.17; Cass. Dio 67.3.5; Suet. *Dom*. 7), Bédoyère calculates that praetorians received 750 *denarii* per year (in quarterly instalments) versus 225 *denarii* for legionaries, and 375 *denarii* for the urban cohorts.

centurion's *vitis*.[104] Later, when emperors found themselves cash poor, the Guard was

often given gifts in kind; food, rations, clothing, and other goods in order to retain their

support. The Guard interpreted these benefits as a tacit recognition of their position as a

consequential political actor as their response to Galba's actions demonstrates. During his

adventus in 68CE, the new emperor stated that he would not pay the expected *donativum*

to the rest of the assembled soldiery. His declaration that he enrolled troops, not bribed

them earned the instant enmity of the soldiers. Without their support, Galba's reign only

lasted seven months. [105] On the surface, the uproar generated by Galba's refusal to pay may

appear to be one of money, but Plutarch's narrative highlights that the soldiers were more

angry about the precedent that the emperor's refusal could set and what this would mean

in terms of political consequences. After all, if future emperors decided not to bestow

largesse, then the praetorians and the broader army would no longer be a recognised

political heavyweight.[106] Their donatives had been enshrined as a military tradition, and

therefore formed part of an emperor's foundational and performance based legitimacy

claims for the Guard and the empire's other soldiers.

How to earn the consensus of the most numerically superior group, the *plebs urbana*, was

more complex. They may have lost their direct involvement in the political process with the

removal of their ability to elect magistrates, but what they could still lay claim to was the

privilege attached to their residence within the Empire's spiritual and political heart. As part

of their ancient patrimony, the city's *plebs urbana* could collectively claim to be

representative of the Roman citizen body as a whole, and they expected unique benefits

over and above those living elsewhere. It was they who directly participated in the political

process during the Republican period, and they continued to benefit from their physical

proximity to the institutions and personnel of government, including the emperor. The

provision of certain social goods for the urban plebs was viewed as a right, and Augustus

took care not only to preserve the benefits the population had received under Republican

governance but extended them in his guise as Rome's chief patron. Non democratic regimes

often keep food and fuel prices artificially low through subsidies and price controls, and the

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[104] Cass. Dio 55.24.8: *vitis*=ῥάβδος.
[105] Suet. *Galb.* 16; Tac. *Hist*. 1.5.
[106] Flaig (2015) 96-7.

cornerstone of the emperor's patronage was the continued provision of the free grain dole (*frumentaria*), and oversight of the open market. Although there was no systematic organisation of the imperial food supply, most emperors took their role of overseer seriously, making structural improvements to the supply chain and *annona* system.[107]

Like the military, the urban populace also received cash payments (*congiaria*). These were usually far less substantial than those given to the praetorians, and were not necessarily given to symbolise the transfer of power, but rather to mark special festivities such as the emperor's birthday, a triumph or coming of age (*tirocinium*) of an imperial heir.[108] Just as the largesse distributed to the soldiers was meant as recognition of their position, so too the *congiarium*: the cash gift had its antecedents in the allotments of oil – *congius* – distributed to the plebs by *triumphatores* in Republican days.[109] Successive emperors followed the Augustan model of benevolence through the spatial and temporal expansion of leisure, regular *congiaria*, the provision of water and grain supplies, and extensive urban building programmes. For example, Vespasian's undertakings for Rome's residents faithfully followed Augustus' template: diligent oversight of the grain supply, gifts, lavish games and entertainments funded from the emperor's pocket, and the construction of civic buildings that linked the Flavians to the legitimacy and topography of the Julio-Claudian regime.[110] In one anecdote Suetonius records that a mechanical engineer had invented a device that could transport heavy columns quickly and cheaply. Vespasian gave the man a considerable reward but refused to use the contraption, declaring that he must feed his people (*plebiculam*).[111] His role as the city's principal patron meant ensuring ongoing employment opportunities so that ordinary people could eat and enjoy the perks of being a resident in

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[107] For example, Claudius promoted winter sailings for grain ships, and attracted traders by offering privileges (Suet. *Claud*. 18). Nero organised an Alexandrian fleet (Sen. *Ep*. 77.1). Trajan promoted state purchases which eased the *annona* (Plin. *Pan*. 29). See Garnsey (1988) 223, 233-235; Rickman (1981) 77-78, 85-6.

[108] Tacitus and Suetonius both note the distinction between the *donativum* and the *congiarium* (Tac. *Ann*. 12.41: '*donativum militi, congiarium plebei;*' Suet. *Ner*. 7: '*...populo congiarum, militi donativum*'). By the second century the term *congiarium* was replaced by the term *liberalitas.* Claudius gave the people 300 *sesterces* in 44CE and 51CE in comparison to the 15,000 he promised the Guard on his accession. This sum appears to have become the custom. Nonetheless, 300 *sesterces* at the time could buy 4 amphorae (275 litres) of wine, 600 one-pound loaves of bread, or 70 bushels (560 litres) of corn: no doubt extremely welcome for many ordinary city dwellers. Bennett (1997) 60.

[109] Bennett (1997) 60-2.

[110] There has been much discussion regarding Vespasian's deliberate attempts to link his regime with that of the Julio-Claudians. See Boyle (2003).

[111] Suet. *Vesp.* 18.

the capital. Of all the benefits of urban residence, the provisions of lavish shows and spectacles was perhaps the most important. Each emperor was expected to put on gladiatorial fights, hunts, theatrical performances and chariot racing to such an extent that the festival calendar ballooned from 77 days under Augustus to nearly 160 days under Claudius.[112] One of Marcus Aurelius' advisors, Marcus Cornelius Fronto, reminded his emperor of the centrality of the shows, employing Trajan as an *exemplum*:

> The emperor did not neglect even actors and the other performers of the stage, circus, or the amphitheatre, knowing as he did that the Roman people are held fast by two things above all, the corn dole and the shows; that the success of a government depends on such amusements as much as more serious things; neglect of serious matters entails the greater loss, neglect of amusements the greater discontent; food largesse is a weaker incentive than shows; by largesses of food only the proletariat on the corn register are conciliated singly and individually, whereas by the shows the whole population is key in good humour.[113]

Providing regular, generous spectacles was, therefore, the primary socio-economic showpiece of the emperor-urban plebs relationship, and was fundamentally, a transactional bid for legitimacy. The formation of an imperial cult and its incorporation in public ceremony could similarly be viewed as a common cultural construct that formed part of the performative, reciprocal moral contract between emperor and subject that was grounded firmly in the context of participant's horizons of expectation.[114] As the games and festivals simultaneously invoked religious, political, and social tradition, they were tangible offerings of foundational, ideological, performance, and personalism legitimacy claims.

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[112] The packed festival calendar was a persistent problem, and periodic purges were required under Caligula, Claudius and Domitian. Due to spiralling imperial expenses, Marcus Aurelius sponsored legislation in 177CE to control expenditure on games and reduced the number of festival days to 135: *CIL* 2.6278=*ILS* 5163; Futrell (2006) 48.

[113] Fronto *Ep.* 2.217.

[114] Gordon (2011) 41. I envisage the imperial cult here as the practice of worshipping an emperor without implying there was a unified cultic practice.

(i)   Contention and the imperial moral economy

Certainly, the expansive measures that emperors took to satisfy urban soldiers and civilians demonstrate that maintaining legitimacy required constant output, and a multifaceted claim was almost wholly dependent on the fulfilment of certain value expectations. Of course, the idea that common goods should be distributed from 'above,' was part of a long established electoral tradition of providing free gifts to potential voters, and the euergetism of Hellenistic elites and monarchs. Plutarch observed that 'rulers serve god for the care and preservation of men in order that, of the excellent gifts which god bestows on mankind, they may distribute some and safeguard others.'[115] This obligation was also covered to some extent by *pietas*, which covered an emperor's fulfillment of the duties owed not just to the gods, but to anyone, including one's subjects. *Pietas* was of central importance to Romans and had long been recognised as a powerful tool in rendering actions as morally legitimate.[116] Emperors who claimed the title of *pater patriae* were explicitly representing themselves as a familial entity providing for the best interests of his subjects. Macro politics mirrored micro politics, and while the emperor was obligated to provide for his 'family', the bonds of interdependence that were part of the obligations of *pietas* meant that his 'children' had reciprocal obligations to obey and support his power and position.

How the obligations and expectations embedded in the shared virtue of *pietas* operated in practical terms can be explained using the concept of 'moral economy.' A theory developed by E.P Thompson, James Scott, Eric Wolf, and Scott Migdal among others as a way to explain collective behaviour in peasant economies, moral economy literature has evolved over the past few decades to incorporate exchange relationships and behaviour not necessarily limited to market economics.[117] Although Thompson's original model posited moral economy as the 'popular consensus as to what were legitimate and illegitimate practices' with regards to food access, as Norbert Götz points out, the restricted historical context and meaning of moral economy in Thompson's usage is not inherent in a term joining two concepts as general as 'moral' and 'economy.' [118] A broader conception, where

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[115] Plut. *ad Princ.* 3.
[116] Noreña (2009) 272-3; Kragelund (1998) 156.
[117] Thompson (1971); Scott (1977); Wolf (1969); Migdal (1974).
[118] Götz (2015) 147.

the semantic weight shifts from the noun (economy) to the adjective (moral) has been promoted in recent years. Didier Fassin argues it is the 'production, distribution, circulation and use of moral sentiments, emotions and values, norms and obligations in social space' that are the main constituents of moral economy.[119] In a similar light, Thomas Arnold refocuses the concept in light of the constitutive, communal, and nested properties of social goods, that is, the objects and qualities whose 'possession or consumption confers some kind of benefit and satisfies human needs and wants and therefore are symbols of collective culture.'[120]

Given their nature and meaningfulness, social goods are sources for shared notions of legitimacy, and any threat or attack on those social goods undermines the acceptability of a government. People in response could frame collective action as a legitimate defence of communal goods that made up one end of the reciprocal relationship with the emperor.[121] Therefore, on a wider level, moral economy encompasses the notion that the commonwealth should be justly distributed, a notion that is 'embedded within the wider social environment and institutions and is therefore deeply coloured by non-economic considerations.'[122] In this vein, I will term the relationship between the urban plebs and emperor that revolved around the obligations of *pietas*, that is, access to social goods and the reciprocal performance of universal consensus as the 'imperial moral economy.'

This set of obligations and expectations was fundamental in terms of legitimacy and political interaction. For example, while imperial regimes could broadly rely on diffuse support, they also needed to cultivate *specific* support, that is, support derived from performance and outputs by the emperor and his administration. Although diffuse support tends to be more durable and stable because it is derived from deep seated cultural norms, specific support is contingent on shared evaluations of government performance and is prone to short term fluctuations in response to political, social and economic factors.[123] Hence, if specific support fell, so too did the perceived legitimacy of a regime. In von Soest and Grauvogel's

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[119] Fassin (2009) 1257.
[120] Arnold (2001) 85, 90.
[121] Arnold (2001) 92.
[122] Mau (2007).
[123] Teixeira, Tsatsanis, and Belchior (2014) 501-518.

conception, the more pronounced the legitimation process, the more likely it will strengthen collective identities, elite cohesion, and overall feelings of community and solidarity. Although economic exchange occurred (and indeed became an expectation), citizens could not live on *congiaria*, *beneficia* and *frumentationes* alone. Through the emperor's provision of a catalogue of social goods, Roman collective identity was performed and reaffirmed, a process that affected how, why, and where actors made claims against the imperial regime.

The imperial moral economy reinforced the privileged position of Rome's population in the empire's hierarchy, and the attached set of obligations and expectations barely changed from Augustus to the time of Marcus Aurelius. By fulfilling these expectations, an emperor could make a multifaceted claim that drew upon Roman conceptions of foundational myth, ideology, performance, and personalism. An emperor who neglected Rome's moral economy weakened the contract and the reciprocal nature of the relationship meant that the plebs' end of the bargain – a conferral of consensus, and thus regime legitimation – could potentially be withdrawn. Successfully maintaining legitimacy claims, on the other hand, not only enabled successive imperial regimes to maintain their entitlement to rule, especially under pressure, but it also shaped how they were able to implement their rule.[124] The benefits embedded within the imperial moral economy drastically altered political opportunity structures by reducing the multiplicity of potential rivals for power, and closing down avenues for new political actors to make claims except at the times and places dictated by the emperor. It was by shutting down previous openings and meeting the social and material obligations of a great 'king' that Augustus could claim that he had *consensus universorum* for his personal rule.

The compact between the Praetorian Guard and the emperor took a similar shape. Their conferral of legitimacy was the most important, and in terms of cash outlay, it was expensive to maintain. Kenneth Harl estimates that while Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus bestowed 30 million *denarii* on at least 150,000 urban plebeians and 43.5 million on their 29 legions, they spent 76.6 million *denarii* on the praetorian and urban cohorts. In total, the

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[124] von Soest and Grauvogel (2017) 289; von Soest and Grauvogel (2015) 2.

two emperors spent 150 million *denarii* on donatives, consuming 29% of the treasury left by Antoninus Pius, a figure that did not include games and war expenses.[125] Although expensive, lavish *donativa*, and a constant supply of benefits sufficed for the Guard in contrast to the matrix of social goods demanded by the populace. In short, the reciprocal exchanges of the imperial moral economy ensured consensus and a sense of harmony and goodwill (*eunoia*), which constrained transgressive contention. Plutarch, Dio Chrysostem, Herodian, Philostratus and the author of Ps.-Aelius Aristides' *Eis Basilea* all emphasised that cultivating *eunoia* was an essential defining characteristic of Hellenistic kingship, a reflection of both Isocratean tradition and Augustan ideology.[126] In Herodian's narrative, Marcus Aurelius praises the *eunoia* of his subjects as the true foundation of imperial power, warning that 'bodyguards are not enough protection for a ruler unless he has the goodwill of his subjects,' and 'people who are bound to their emperor through *eunoia* will not rebel unless driven to by 'violent, arrogant treatment.'[127] The words of the former emperor, even if apocryphal, confirm what sociologists and historians have found time and again across different times and cultures: a coercive regime type enjoys little popular legitimacy. Consent once earned was durable but to a point. Due to Rome's long history of public claim-making, conceptions of legitimacy and consensus were attached to the public, ritualised communication between emperor and plebs. This meant that when grievances emerged, or when Rome's political actors wished to communicate with their emperor, they were channelled towards mass, public performances – contentious politics.

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[125] Harl (1996) 223.
[126] Plut. *Prae. ger. reip.* 15, 21, 28; Dio Chrys. *About Kingship* 1.34-35, 3.86; Isoc. *Evag. 9, Ad Nic.* 2.4; Hdn. 1.4.4; Ael. Ar. 22-29. For a full discussion, see de Blois (1994).
[127] Hdn. 1.4.4-5.

From consensus to subversion: contentious practices in the early imperial period

(i)   Imperial repertoires and consensus

Roman contentious performances were sensitive not only to learning and innovation during times of political crisis, but also to the history, culture, and transformation of Rome's regimes. Just as imperial legitimacy claims were predicated in part on a sense of continuity with the past, how, where and when actors performed contentious politics from the late second century CE onwards owed much to the city's long history of collective political participation.

Republican political culture has been described as one of spectacle with key urban spaces acting as theatres of power.[128] Open air assemblies, funerals, triumphs, festivals, trials and lawsuits, and electioneering activities were an amalgamation of religious ceremonial, public performance and displays of power and social stratification, resulting in a visual spectacle of both communal and individual performance in what Keith Hopkins describes as a 'stately and protracted dance.'[129] Approval or disapproval was communicated via a show of hands, shouting, or proffered suggestions. As Cicero observed, '[resolutions] are not based upon considered votes or affidavits nor safeguarded by an oath, but produced by a show of hands and the undisciplined shouting of an inflamed mob.'[130]

Mass verbal participation was, therefore, a recognisable performative template, and contentious performances and repertoires closely mirrored the form of institutional politics, reimagining traditional concepts of political communication. The politics of imperial Rome was far different from that of the Republic, but previous interactions and repertoires supplied much of the concrete means by which emperor and citizens engaged in contentious politics.[131] To be sure, the conception of the Republic as an almost mythical period of democratic government was arguably a creation of the imperial period, and Augustus and his successors employed Republican ideals and rituals in their design and

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[128] Gargola (2017) 210.
[129] Hopkins (1991) 495.
[130] Cic. *Flac.* 15.
[131] Tilly (2006) 20.

justification of their own regime styles.[132] It is no wonder then that many of the same routines that made up Republican politics were retained, recycled and redeployed in the imperial period. Imperial repertoires can be grouped into four main categories: physical contention (riots and demonstrations); written contention (including graffiti, the circulation of libels and the defacing, destruction or erection of statues); verbal contention and demonstrations at the spectacles, and popular justice rituals. Some were simply a continuation of Republican patterns like the food riot and the circulation of written contention. Others like the shouting of acclamations at the theatre, lethal popular justice rituals, and the delivery of demands and petitions to the emperor were adaptations or innovative re-fashionings of old, established repertoires. These changes as we would expect reflected regime change, and the preference for new political spaces that encouraged some actions, discouraged others and allowed people the opportunity to modernise known scripts.[133]

It was Cicero who famously remarked that there were three places in which the opinion and inclination of the Roman people could be truly determined: the *contiones*, *comitia,* and the games.[134] Each location could hold large crowds meaning that scale and intensity of feeling could be measured on a visual and aural level. The continued centrality of large public spaces for mass audiences, and the physical and verbal forms of contention that lent themselves so well to the emotive atmosphere of community events – if not voting, then the shows – meant that we can see strands of Republican contention threaded through later contentious episodes. Civic spaces had long been political and were locations intended for mass audiences and active participation; how people made claims would continue to be shaped by such spatial routines and memories. For example, during the Republican era, the theatres were inherently political spaces. Audiences would make their feelings known directly to the politicians present who used the theatre themselves as a sounding board. Cicero claimed that for politicians who were guided by popular opinion and rumour, applause at the theatre seemed like immortality and hissing, death.[135] With the effective

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[132] Steel (2015) 1.
[133] Tarrow (2010) 3.
[134] Cic. *Sest*. 110.
[135] Cic. *Sest*. 115.

suppression of the assemblies as a space for dialogue between the populace and government, theatres, circuses and amphitheatres became the city's principal sites for contention. Alongside the spectacles, traditional religious festivals and imperial ceremonies such as the triumph and the *adventus*/*profectio* processions also became central components of the performative side of imperial regimes. [136]

When contention occurred at these spaces, it received the regime's attention. The Roman games not only had the potential to reach a far larger percentage of the population than their modern day equivalent, the packed festival calendar also meant that there were many opportunities for interaction; Paul Veyne estimates that emperors in the first century CE spent about a fifth of their time at the theatre, circus or amphitheatre.[137] Of the city's spectacle spaces, the Circus Maximus was the largest man-made structure in the Empire. Juvenal once complained that 'all Rome today is in the Circus,' and no other building could accommodate an audience on such a scale, which could be as high as 25% of Rome's free population on any given race day.[138] To put these percentages into perspective, soccer teams in the English Premier League played 19 home matches in the 2016/2017 season. Of all the London teams combined, the total average audience for one day's match was 214,967 people, which equates to 2.44% of London's population. Manchester's two premier teams hosted an average of 129,309 people per home fixture, which if we divide by the population of Manchester proper is a figure of 25.26%. If we take the population of the larger urban area into account, daily attendance only equates to 5.07% of the population.[139] The reach of the Roman games was thus demonstrably greater than their modern equivalents, and the spatial and social routines attached to the Circus had a high saturation level amongst the urban populace. Such scale also made the Circus a showpiece of tradition

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[136] For the increase in frequency and splendour of Augustan games: Suet. *Aug*. 43. Augustus' revival of traditional religious games: Suet. *Aug*. 31.

[137] Veyne (1976) 702-704.

[138] Juv. 11.197; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 3.68. In comparison, the Colosseum held approximately 87,000 spectators, and the Theatre of Pompey 40,000. The slave population of Rome is estimated to be somewhere in the range of 25-40% of the city as a whole; see Scheidel (2005).

[139] Calculated from attendance figures for London teams (Arsenal, Chelsea, Crystal Palace, Tott. Hotspur, West Ham) and Manchester (Manchester United, Manchester City) for the 2016/17 season. Data retrieved from http://www.worldfootball.net/attendance/eng-premier-league-2016-2017/1/.

and power: as Pliny observed, it was a 'fitting place for a nation that has conquered the world.'[140]

The vast scale and frequency of imperial spectacles allowed audiences to visually and emotionally picture themselves as 'the people,' a conceptualisation that depended in part on collective memories of popular sovereignty. It also promoted the public performance of mass politics, which in turn encompassed the conventional sub areas of political behaviour and public opinion.[141] What this meant was that these time-spaces, although under the nominal control of the emperor, could embrace multiple political views and claims. The expression of such views and claims was primarily informal and verbal in nature, a repertoire that included acclamations, singing, rhythmic applause, and direct communication with the emperor. Acclamations ranged in complexity from simple clapping or shouted words, to more elaborate titles or phrases that could be chanted or sung. However, a recognisable repertoire of rhythms and stock phrases made it relatively simple for a large number of people to deliver the same message together like modern day soccer chants.[142] Like requests and petitions, imperial acclamations often constituted one side of a two way discussion, a call-and-response pattern that had its roots in Republican practices of *flagitatio* and *convicium*.

As an arena for political negotiation, demands, requests, and petitions were regularly conveyed to the emperor by audience members. Josephus describes how the urban plebs would come 'with great alacrity into the [Circus]… and petition their Emperors in great multitudes, for what they needed. Who usually did not think fit to deny them their requests: but readily and gratefully granted them.'[143] Many of these requests were seemingly trivial in nature; a demand for the manumission of gladiator or actor, the restoration of a previously expelled senator, the return of a well-liked statue, or a request for a man eating lion to be brought to the games. However, demands were made for more serious matters like the execution of criminals or gladiators or calls to fix grain prices or tax issues. Sometimes, a

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[140] Plin. *Pan.* 51.
[141] White (2009) 99.
[142] Aldrete (1999) 103.
[143] Joseph. *AJ* 19.1.4.

crowd would call for the execution of a prominent official; in 68CE, a theatre crowd demanded that Galba punish Nero's hated prefect Tigellinus. Similar demands were made to punish Sabinus and Atticus under Vitellius, and a theatre crowd called for the pardon of Augustus' daughter Julia.[144] These requests were expected to be met, and communication was meant to be direct: the use of heralds were frowned upon as was calling for silence since both did little to bolster the projection of the emperor's *civilitas*.[145] Tiberius allegedly stopped going to the shows to avoid being compelled to submit to audience demands, and Hadrian felt obliged to circulate an explanation around the Circus on a placard as to why he could not meet the crowd's demand to manumit a charioteer.[146]

From the imperial side of the equation, emperors could use the spectacle spaces to advertise their imperial munificence. Lavish shows, lotteries, prizes, and exhibitions proclaimed the greatness of Rome, and its emperor, but occasionally emperors refused entirely to play along.[147] Caligula opposed 'absolutely everything' demanded of him at the spectacles and even took to arresting spectators who refused to applaud for his favourite actors. There were ramifications for not keeping the regime's side of the bargain, however. Galba's refusal to accede to audience demands to punish Tigellinus led to an outbreak of rioting in the city's theatres, circuses, streets and *fora* quelled only by Otho's fulfillment of the original demand.[148] Galba, Tiberius, and Caligula all lost popular support, and Galba and Caligula had to deal with theatre demonstrations, rioting and public expressions of disapproval at the shows partly because they did not address collective demands for redress. If the emperor did not fulfil his role as benefactor and recipient of popular petitions, then he was not fulfilling the moral contract that underpinned his legitimacy and contention often arose as a result.

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[144] Manumission of charioteers: Cass. Dio 57.11.6. Gladiators: Mart. *Spect.* 29.3; Gell. *NA* 5.14.1. Crowd wanting the comedian Actius freed by Tiberius: Suet. *Tib*. 47; crowd asking Hadrian for the manumission of a slave: Cass. Dio 69.16.3. Man-eating lion: Cass. Dio 72.29. The ex-senator Palfurius Sura: Suet. *Dom*. 13; Galba: Plut. *Galb.* 17.2-4. Grain supply: Suet. *Aug*. 41; Tac. *Ann*. 2.87, 12.43. Tax issues under Nero: Tac. *Ann*. 13.50. Executions/pardons: Tac. *Hist*. 3.74; Plut. *Galb.* 17.2-4. Exchanges between the audience and emperor: Suet. *Tit.* 8, *Dom*. 4; Trajan: Cass. Dio 68.7.3; Hadrian: Cass. Dio 69.6.1. Demand for statue to be returned from Tiberius' private apartments back to the public baths where it originally stood: Plin. *HN* 34.19.
[145] Telling the audience to be silent: Domitian: Suet. *Dom*. 13; Hadrian: Cass. Dio 69.6.1-2.
[146] Cass. Dio 69.16.3.
[147] Example of munificence: *ILS* 286, the dedicatory inscription thanking Trajan for his generosity in revamping the seating in the Circus Maximus. Bell (2014) 494.
[148] Tac. *Hist*. 1.72.

Verbal contention was not just restricted to spectacle spaces. Acclamations were often shouted as the emperor passed through streets or at imperial ceremonies like the *adventus*. Pliny described how parents would teach their children acclamation formulas as they waited to view the emperor.[149] The Senate and praetorians also used the form as a legitimising ritual. The form of some chants and acclamations, however, were specific to the city itself. When Nero compelled some rustic Italians to praise his theatre performance at sword point, their ignorance of acclamation formulas and rhythmic clapping disrupted the applause of the rest of the audience.[150] While some chants and rhythms were rehearsed and official (Nero's claquers even had specific applause types),[151] verbal contention was often a by-product of collective identity. Inscriptions from the public auditoria at Aphrodisias suggests that blocks of spectacle seating could be assigned or taken by *collegia*: neighbours, fellow cult or trade members would chant and applaud together.[152] True control of the crowd by the authorities was thus a pipe dream, as the shouts of such groups were not restricted to the official script, but were also expressions of popular culture and identity that were part of the city's hidden transcripts.

Each shouted petition or acclamation was both an enactment of the ability of the urban plebs to legitimise an emperor, and their own views of the world, just as soldiers acclaimed their choice of *imperator*, and the Senate passed decrees conferring imperial powers as their own consensus rituals. The imperial moral economy set levels of expectation and entitlement that helped shape contentious repertoires. As residents received social goods because of their spatial proximity to the fount of imperial power, they reciprocated through ritual displays of consensus that publicly reinforced regime legitimacy. However, it is clear that political contention was hardly ever a black and white scenario. Consent rituals channelled contention into a controlled format, but the *licentia* afforded to the shows permitted an element of behaviour that would not be tolerated elsewhere. If we accept the fulminations of Tertullian, Augustine or Cassiodorus, Roman crowds would act in a far worse manner at the games than they would in everyday life, which meant that these time-spaces

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[149] Plin. *Pan.* 26.1-3; Joseph. *BJ* 7.123.
[150] Tac. *Ann.* 16.5; Suet. *Claud.* 10; Aldrete (1999) 130.
[151] Suet. *Ner.* 20.3: Nero was apparently taken with the Alexandrian style of applause (the 'bees', the 'bricks', and the 'roof tiles'), and had his equestrian cheerleaders learn them.
[152] Roueché (1993) 124; Horsfall (2003) 41.

were potential moments of vulnerability for the political order, and could be used as symbolic resources of collective action for would be challengers.[153] The spectacle verbal repertoire was thus strong but flexible since it could be used to demonstrate either support for or resistance to the imperial regime, and as one of the only available outlets for mass collective expression, emperors usually tolerated the vast majority of contention, lest grievances were expressed in more threatening ways or spaces. When contention was a deliberate act of conflict, however, those who engaged in such collective action were likely to try and manipulate, defend or subvert the spaces that contained symbolic meaning for them or those they were contending against. In other words, the same places and forms of collective claim-making used in permitted or tolerated contention were also used to transmit more transgressive claims.

(ii) Rome and her 'hidden transcripts'

The spectacles were the central element in the web of communication, which instantiated the position of the emperor in the body politic.[154] The subversion of this time-space, therefore, not only threatened the high politics of the imperial court and Senate but political and social order as a whole. James Scott argues that domination can only be sustained by continuous reinforcement, maintenance and adjustment. The spectacle rituals of consensus were a part of that reinforcement and maintenance and comprised what Scott calls the 'public transcript:' the conventional and ritualised public interaction between ruler and ruled.[155]

There was another side to the open and stylised forms of dialogue practiced at the shows and imperial ceremonies. If subordinate discourse in the presence of power holders was a public transcript, then discourse that took place away from direct observation of the regime was a 'hidden transcript.' These transcripts employed many of the same speech patterns, gestures and practices utilised in the public domain, but were instead used to subvert, contradict and deny the dominant discourse.[156] Hidden transcripts primarily reflected lived

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[153] Tert. *De spect*. 21.2-2; August. *Conf*. 6.13; Cassiod. *Var*. 1.27.5; Tac. *Ann*. 1.77 (*theatri licentia*). See Rich (2015) 106.
[154] Purcell (2013) 456.
[155] Scott (1992) 45.
[156] Scott (1992) 4-5.

reality and non-elite collective identities. If we define collective identity as an individual's connection with a broader community, and perception of a shared status or relation, understanding how such identities were formed and reinforced separate from the dominant discourse will provide a better understanding of how and when the urban population mobilised to make contentious claims, in what manner, and why.[157] Coming together for games and festivities was an obvious way for Romans to assert a collective voice. Although the built environment influenced how Rome's communities interacted with each other and positioned themselves as members (or non-members) of the polity, those same spaces were still subject to local conflicts over ownership, meaning, and use that at times clashed with ideologies imposed from above. Spaces within the temporal confines of festivals were explicitly sites under the emperor's direct control, but as Ngugi wa Thiong'o observes, 'the more open the performance space, the more it seems to terrify those in possession of repressive power.'[158] Enormous crowds meant personal risk was lowered for individuals within an audience, and any potential transgressive contention would be witnessed by many, spreading a message of resistance quickly throughout the city.

Rome's authorities also had to consider how festivals and spectacles acted as 'free spaces' for the population. Sara Evans and Harry Boyte define free spaces as spatial and temporal havens that typically take the form of a wide range of associations such as public rituals, taverns, clubs, cooperatives, and communes that serve to foster deep and assertive group identities.[159] Charles Tilly, however, offers a broader definition:

> [Free spaces are] geographic areas where contentious claim making gains protection
> from routine surveillance and repression because of terrain, built environment, or
> legal status, […] segregated institutions in which legal privilege, organizational
> structure, social composition, or governmental neglect permits otherwise forbidden
> conversation and action, […] public occasions on which authorities tolerate or even
> encourage large, extraordinary assemblies in selected sites, thus providing

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[157] Polletta and Jasper (2001) 285.
[158] Thiong'o (1998) 63.
[159] Evans and Boyte (1986) 17. See also Polletta (1999) 1-38.

opportunities for both airing of generally forbidden claims and access to large audiences for those claims.[160]

Significantly, Tilly's parameters include not only small, local sites of popular culture but crucially, large scale public occasions. Considering the high frequency of festivals and spectacles, most of which drew large crowds, Rome was host to a wide variety of free spaces despite the inherent element of surveillance and control at these spaces. Hayagreeva Rao and Sunasir Dutta suggest that large gatherings and processions are liminal spaces that heighten emotions and allow the 'communication of voices and meanings that challenge existing interpretations of hierarchy, justice and convention, enabling people to undertake collective action.'[161] The carnivalesque nature of many of Rome's religious festivals temporarily permitted acts of sanctioned deviance, and provided multiple time-spaces where dominant authority structures could be challenged, and political opportunities recognised. Aside from the emotional pull of a large crowd, the intrinsic structure of the rituals associated with spectacle space threatened social order by removing audience members from their ordinary spatial routines, and by temporarily rendering power relations transparent, therefore making the maintenance of social structure reliant on collective action.[162] Also, given that the performative aspect of the moral contract between emperor and plebs was one of face to face communication: when the *pulvinar* or imperial box was empty, spectacle spaces could operate more as free spaces than sites of power.

 It is no coincidence then, that when Romans took advantage of public free spaces, they made use of the same rituals and repertoires used to make demands upon the regime. Audiences demonstrated their hostility to Caligula by deliberately refusing to applaud for his favoured performers, instead cheering for those he disliked. They also walked out of the theatres in protest of the emperor's *delatores*.[163] Vitellius used force against circus fans whom he believed deliberately insulted the Blues faction in contempt of himself and in anticipation of a change of rulers.[164] Claudius had to issue an edict reprimanding theatre

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[160] Tilly (2000) 144.
[161] Rao and Dutta (2012) 632, 635.
[162] Pfaff and Yang (2001).
[163] Cass. Dio 59.13.5,7; Suet. *Calig*. 30.
[164] Suet. *Vit*. 14.

crowds who shouted insults at the consul P. Pomponius Secundus and other members of the elite.[165] Galba was mocked by a theatre audience who finished singing the chorus from an Atellan farce about a stingy old man, presumably meaning the emperor.[166] In these cases, as with audiences who presented demands, an emperor had two choices. He could tolerate dissent, or he could repress it. Caligula and Vitellius both chose the latter, but it proved costly in terms of public opinion.

The culture and mass crowds associated with the spectacles provided free space for the airing of transgressive claims, but not all claims were made in such a theatrical manner. The existence of less dramatic contentious performances demonstrates that we should understand political contention as a continuum between public confrontations and hidden subversion, since transcripts of resistance were part of everyday social life and routines.[167] As the definitions by Evans, Boyte and Tilly have outlined, the free spaces created in local community spaces allowed people in the course of their daily routines to discuss information that was relevant to them, and this information, for the most part, was unable to be manipulated or controlled from above. Scott contends that 'if the social location par excellence of the public transcript is the public assemblies of subordinates summoned by elites, then the social location par excellence for the hidden transcript lies in the unauthorised and unmonitored assemblies of subordinates.'[168] It was within the social spaces where like-minded people gathered that social, political, and economic dialogue took place and where grievances could be safely aired. Rome's bars, streets, crossroads and club meetings were information exchanges where ordinary people engaged in political debate.[169] Authorities had long been well aware of the link between the discourse that occurred within

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[165] Tac. *Ann*. 11.13.
[166] Suet. *Galb.* 13. The actors began with the familiar lines; 'Here comes Onesimus from his farm.' The text is uncertain, but it seems the song ridiculed a stingy old countryman.
[167] Vinthagen and Johansson (2013) 3.
[168] Scott (1992) 120.
[169] It is estimated that there was perhaps one fixed-location bar or inn for every 55-90 residents in Pompeii, a high density which indicates that they served a large cross-section of the community. Discussions on street corners and crossroads (*compita*): Ammianus Marcellinus records that groups of ordinary people would gather in the fora, *compita*, the streets, and other meeting-places *(circulos multos)*, 'engaged in quarrelsome arguments with one another, some (as usual) defending this, others that' (28.4.29). Many *popinae/tabernae* were located at crossroads as well. Propertius, Juvenal, Ovid and Horace all mention the circulation of gossip and news at the crossroads*:* Prop. 2.20.21-2; Juv. 9.110; Ov. *Am*. 3.1.17-22; Hor. *Sat*. 2.3.25-6, 2.5.50-58. See O'Neill (2001) 281.

these local networks and potential contention. Night meetings were considered the core of plebeian organisation in the early Republic, with *coetus nocturnus* allegedly banned by the Twelve Tables.[170] *Collegia* were brought under the control of the Senate and emperor, and although sanctioned associations were given legal protection from the second century CE on, *collegia illicita* continued to exist, concerning authorities.[171] Tiberius for instance, banned the sale of baked goods in taverns; Claudius went further, closing taverns where *collegia* met and banning the sale of meat and hot water. Nero reiterated the ban on meat, allowing only pulses and vegetables to be served.[172] Trajan meanwhile turned down Pliny's request for a fire fighting *collegium* in Nicomedia because, 'we must remember that it is associations like these which have been responsible for the political disturbances in your province, particularly its towns. If people assemble for a common purpose, whatever name we give them and for whatever reason, they soon turn into a political club.'[173] Each example demonstrates that emperors took steps to disrupt or at least assert control over local social networks and the free spaces in which they gathered.

Certainly, the free spaces that the authorities worried about mainly hosted non-elite communities, and the sources identify these very groups engaging in transgressive collective action during the turmoil of the Late Republic and early imperial years. Trades, often highly specialised, made up a sizeable portion of the urban market economy, and their *collegia* and other localised social networks played a significant role in many people's ordinary lives. Approximately 700 inscriptions from Rome and the existence of at least 500 types of association attest to their social importance, and just as *collegia* functioned as ready-made structures for political mobilisation in the Late Republic, there is no reason why they would not, given their ongoing prominence, continue to play a similar role in the second and third centuries.[174] This assumption is strengthened by the recurrent references to artisans and shopkeepers (*tabernarii, opifices, technites, cheirotechnai*) participating in demonstrations and riots.[175] Although shopkeepers, *collegia* members, neighbourhood groups, and artisans

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[170] Twelve Tables 8.26; Nippel (1995) 28.
[171] Suet. *Iul*. 42.3; *Aug*. 32.1. After the deadly riots in Pompeii in 59CE, a *lex de collegiis* likely stipulated that all associations had to have senatorial/imperial authority to operate: *CIL* 4.2193=4416.
[172] Suet. *Tib*. 34, Cass. Dio 60.6.-7; Suet. *Ner*. 16; O'Neill (2001) 232.
[173] Plin. *Ep*. 10.34.
[174] Liu (2013) 353-354.
[175] *E.g.* Cic. *Dom*. 89, *Mil*. 91, *Flac*. 8; Asc. 33-34; Sall. *Cat*. 50; Cass. Dio 40.49.2-5; App. *BC* 2.22, 4.19.

cannot be viewed as a distinct class, these groups still shared identities generated and reinforced at the lower levels of the city landscape. Solidarities engendered through participation in voluntary associations like *collegia*, *vici* associations, *sodalitates* or apprenticeship networks are evidenced in no small part to how they described each other as *amici subaediani* (friends and construction workers), *convivae marmorarii* (mates and marble workers) and *comestores* (eating companions).[176] Being part of a *vicus* with its shared social, religious, and economic spaces (since many lived where they worked) also meant that neighbourhood free spaces operated as firm cultural and political boundaries. The link between spatial proximity and identity has been observed in other urban environments; Roger Gould for instance demonstrated in his study of the Paris Commune that collective identities based around neighbourhood played a much more critical role in motivating people to collective action than class.[177] Identity, then, was often a product of accumulated biographical and spatial experiences, which in turn facilitated place-based solidarities.[178]

In terms of political contention, the close associations between local social networks, free spaces, and the creation and circulation of hidden transcripts meant that these groups possessed strong structures that could facilitate mobilisation. As Tilly notes, mobilised crowds 'often consist not of living, breathing individuals but of groups, organisations, bundles of social relations and social sites such as occupations and neighbourhoods.'[179] *Collegia* and some *vici* associations, for example, had established hierarchies that provided leadership and organisational structure as an effective mechanism for mobilisation, and since many non-elite urbanites were integrated and organised in such separate but flexible communities, they were able to merge and support contention around common issues easily. As the research shows, the organisation of an episode of contention corresponds to the degree of pre-existing organisation, and the stronger and more cohesive the pre-existing organisation, the more coherent and successful mobilisation. The civic order offered by these associations also gave those who were elsewhere defined by inferiority and exclusion

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[176] Toner (2015).
[177] Gould (1993), (1995); Nicholls (2009) 79.
[178] Gieryn (2000) 481.
[179] Tilly (2003) 32.

an alternative not tied to the public transcript. In other words, rather than being seen as a deliberate mirroring of elite hierarchies, local social networks should be seen as more independent and representative of hidden transcripts than official ideologies.[180]

Imperial regimes also had to try to control more transient urban sub groups who acted as carriers of hidden transcripts and as mobilisers of contention.[181] For example, pantomime actors were a prominent lightning rod for subversive undercurrents. As mimes did not speak on stage and were a relatively small social group, their ability to organise and lead contentious behaviour rested on their connections with larger groups. They were well organised with their own *collegia,* and attracted loyal partisans and factions that seem to have been organised by street and region that also included many *equite*s and senators.[182] Pantomimes instigated at least three major theatre riots during Tiberius' reign, and their ability to mobilise supporters and play a part in transgressive contention meant they were regularly expelled from the city, as were philosophers, astrologers, and magicians. The latter two groups were banned at least 8 (and perhaps up to 11) times between 139BCE and 175CE, Ulpian claiming that they were so often targeted 'because they practice[d] base arts against the public peace and the *imperium* of the Roman people.'[183]

Circus factions were also a potential 'stirrer of the masses.' There were four *factiones*, but the Blues and Greens had the most ardent fan bases, including emperors.[184] The ties between the imperial house and the circus factions (emperors funded their operations) meant that that the relationship between the populace and the emperor was perhaps most

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[180] Verboven (2007).

[181] Scott (1992) 123: Scott argues that carriers of hidden transcripts are 'likely to be as socially marginal as the places where they gather…Actors, acrobats, bards, jugglers, diviners, itinerant entertainers of all kinds might be said to have made their living in this fashion.'

[182] Pantomime factions: Suet. *Tib*. 37.2, *Ner*. 16.2; Tac. *Ann*. 1.77, 13.25, 13.28.

[183] *Mos. et Rom. legum. coll*. 15.2.1-3. Tiberius expelled all pantomimes and faction leaders from the city in 23CE claiming that they were 'formenters of sedition against the state' (Cass. Dio 57.21.3; Suet. *Tib*. 37.2; Tac. *Ann*. 4.14). Caligula allowed the pantomimes to return fourteen years later, but fighting between their factions in 56CE led Nero to expel them once more, and restrictive measures were taken against them by both Domitian and Trajan (Tac. *Ann*. 13.25, 14.21; Suet. *Ner*. 16, *Dom*. 7). For expulsions of astrologers and magicians, see Ripat (2011).

[184] According to Tertullian, there were originally just two factions, White and Red, but later expanded to four (*De spect*. 9). Domitian created two further factions, the Purples and Golds, but these disappeared after his death. Vitellius and Caracalla both supported the Blues while Caligula, Nero, Domitian, Verus, Commodus, and Elagabalus were all fans of the Greens. Unsurprisingly, Marcus Aurelius notes in his *Meditations* (1.5) that he was a partisan of neither.

intimate and politically loaded at the Circus than at Rome's other spectacle spaces. That is not to say that the circus factions themselves were as potentially subversive as other popular figures or networks. Alan Cameron convincingly argued in his 1976 study on the circus factions of Rome and Byzantium that the *factiones* were first and foremost sporting bodies rather than political cheerleaders, and rivalry (including rare outbursts of violence) between supporters was usually a non-political issue.[185] As Nero found out, deploying a 5,000 strong squad of young equestrians as claquers only elicited a reluctant participation from the rest of the audience.[186] A group may lead a chant, but at a venue as vast as the Circus Maximus, any mass chants or protests needed buy in from a sizeable number of people, not just those paid to do it. As self-selecting groups, popular figures all courted celebrity to some extent, since fame brought a clientele. Customers and factions could become powerful mobilising groups, especially when bound together through shared outlook and identities. The more their leading figures were subject to repression, the more they could publicly embody anti-authoritarian attitudes. An emperor had little to worry about in terms of contained contention that featured previously established actors employing culturally embedded claim-making methods. But issues and grievances framed and circulated in private, and then publicly articulated by those who had independent social influence represented infrapolitics that could directly challenge a regime and its public transcript.

The centrality of social networks, leadership, and hidden transcripts in the performance of Roman contentious politics should not, therefore, be underestimated. None of these structures or processes were a uniquely Roman phenomenon; the role of trade guilds and other more informal associations of artisans and shopkeepers figure prominently in contentious urban politics across a wide variety of cultures and times.[187] What we do not have in the later source evidence (in contrast to the Republican material) is specific

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[185] Cameron (1976).

[186] Tac. *Hist*. 1.72; Suet. *Ner.* 20.3; Cass. Dio 62.20.3-5.

[187] For example, the involvement of trade networks and their constituents in protest, violent or otherwise, are found in the formative years of the French Revolution and the *sans-culottes*: Skocpol and Kestnbaum (1990) 14-27; protests in modern-day Turkey: Gemici (2003); political agitation in Italian city-states during the twelve and thirteenth centuries CE: Tarrow (2004); urban collective action in Victorian and Edwardian England: Hosgood (1992); the Stamp Act riots in eighteenth-century CE Boston: Morgan and Morgan (1995) 128; and anti-elite, anti-state agent rioting in fourteenth century CE China: Rowe (2003) 318.

descriptions of the sub groups that made up claimants.[188] Both Dio and Herodian use generic descriptors like *demos*, *plethos*, and occasionally the more pejorative *ochlos* to describe popular participation in collective action; terms that should be taken as a reflection of the writer's moral or social stance rather than as an explicit identifier.[189] It is therefore difficult to state with certainty who was involved in the majority of contentious incidents in the second and third centuries. Yet, if we take into consideration the long history of popular sub groups in politics, and authorities' ongoing attempts to control their spaces and structures, we can infer the same or similar building blocks were the conduits through which mass mobilisation could occur. Any continuity or lack thereof with performances in later years provides important context and clues as to who participated and why, in the absence of detailed information.

(iii)   Subversion in practice: Roman popular justice, and violent contentious repertoires

The ability of ordinary Romans to reaffirm collective identities in their free spaces, local social networks, and through the circulation of hidden transcripts enabled them to mark out political identities and opinions that were separate from the dominant discourse. The importance of these spaces and forms of contention and communication lay in their mobilising abilities. Free spaces created and nurtured shared beliefs that could strengthen and organise a community response in the face of crisis or uncertainty, and these beliefs could shape public dialogue. As Scott explains, 'off stage' discursive practices 'continually press against the limit of what is permitted on stage, much as a body of water might press against a dam.'[190] Much of what was discussed 'off stage' was framed according to lived experience. The discourse of justice in particular was a product of subordinate communities who created their own codes, myths, heroes, villains and social standards separate from the public transcript, and was also reflective of framing processes within those communities.

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[188] In contrast, there is a long list of describers for non-elite participants in Republican politics including: *plebs, multitudo, populus Romanus, equites, hippeis, ochlos, plethos, demos, politai, homilos, polloi, libertinorum et servorum manus, gladiatores, fugitivii, cives imperiti, cheirotechnai, falcarii, tabernarii, opifices, servitia, xenoi, monomachoi, therapontes, improbi, homines, milites, stratiotai, hopla, liberi, servi, egentes, tota Italia and omnes ordines.* Earley (2009) 24.
[189] This is also the conclusion of Yavetz (1969) 7.
[190] Scott (1992) 196.

The idea of justice was relatively flexible in the Roman context in part because of its social structure that allowed for different modes of interpretation and definition depending on a person's social position. Where the concept of justice (*iustitia*) was solid was in the standards of an emperor's conduct. Unsurprisingly, this concept was connected to an emperor's expected *pietas*: when Seneca urged Nero to rule as *pater patriae* in accordance with a policy of *clementia* and *iustitia*, he was urging his protégé to act as a Stoic 'good king.'[191] In a similar manner, Marcus Aurelius deemed justice to be the virtue 'upon which all others depend.'[192] In terms of Roman autocracy, the ideal that a 'good' emperor should submit to the laws that he was technically freed from was a central premise for many thinkers of the time. Dio Chrysostom posed the question; 'for whom is a sense of justice more important than for the one who is above the laws?'[193] Septimius Severus acknowledged the centrality of this concept for his subjects, publicly declaring that 'although we are not bound by the laws, nevertheless we live in accordance with them.'[194]

The enduring appeal of justice as an imperial virtue was thus tied to an emperor's performance claim, which by extension applied to the obligations laid out in the city's moral economy. Given this cultural intertwining of legitimacy, obligation, and justice, it is understandable to see why so many examples of hidden transcripts performed publicly as transgressive contention revolved around ordinary people's conceptions of justice. Violent forms of popular justice were utilised far back in Republican days. Stone throwing (*lapidatio*), organised recitation of chants (*flagitatio*), and more serious acts like property destruction (*occentare*) and lynching were originally viewed as a citizen's right to 'self-help' in executing the law or punishing those who transgressed against the community. While such acts were meant to be sub legal and exacted as a community rather than political ritual, the deliberate and targeted use of *lapidatio*, *occentatio*, and *flagitatio* by Publius Clodius Pulcher during the Late Republican era against his senatorial enemies weaponised the forms and dragged them into the political arena. Clodius' ability to successfully evoke

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[191] Buckley (2013)134.

[192] Noreña (2009) 272-3; Marc. Aur. *Med*. 11.10.4. See also 3.6.1, 5.12.2, 6.47.6, 50.1; 7.54, 7.63.1, 8.39, 10.11.2, 11.1.5, 12.1.2– 4, 12.15; Aristid. *Or*. 35.8, 15, 17; Pan. *Lat*. 3.21.4, 4.1.5, 6.6.1, 7.3.4, 11.19.2.

[193] Dio Chrys. *Or*. 3.10 (trans. Noreña). Justice is also invoked as a royal virtue at 1.45, 2.26, 2.54, 3.7, 3.32, 4.24; Noreña (2009) 272-3.

[194] Birley (1999) 165 n.19.

injustice as a frame through popular justice rituals contributed significantly to the escalation of popular dissent during the 50s BCE, as each performance aggravated the 'us' versus 'them' divide between each side, and boosted Clodius' contrived identity as a popular leader.

Non-violent forms of popular justice included the posting of written contention such as *libelli or* graffiti, and the chanting of verses, curses, and nicknames. Christer Bruun's compiled list of 130 nicknames from the beginning of the Principate to the mid-third CE indicates that we are dealing with a significant phenomenon, even though non-literary sources contribute very little.[195] The public reaction to Agrippina's murder in 59CE, for example, included the circulation of libels, rumour, curses, and insults directed towards Nero; his statues were graffitied with ominous threats and, later, verses were spread regarding his role in the Great Fire. Suetonius notes that Nero was unusually tolerant of the vast amount of lampoons and verses posted on city walls or transmitted orally, although Vitellius was not so easy going.[196] As Rome was liberally festooned with the statues of prominent men, the statues themselves often became the focal point for either symbolic protest or celebration, a tradition that also went back to the Republican era.[197] The statuary of popular emperors and members of the imperial family could be applauded and garlanded. Unpopular figures would be graffitied or destroyed, like those of Nero's wife Poppea at the same time as statues of Octavia were carried to the Forum and temples and garlanded with flowers by a cheering crowd.[198]

On occasion, a collective quest for justice took on a far more independent, ritualised, and violent garb. Three significant episodes of popular justice occurred at the Gemonian Steps during the imperial period that reinforce how the symbolism of civic spaces could be contested, appropriated and subverted for claim-making purposes. In 20CE, while the Senate was deliberating the alleged crimes of Cn. Calpurnius Piso, a crowd shouting that

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[195] Bruun (2003) 88.
[196] Suet. *Ner.* 39, 45, *Vit*. 14.4; Cass. Dio 62.16.1-2[2.].
[197] Commemorative statues and altars were erected in the *compita* of M Marius Gratidianus in 85BCE: Cic. *Off*. 3.80; Plin. *HN* 33.46, 34.2. Statues was also erected to honour T Seius: Plin. *HN* 18.4; likewise with the Gracchi: Plut. *C. Gracch*. 18.2.
[198] The crowd had heard reports that Nero was planning on bringing Octavia home from exile: Tac. *Ann*. 14.61. 68.1, Ps-sen. *Oct*. v.669-689, 780-799.

'they would take the law into their own hands,' dragged Piso's statues to the stairs and smashed them.[199] In 31CE, a crowd anticipating the formal condemnation of Sejanus dragged his statues to the stairs and smashed them in view of the man himself.[200] In 69CE, popular pressure forced Vitellius to hand over his urban prefect Flavius Sabinus to a crowd who killed and mutilated him and dragged his headless body to the stairs. Here, Tacitus explicitly notes that the plebs claimed that they had the right to kill Sabinus (*ius caedis*).[201] The emperor's indecisiveness that left Rome exposed to the potential brutality of Vespasian's troops was a breach of his moral contract with the plebs, who quickly turned against him. A day later, Vitellius himself was dragged half naked from the imperial palace by forces loyal to Vespasian through a gauntlet of jeering plebs to the steps where his corpse was mutilated, dragged by a hook and thrown into the Tiber while soldiers paraded his head around the city.[202] The Gemonian Steps, hook, and Tiber were all symbolic choices that aped official uses of each space and ritual. The administration used the steps for ritual punishment.[203] Mutilation, exposure, use of a hook, and disposal via the Tiber also had overt links with traditional execution. By appropriating the forms and spaces used for official, civic punishment, participants legitimised the people's right to exact justice on behalf of the community. In a closed, autocratic regime, this was a powerful form of contention against the regime.

None of these contentious performances were legal, but they had ideological weight. The goal of each episode was to draw a crowd, elicit a strong emotional response, and implicitly legitimate the nature of the claim by aggravating the 'us' versus 'them' divide based on collective identities and methods of plebeian agitation and self-help from the early Republic.[204] Given the divisiveness that could fester in the aftermath of competing justice frames, most examples of popular self-help were tolerated and even celebrated by regimes after the act. When tensions ran high after the death of Germanicus, the Senate officially congratulated the plebs for erecting statues in his honour; in the decree against Piso, the

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[199] Tac. *Ann*. 3.14; see also Suet. *Calig.* 2.
[200] Cass. Dio 58.11.3-5; Juv. 10.58-67.
[201] Tac. *Hist*. 3.74. Tacitus claims it was 'the lowest plebeians' (*sordida pars plebis*) who demanded the punishment of Sabinus.
[202] Suet. *Vit*. 17; Cass. Dio 64.21.2–22.1; Tac. *Hist*. 3.85.
[203] See Barry (2008)
[204] Kelly (2103) 418.

plebs are congratulated for their threats to lynch Piso and for allowing themselves 'to be controlled by our *princeps*.'[205] Repression was the only other option, and against a mobilised urban populace, the risks were great. Thus, the foundation of the popular justice repertoire was intimately connected to and reinforced by the city's hidden transcripts. The emperor may have controlled the public transcripts that provided the official markers that made up what it meant to be Roman, but the discourse of the city's free spaces and social networks bound people together in shared experiences and environments that at times ran counter to sanctioned dialogues and identities. The execution of popular justice, circulation of written contention, creation of popular heroes and villains, and the public demonstrations and rioting that made up transgressive popular contention were all linked by the same set of expectations and obligations that defined and animated the relationship between the emperor and the urban population. That publicly communicated relationship provided parameters for the performance of the public transcript of legitimacy and consensus, and also provided the practices and methods for the city's hidden transcripts. Together with political opportunity structures, these cultural constructs made up the nuts and bolts of contentious practices in Rome during the first two centuries of the imperial period.

(iv)   Public versus private: the spatial aspects of contentious politics

The spatial makeup of urban Rome also had a vital impact on contentious behaviour. If we follow Edward Soja, we can pivot spatial thinking around three key ideas: (i) that we are all spatial, temporal and social beings: (ii) that space is socially produced and thus able to be changed socially; and (iii) that the spatial shapes the social as much as the social shapes the spatial.[206] Transgressive contention, free space, subaltern social networks, and hidden transcripts were, therefore, all linked and shaped by the urban built environment. The availability of free spaces and the communication and relationships that existed within them increased the ease with which potential resistance could be formed, organised, and acted upon, while also providing a measure of cover against regime repression. Moreover, the product of these spaces and networks could affect how other, seemingly unrelated spaces would be perceived and used, since transgressive contention often disrupts existing spatial routines, and has a hand in reorganising or dramatising public space. So, when hidden

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[205] *s.c de Pisone* lines 155-58, from Rowe (2002) 85.
[206] Soja (2008) 2.

transcripts emerged into public spaces, they often adopted or subverted official scripts, acquiring the symbolic significance of that space or spatial routine. The inherent power of a location endowed by routine political life could, then, be wrested away, or at least contested by claim-makers, demonstrating that a feedback loop existed between 'public' and 'private' space, and hidden and official transcripts.[207] Indeed, the contrast between the neighbourhood spaces of ordinary people, and the spaces inhabited by Rome's other political actors was stark. The imperial palace complex on the Palatine, the fortified praetorian *castra* lying behind the city's ancient *agger*, and the Curia all represented different scenarios of power, which meant they could potentially be viewed as contestable, contentious locations. In short, the symbolic geography and spatial patterns of Rome mattered in the practice of contentious politics. The built environment shaped meaningful itineraries for public displays of resistance. When spaces were deliberately used as emblematic monuments for the dramatisation of popular demands, each instance laid down new histories, altering the spatial routines, collective memories, and symbolic value of each location. As a consequence, although Romans had well-established contentious repertoires, a cycle of contention (which naturally includes an upswing of transgressive behaviour) modified the lived experience and the memories upon which future urbanites constructed their own identities.

Conclusion: Roman contentious politics

The aim of this chapter was to introduce the theoretical concepts that underpin contentious politics and how those concepts could be applied to the Roman context. Fundamentally, contentious politics is the public component of the multifaceted relationships between political actors. In the course of participating or observing contention, people learn what interactions prove fruitful as well as the locally shared meaning of those interactions. When collective claim-making clumps together according to previous successes and cultural norms, performances become repertoires. Repertoires draw on the collective identities and social networks that make up everyday life. From these identities and social ties emerge both collective claims and the means for launching them. Changes in these localised

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[207] Tilly (2000) 138-9.

identities and interactions combined with cumulative contentious experiences and regime intervention produce incremental changes in contentious performances.[208]

Imperial Rome was by definition a 'non democracy' regardless of the parading of Republican ideologies by autocratic emperors. Relatively high regime capacities, restricted political access, and a small and usually stable elite made up the main components of the city's political opportunity structures. Whether actors mobilised successfully for contentious purposes was dependent on the opening up or closure of these structures, and whether they mobilised at all was dependant not merely on grievances, but on how situations and issues could be framed as unjust and liable to change.[209] The nature of imperial regimes carved out particular positions for the city's main political actors. The emperor relied upon the Praetorian Guard for its repressive capacity, the co-operation of the Senate, and the acceptance of the vast numbers that made up the *plebs urbana* for his social and political legitimacy. In return, each group expected certain benefits that recognised their status. The social goods that made up the imperial moral economy held the parties together, and the people would participate in mass consensus rituals that mirrored old Republican political forms. Politics was thus a public, performative affair. However, because of the capacity of imperial regimes and restricted access to the institutional side of politics, the importance of hidden transcripts and free space in Roman contention should not be overlooked. For an opportunity or threat to be recognised, it must be visible to potential challengers and perceived as an opportunity. How an issue is framed away from the eyes of authorities becomes an activating mechanism responsible in part for the mobilisation of previously inactive or new political actors.[210] Within those free spaces, local social networks who shared collective identities and lived experiences circulated their own unofficial information that combined with extant social structures to simplify and enable mass mobilisation around common issues. Roman contention, both contained and transgressive, depended on collective attribution developed through social constructs influenced by collective action frames generated and shared by local networks.[211] Understanding these patterns and

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[208] Tilly and Tarrow (2015) 23.
[209] Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2009) 28.
[210] McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2002) 43.
[211] McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2002) 43–45.

mechanisms provides valuable insight into how a cycle of contention began to gain momentum after 180CE, as many of the structures, processes and performances discussed in this chapter were part of the escalation of collective action in the late second and early third centuries.

Chapter 2: The beginning of a contentious cycle

When Marcus Aurelius died in 180CE, Herodian tells us that the emperor was mourned by soldier and civilian alike, acclaimed as 'Kind Father,' 'Noble Emperor,' 'Brave General,' and 'Wise, Moderate Ruler.' When his son Commodus was killed little over a decade later, people rushed to the altars and temples to give thanks, shouting 'the tyrant is dead!' 'The gladiator is slain!' and 'other blasphemies more scurrilous.'[212] The contrast between the seemingly spontaneous claims on behalf of father and son could not be more obvious. What motivated the change in public opinion was not entirely the fault of Commodus though. Exogenous factors combined with a marked shift in regime policy offered political opportunities for political actors to challenge the new administration, a process that in turn initiated a cycle of contention. Traditional verbal and physical contentious repertoires such as popular justice, food riots, and acclamations continued to be employed, but these performances were innovated upon and performed by new political actors as contention diffused into new social groups and spaces. Commodus' reaction to contention early in his reign exacerbated underlying grievances held by Rome's civilian population, which helped to diffuse contentious behaviour across a broad section of the populace. Then, the violent regime transitions of 193CE profoundly undermined long-held notions of imperial legitimacy. Only Septimius Severus found a way to contain the escalation of collective action by realigning political opportunity structures that hindered potential challengers, and by re-establishing strong legitimacy claims through his careful attendance to the city's moral economy. Severus may not have been loved like Marcus Aurelius, but his governance was stable enough to temporarily dampen the acceleration of contentious activity, which would escalate after his death and find its apogee in the destruction and violence of the events of 238CE.

This chapter aims to explain how this cycle of contention came into being: how grievances, opportunity structures, political actors, and the interaction between successive regimes and repertoires between 180-193CE generated political space and the performative templates for events that were to unfold decades later. The first section will focus on two issues from

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[212] Hdn. 1.4.8, 2.2.3.

Commodus' reign that contributed to the later escalation of contention: the socio-economic effects of the Antonine Plague and other exogenous factors, and the activities of 'early riser' challengers who employed persuasive collective action frames to draw in new political actors. The second part of this chapter will concentrate on the political opportunities opened up by the competing interests of the Senate, urban plebs, and Praetorian Guard in the wake of Commodus' assassination, and how those opportunities facilitated the diffusion of contention across the wider urban community, the employment of innovative performances, and the formation of new boundaries between groups.

The early imperial era was one of population growth and economic expansion, and popular contention remained at reasonably low, static levels apart from some isolated spikes during transitional years or times of dearth: 69CE saw both for example. That is not to say the era was entirely politically stable. Of Augustus' ten immediate successors, six were overthrown, but, except for the Year of the Four Emperors, these were a result of palace coups rather than contentious politics.[213] Nevertheless, Rome experienced relatively few episodes of political contention between 96-180CE, a continuation of the socio-political stability re-engineered by the Flavians after the tumultuous end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Amid example of collective violence, only Aurelius Victor mentions a food riot sometime during Antoninus Pius' reign, when a crowd (*a plebe Romana*), motivated by rumours of a grain shortage, threw stones at the emperor.[214] Aside from this episode, contention was mainly confined to the consensus rituals of the spectacle spaces and participation in imperial ceremonies. The *adventus* and *reditus* ceremonies in particular became more important as the emperor's absences from the city became more prolonged and frequent.

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[213] Turchin and Negedov (2009) 211.
[214] Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 152.9. Perhaps in connection with this disturbance, the *Historia Augusta* mentions that Antoninus relieved a shortage of grain, wine and oil during his reign (*Ant. Pius* 8.11); Rowan (2013) 222. Kyle Harper's data for wheat prices in Egypt show an increase for 150CE, which may indicate that there were food shortages around this time (Harper 2016).

However, after the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180CE, political contention in Rome escalated. The graph below presents the frequency of contentious performances between the first and early third centuries:

Fig 2: Frequency of contentious performances in Rome between 20CE-240CE

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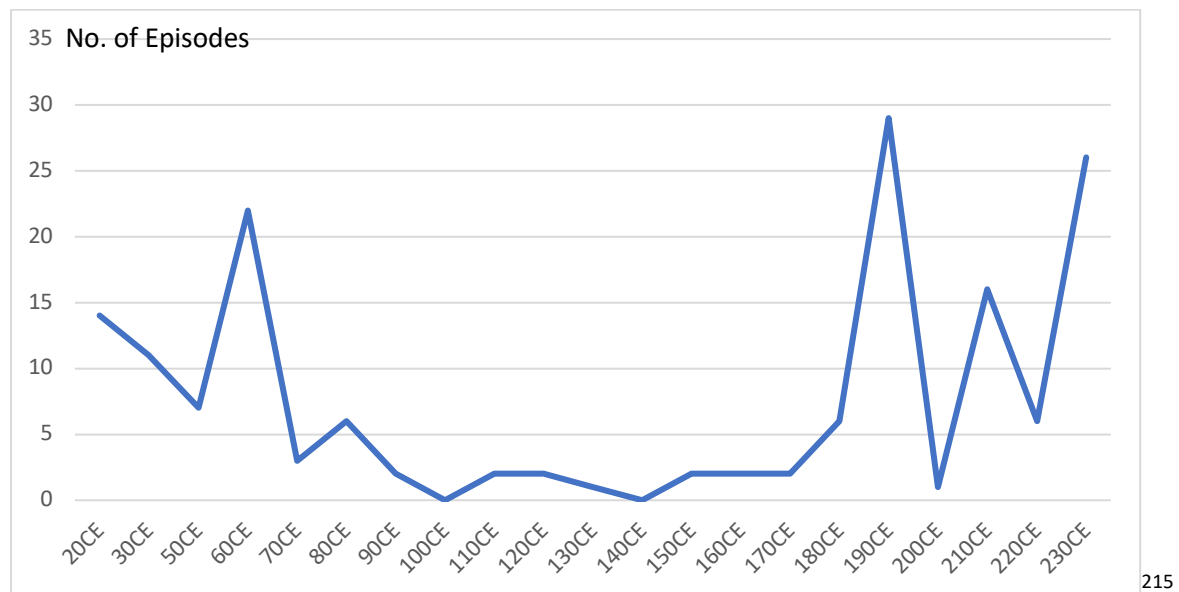
We can best interpret the urban political contention that occurred between 180-238 CE as a cycle. Contentious cycles begin when demands for social or political change are made by 'early risers:' well-placed claimants whose demands are usually narrow and group-specific. Their focused claims demonstrate the vulnerability of authorities to challenge, thus creating political opportunities for others to engage in claim and counter-claim making. As a cycle progresses, contentious activity increases as conflict heightens across the social system, and collective action diffuses into different spaces, social groups, and forms. Finally, a cycle declines when political opportunities decrease, either because demands have been met, or through exhaustion or repression.[216] As far as we can tell from the source material, contention in Rome declined precipitously after the momentous events of 238CE, suggesting that political activity entered a period of exhaustion after the extreme violence and destruction of that year. Together, the acceleration and deceleration of contentious

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[215] See Appendix.
[216] Tarrow (1993) 202, 287.

activity combined with the diffusion of collective action suggests that we are dealing with a cyclical phase of political conflict. Tarrow argues that the most distinctive aspect of contentious cycles is not that an entire society will necessarily rise up, but that the actions of early-risers triggers diffusion, extension, imitation, and reaction among actors who are usually more quiescent and have fewer resources to engage in collective action.[217] The outcome of a protest cycle then, is less significant in terms of the bigger picture than the social and political changes that accompany contentious processes, particularly diffusion. Indeed, a crucial property of diffusion is scale shift, a concept that relates not only to the spread of contention, but its shift to levels of the polity, which draws in new opponents, potential alliances, and different institutional settings.[218] This process would be significant even if it were an outcome of early riser action alone, but Rome experienced a multitude of external pressures from the mid-second century, which aided the diffusion process.

Furthermore, protest cycle theory suggests that, while endogenous aspects of the political environment like political opportunity structures are vital for the emergence and development of popular contention, exogenous factors also have a major role to play. The social impact of disease or natural disasters, for example, can have significant effects on political mobilisation, for certain sorts of claims to be advanced, and for particular strategies to be employed over others. Rome had long weathered numerous natural disasters, be it fire, flood, or famine. Whether contention resulted depended on how a regime responded to the expectations of the populace, and existing political opportunity structures.[219] Accordingly, uncertainty and instability generated from a combination of endogenous and exogenous factors provided opportunities for claim-making (and explains why contention would not break out in the absence of endogenous opportunities). The combination of both factors would also threaten established groups like the political elites, leading to increased competition among claimants for political space.[220] The origins of the late second century contentious cycle can thus be found in the convergence of external factors alongside regime response.

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[217] Tarrow (1998) 205.
[218] Tarrow (1998) 205.
[219] Meyer and Minkoff (2004) 1457-8.
[220] McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2006) 66.

Exogenous factors during the late 2nd century CE

The first two centuries of the imperial period witnessed strong demographic and economic growth and stability. Building activity, trading, and manufacturing peaked in the early second century, and the imperial financial position was sound: Antoninus Pius left a surplus of 2.7 billion *denarii*, the last reported until the fifth century.[221] However, the historiographers of the day believed that the sole accession of Commodus in 180CE marked the beginning of a period of instability, violence, and decay. Dio claimed that he was divinely inspired to write of the 'struggles' following the death of Marcus Aurelius, when 'our history now descends from a kingdom of gold to one of iron and rust, as affairs did for the Romans at that time.'[222] His contemporary Herodian was likewise stirred to write an eight-book history spanning the years 180-238CE. In his words:

> If we were to compare this period with all the time that had elapsed since the Augustan Age, when the Roman Republic became an aristocracy, we would not find, in that span of almost two hundred years down to the time of Marcus Aurelius, imperial successions following so closely; the varied fortunes of war, both civil and foreign; the national uprisings and destructions of cities, both in the Empire and in many barbarian lands. We would not find the earthquakes, the pollutions of the air, or the incredible careers of tyrants and emperors (1.1.4).

Modern debate on whether there really was a 'third-century crisis' and if so, from when it should be dated continues, but if we side-step the contemporary penchant for parsing 'crisis' versus 'transformation' or 'structural change,' there is still ample evidence that the time period highlighted by Dio and Herodian was one of growing economic, political and social instability, particularly in Rome.[223] In the mid-third century, Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, wrote to Demetrianus, the proconsul of Africa to defend his fellow Christians from accusations that their refusal to worship the gods caused 'all the events which shake and

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[221] Harl (1996) 94.
[222] Cass. Dio 72.36.4.
[223] For a discussion of the crisis of the third century (or in some views, a non-crisis), see many of the contributions in Hekster, de Kleijn, and Slootjes (2007). See also Alföldy (1974); McMullen (1976); Alföldy (1989); Strobel (1993); Potter (2004), and Drinkwater (2005).

oppress our world.' In his defence, Cyprian describes the effects of a shifting climate, hunger, war, and disease, and laments the breakdown in integrity, justice, and discipline.[224] The bishop's treatise was a reaction to recent anti-Christian imperial policies.[225] However, there is evidence that the climate began to deteriorate during the latter half of the second century. A warm, wet, and stable climate known as the Roman Climatic Optimum had graced the Republican and early imperial periods. From the mid-second century until approximately 400CE (a period known as the Roman Transitional Period), the weather worsened. Economic expansion and population growth had necessitated the employment of more marginal land that was the first to falter when the climate destabilised. Galen observed an 'unbroken succession' of famines in the mid-160s, and it is essential to bear in mind that the social burden associated with such environmental shocks are usually disproportionately borne by the lower levels of a social hierarchy.[226]

The economic situation that Cyprian describes is also corroborated by inscriptional and archaeological evidence. The chronology of dated wood and a reduction of metal content in the Greenland ice cap all point to a decline in industrial activity from the mid-second century. Debasement of imperial coinage, meanwhile, precipitated a slide towards rampant inflation, and the outbreak of the Antonine Plague between 165-180CE reversed previous demographic growth trends, creating conditions of insecurity and instability throughout the Empire.[227] Most scholarship agrees that the plague was severe enough to impact both rural and urban economies, the army, imperial finances, and even the spiritual values of many of the Empire's inhabitants. For those living in Rome, the plague undoubtedly had a severe impact. The most likely culprit, smallpox, is a directly transmitted respiratory disease mainly spread by direct and prolonged face-to-face contact between people. Urban risk factors of overcrowding, poor housing, and sanitation meant that the plague would have quickly spread through *insulae*, *vici*, and *thermae,* disproportionately affecting those with the poorest housing and endemic health conditions.[228] Littman and Littman postulate that, even

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[224] Cyprian: *Ad Dem.* 253-5, from Hekster (2008) 130-131.

[225] An edict of Trajan Decius obliged all inhabitants of the Roman Empire to sacrifice to the gods.

[226] Galen: *De alim.* 6.749–750. For the scientific data on ancient climate change, see McCormick, Büntgen, Cane, Cook, Harper, Huybers, Litt, Manning, Mayewski, More, Nicolussi, and Tegel (2012) 169-220; Harper (2017); Izdebski, Mordechai, and White (2018) 291.

[227] Hekster (2008) 32.

[228] For smallpox, see Zelener (2012).

if the average death rate in the Empire was at the low end of approximations, the mortality rate in Rome could have been 10% higher than in less densely populated areas, suggesting that at least 100,000 people in Rome died from the plague alone between 165-180CE, a significant percentage of the population, immigration notwithstanding.[229] Casualties were so high in the city that the *Historia Augusta* claims that bodies had to be removed by the wagon-load.[230] Like mortality rates, the economic impact of the plague years has been a source of much debate, although most agree that the epidemic disrupted the normal functioning of the Roman economy. As mortality rates remained higher than usual for many years, the amount of leased agricultural land, army diplomas (and documents in general), inscriptions, and coin and brick production all hit persistent lows throughout the early years of Commodus' reign. Drops in air pollution, mining activity, shipwrecks, and manufacturing and construction also point to a systemic economic downturn in the late second century.[231]

The scale of the plague unquestionably had the potential to stimulate political contention by eroding urban privileges and placing heavy pressure on the emperor to deal with the ongoing economic and social effects of the crisis. Certainly, when an economy suffers a downturn, any regime is vulnerable to challenge, especially one with depleted resources. In other words, economic crises can generate political crises, and issue-specific opportunities are often dependent on a broader background of economic and social issues.[232] Likewise, a disaster on the scale of the Antonine Plague can affect how a population perceives the government and its response. As Olsen argues, such a disaster can 'strip away layers of semantic, symbolic, and process cover to provide clear insights into the nature, priorities, and capabilities of authorities, governments and entire regimes. They are deeply, deeply

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[229] Littman and Littman (1973) 55. Total mortality rates differ significantly between scholars. More recent estimates have narrowed the range to between 10-30%. See Bruun (2003a) 426; Rathbone (1990), and Gilliam (1961). It is accepted that Egypt could have suffered a population loss of 20–30%. For example, Elliot (2016) 9-10 notes that Roman Alexandria had a population density upwards of 50,000 people per square kilometre, and a correspondingly high mortality rate. There is, then, no reason why urban Rome's mortality rates would have been much different, given that it was the same disease.

[230] SHA *Marc.* 13.5.

[231] Cass. Dio 71.2.4; Amm. Marc. 23.6.24, and Eutr. 8.12 note the severe demographic impact of the plague. Most of the economic data comes from Roman Egypt where prices suddenly doubled between 160-190CE, the only significant change between 45-274/5CE, although it should be noted that other socio-economic factors also contributed to Egypt's demographic and economic changes during this period. See Jongman (2007); Bruun (2007); Duncan-Jones (1996); Scheidel (2002); Greenberg (2003), and the contributions in Lo Cascio (2012).

[232] Kousis and Tilly (2005).

political.'[233] While the collective trauma attached to the effects of the plague impacted Rome's communities in a myriad of ways, that was not the only exogenous factor of the period. Famine, disease, rebellion, and military setbacks were a feature of nearly every reign, but Marcus Aurelius (and Lucius Verus) were unlucky enough to have to deal with several of these issues simultaneously and on a larger scale than before. Aside from the plague, the emperors had to deal with conflict with Parthia; instability in Britain, Raetia, and Upper Germany;[234] a catastrophic flood that caused damage and severe famine in Rome,[235] as well as wars with Marcomanni, Quadi and the Iazyges among others that would last for fourteen years. Disturbances in Egypt, Spain, Lusitania, and a short-lived rebellion by Avidius Cassius in 175CE added to Marcus Aurelius' woes. Dio alludes to the unique conditions of the time, noting that the emperor 'did not meet with the good fortune that he deserved, for he was…involved in a multitude of troubles throughout practically his entire reign.'[236] Undeniably, the sources illustrate a real emotional response to the cascade of crises. Lucian of Samosata describes oracles promising 'infallible aid' through verses that frightened people would write over their doorways as a charm against the plague.[237] A man and his associates continually made speeches from the wild fig-tree on the Campus Martius declaiming that the end of the world was near.[238] The city's anxieties over the concurrent Marcomannic war were such that Marcus Aurelius had priests perform both venerable Roman and foreign religious ceremonies to purify the city and placate its inhabitants.[239]

How the socio-economic effects of these crises were framed by the urban populace would dictate whether lived experience would be politicised, either in the direction of regime reinforcement or in the direction of political contestation. Marcus Aurelius and his advisors were frequently absent from Rome, providing elites with opportunities to seek out

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[233] Olsen (2008) 167.
[234] Birley (2000) 122; SHA *Marc*. 8.7.
[235] SHA *Marc*. 8.4-5. Because both Verus and Marcus are said to have taken active part in the recovery, the flood must have happened before Verus' departure for the east in 162CE as it appears in the biographer's narrative after Pius' funeral has occurred. Aldrete argues a date in autumn 161 or spring 162 is probable, and given the normal seasonal distribution of Tiber flooding, the most probable date was probably spring of 162CE. See Aldrete (2007) 30-31.
[236] Cass. Dio 72.36.3.
[237] Luc. *Alex*. 36.
[238] SHA *Marc*. 13.6.
[239] SHA *Marc*. 13.1-3. According to tradition, the ancient purificatory ceremony ordered by Marcus was first celebrated in 399 BCE in order to ward off the plague (Livy 5.13.5-6).

influential allies. The regime's repressive capacity was also lower than usual given that the majority of the emperor's man-power was engaged elsewhere in the Empire. In this case, however, the judicious leadership of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus closed opportunities and prevented grievances from festering. The co-emperors safeguarded the city's food supplies, ratified new laws on burials and tombs, conducted funeral ceremonies for the indigent at public expense, and provided spiritual leadership for the frightened populace. Imperial possessions were auctioned to avoid tax increases, while Rome's lavish games continued.[240] The absence of popular contention suggests that the epidemic was primarily experienced as a consensus crisis that increased the political capacity and legitimacy of the regime. As a concerned 'father' to his flock, the demonstrable *pietas* of Marcus Aurelius meant that he maintained his end of the moral contract with the people despite such severe challenges. That is not to say that grievances and social stresses were inconsequential. Any perceived change in imperial policy could prompt contention, notably if the relationship between the regime and urban political actors underwent adverse change. The goodwill Marcus Aurelius had built up meant that Rome had high hopes that Commodus would take after his father. Unfortunately, the sharp shift in regime outlook under the son affected dynamics between the emperor and the urban populace, providing fertile conditions for a contentious cycle to open.

The 'early risers' of Commodus' reign

The sole accession of Commodus in 180CE triggered contention as the regime change shifted political opportunity structures. Those in Rome who had lived under Marcus Aurelius had weathered multiple storms, but his governance had met the expectations of most of Rome's political actors, proving that exogenous factors do not cause contention on their own. Past events, experiences, and fears, however, become part of collective memory. Like trust, acceptance and good-will are fragile settings, and the inability or unwillingness of Commodus to follow his father's cooperative model of governance positioned early risers to take advantage of new opportunities for action that in turn provided templates for others to follow.

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[240] Grain supply: SHA *Marc.* 11.3, 5. Burial laws: 13.4-6. Spiritual support: 21.6. Games: 17.7, 23.4-5. Imperial possessions: Cass. Dio 72 fr.2; SHA *Marc.* 17.4-5.

Second-century emperors maintained the senatorial order's close ties with the imperial court and guarded their position at the top of the social pyramid. The *Historia Augusta* claimed that no-one showed the Senate more respect than Marcus Aurelius who 'always' attended meetings when he was in Rome, and even entrusted the order with judicial duties that were previously the emperor's prerogative. He also relied on an inner circle of advisors and almost always involved a *consilium* of eminent senators for significant decisions.[241] Commodus initially retained many of his father's former advisors but soon took an adversarial approach to the Senate, and increasingly relied on imperial freedmen and favourites instead of senatorial heavyweights. The breakdown in the traditional relationship between the Senate and emperor and the closing down of the imperial regime posed a threat to elites who now found themselves in the position of outsiders. Years earlier, former *amici* of Lucius Verus shut out after their patron's death likely supported Avidius Cassius' rebellion in 175CE, demonstrating that such men were prepared to defend their position by challenging their emperor.[242] Now, courtiers, faced with a similar threat from Commodus took the same approach. Together with disgruntled members of the imperial *familia* and administration, they helped three separate early-riser groups to launch public claims against the administration in the first half of the decade.

The first contentious act took place in 182CE shortly after Commodus' triumphal return to Rome.[243] The basic details align in all three main sources: Commodus' sister Lucilla, together with her husband's nephew Quintianus and her probable kinsman Marcus Ummidius Quadratus Annianus, arranged to have Commodus assassinated as he entered the Colosseum. Unfortunately for the conspirators, Quintianus announced to Commodus before stabbing him that the act had been commissioned by the Senate, allowing enough time for the imperial bodyguard to step in and thwart the attack.[244] By presenting the assassination attempt as one sanctioned by the Senate, the conspirators not only intimated the plan had

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[241] SHA *Marc.* 10.1-9, 22.3; Eck (2009) 103.

[242] Birley (2000) 190-1. Many of these connections would still be active in the Senate in 175CE, but none had graced the consular *fasti* after the death of Lucius in 169CE, and none were included among the *comites augusti* in 175/6CE for the eastern tour.

[243] Hekster (2002) 52 dates the conspiracy somewhere between 181 and the end of 182CE; Grosso (1964) 146-7 places at the date as late 182CE. Whittaker (1969) 37 argues that the date of the plot is fixed by the title Pius taken by Commodus afterward the plot. As this title first appears on the 7th Jan 183CE (*CIL* 4.2099.12), Whittaker concludes the plot must have been in 182CE.

[244] Hdn. 1.8.4: ἀμφιθεάτρου; Cass. Dio 73.4.4: ἐς τὸ θέατρον τὸ κυνηγετικὸν; SHA *Comm.* 4.3.

influential supporters, they also drew on collective memory to frame their claim as a just act. The performance had two obvious precedents; the assassination of Julius Caesar by a posse of senators in 44BCE, and that of Caligula by senators and members of the Praetorian Guard in 41CE. Undoubtedly, Quintianus' act was meant as a reminder of the Senate's fundamental but long-dormant role to safeguard the state against tyranny, and therefore meant to convince others that the claim was legitimate and not some grubby attempt at usurping imperial power. Accordingly, what began as an internal power struggle was transformed into a collective claim and act of transgressive contention against the emperor.

In response, Commodus initiated an extensive round of purges. Eminent senators, military commanders, members of the imperial family, former *amici* and close friends of Marcus, and the praetorian prefect Taruttienus Paternus were all executed. Rumours also circulated that Commodus wanted to kill the venerable urban prefect Aufidius Victorinus.[245] With the most powerful of the old guard gone, the now sole praetorian prefect S. Tigidius Perennis effectively operated as head of state.[246] The threat posed by a hostile prefect and emperor team resulted in another act of contention in the mid 180s. Unlike the Lucilla conspiracy, who and what engineered the fall of Perennis differs markedly in Dio and Herodian's accounts. According to the former, Perennis was lynched by mutinous troops who marched from Britain to protest the prefect's management of their affairs.[247] In contrast, Herodian claims that Commodus was pressured into executing his first minister in part because of a contentious episode at a theatre performance during the *Ludi Capitolini*, when a man dressed as a philosopher addressed the emperor from the stage to warn him of the threat posed by Perennis.[248] Most scholars prefer Dio's version of events, although it is unclear

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[245] The *Historia Augusta* provides a long list of those caught in Commodus' net after the failed attempt (*Comm.* 4.8-11). See also Cass. Dio 73.5.1-3; Hdn. 1.8.8. Victorinus: Cass. Dio 72.11.1-2. Garzetti (1961) 532-3 sees the executions in two distinct waves: the first was the actual conspirators and the second wave was directed at the prominent and successful. The execution of Paternus also likely came later, ostensibly for his decision to have Commodus' favourite, the freedman Saoterus, executed by the *frumentarii*, because of the people's 'aversion' of the emperor on account of the freedman, 'whose power the Roman people could not endure,' but more likely because his power threatened court insiders like Perennis (SHA *Comm.* 4.5).
[246] Although Perennis was a hold-over from the administration of Marcus Aurelius (his name is recorded in the *Tabula Bansitana* of 177CE), he appears to have been Commodus' personal choice for prefect.
[247] Cass. Dio 73.9.2-3. The soldier's anger, if true, rested upon the punishments handed down for their insubordination. Whether their claims of potential usurpation were a ready excuse to rid themselves of the head of military affairs or whether this story was a transmission of rumours doing the rounds in Rome is hard to say; as Brunt observes, Xiphilinus' abbreviated account is hardly intelligible: Brunt (1973) 174.
[248] Hdn. 1.9.4. This would provide a more or less exact date of 15 October 184CE. See Whittaker (1969) 53, n.3.

why Herodian's narrative should be less plausible than Dio's story that 1500 legionaries made a long and unsanctioned trip from Britain to personally denounce Perennis.[249] We should not discount either, but Herodian's version does account for the evident political tensions of the time (that are also noted by the *Historia Augusta*).[250] Perennis was unpopular with Rome's elites. He enthusiastically supported Commodus' adversarial approach towards them, and the prefect's replacement of senatorial commanders with equestrians also allegedly caused outrage.[251] In addition, instability in Britain, Germany, and Gaul saw rebellions both from within the imperial military apparatus and from outsiders, while substantial fortification activities in Lower Pannonia and Mauretania Caesariensis suggest that the frontier areas were also unstable.[252] These developments, combined with reports of military unrest provided an opportunity to stage a public claim against a regime indirectly under siege.

If Quintianus' performance at the Colosseum was meant to echo the Senate's historical role as guardians of the state, the *Ludi Capitolini* episode referenced two aspects of popular politics: the subversive role of philosophers, and the role of the theatre as a traditional site of contention. Herodian claims that the man who addressed Commodus wore the characteristic garb of an itinerant Cynic. While philosophers filled a public role as carriers of hidden transcripts, Cynics in particular were noted for their contempt for authority and ability to stir up popular feeling. Tacitus believed that no Roman emperor could tolerate 'that breed of men who were notorious for betraying the powerful and deceiving the hopeful.'[253] Under Vespasian, two Cynic philosophers returned to Rome and like 'barking dogs,' tried to stir up the masses by denouncing Titus' mistress Berenice in the theatre even though all philosophers were previously supposed to have been expelled.[254] They also

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[249] For those who prefer Dio, see Potter (2004) 90-91; Hekster (2002) 63; Alföldy (1989a) 101. Garzetti (1961) 536 is more sceptical, arguing that it is 'difficult to believe the absurd number quoted for the curious delegation, as it would also seem sensible to reject the far-fetched details given by Herodian, who among other things attributes the downfall of Perennis to a totally different cause, namely the discovery of disloyal plans of the son who held command in Pannonia.'

[250] See n.245 above.

[251] Hdn. 1.8.2; SHA *Comm*. 6.2. The replacement of senatorial commanders with equestrians was not new, but an acceleration of a policy pursued by Marcus Aurelius.

[252] Hekster (2012) 5-6; Cass. Dio 73.9.2a; *CIL* 11.6053.

[253] Tac. *Hist*. 1.22.

[254] Crook (1951) 170; Suet. *Vesp*. 13; Cass. Dio 65.13, 65.15.5, 66.12.2; Yavetz (1988) 138.

continued to plague future emperors: Dio informs us that Caracalla held a particularly bitter hatred for Aristotelian philosophers, even wanting to burn their books.[255]

The philosopher's display not only fit his performative role as a subversive truth-teller, but it also referenced the earlier tyranny theme articulated by Quintianus. Instead of Commodus playing the role of tyrant, the philosopher pointed to the danger of the prefect's tyranny, telling the emperor that 'the sword of Perennis is at your throat.'[256] This was a clear allusion to the Sword of Damocles and its victim, the young tyrant Dionysius II of Syracuse. The emperor, having closed down his regime, was meant to understand by the performance that he was now at the mercy of a too-powerful prefect.[257] Usually, contentious repertoires are specific to relational contexts; that is, a repertoire emerges out of the contentious relationships between particular powerholders and claimants.[258] The tyrant framing, along with the employment of a subversive philosopher figure was a recognisable repertoire enacted by those who wanted to challenge the emperor directly. In this case, though, the target was Perennis, which indicates that the repertoire had shifted. Instead of remaining a contextual claim aimed at the emperor, it now embraced a new target, purpose, and the involvement of new social actors. The repertoire was becoming modular.

This change is significant because the rise of a modular repertoire is associated with contentious cycles. Studies have shown that a modular repertoire will emerge when early claimants can demonstrate the effectiveness of their contention in such a way that following claimants will appropriate similar forms and imagery.[259] The repressive tactics of previous emperors had demonstrated that the public pronouncements of philosophers, on an imperial stage no less, had a profound effect on public opinion. This performance was not only meant to persuade Commodus, but the audience as well. Indeed, Herodian claims that everyone present at the theatre suspected the philosopher's words were true (although they pretended otherwise).[260] Moreover, the location ensured that the act would

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[255] Cass. Dio 78.7.3.
[256] Hdn. 1.9.4.
[257] See Cicero's discussion of the Dionysius and the Sword of Damocles: Cic. *Tusc. Disp*. 5.21. Herodian did like to use the cliché of looming danger (*e.g* 6.8.6, 7.5.5).
[258] Wada (2012) 545.
[259] Wada (2012) 545-6; McAdam (1995); Tarrow (1993).
[260] Hdn. 1.9.5.

be understood as a political claim. This performance probably took place at the Odeon specially constructed for the *ludi* by Domitian in 86CE.[261] It had a capacity of nearly 11,000 people, ensuring reports of what occurred would quickly circulate.[262] There had been little theatre contention after 69CE, but the space was regaining its contentious atmosphere. Commodus had earlier banished the pantomimes after they alluded to his debaucheries on stage.[263] The combination of a philosopher figure with the theatre space and an audience guaranteed that the claim would be shared collectively, and its message amplified.

Participants in contentious politics learn how to match performances with local circumstances and to modify performances in the light of their effects.[264] The real threat of retribution compelled the claimants to employ an indirect and persuasive claim instead of a risky physical attack. Also, since it was customary for the emperor to present the prizes for the cultural elements of the games, Commodus' attendance was expected. Logistically, the theatre was one of the few places where somebody could hope to address the emperor personally, since Commodus by this point was restricting his public appearances and all messages were passing through the hands of Perennis first.[265] Cultivating potential allies from the watching crowd and utilising the public nature of the theatre to petition an increasingly inaccessible emperor was a clever use of symbolic imagery and space, as Commodus could not ignore what effectively was a public petition. Transgressive though the philosopher's performance was, it still put pressure on the emperor to address the claim and the articulated threat, lest he appear weak or unwilling to engage with his subjects. As a result, Perennis and his sons were executed, and Commodus rescinded a number of the prefect's measures, confirming that popular opinion still mattered, despite the closed nature of the regime.[266]

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[261] Both the Odeon and the stadium for the athletics shows were still regarded as two of Rome's finest buildings in Ammianus Marcellinus' time (6.10.4).

[262] The *Regionary Catalogues* give a capacity of 10,600 for the Odeon. Coarelli, Clauss, and Harmon (2014) 296.

[263] SHA *Comm*. 3.3.

[264] Tilly (2008) 18.

[265] SHA *Comm*. 5.1.

[266] SHA *Comm*. 6.4. Commodus' actions after the removal of Perennis point to his fear of insubordination both abroad and in Rome. For example, several senators were hastily rehabilitated. Pertinax was sent to subdue the British legions in 186CE, and Commodus took to keeping the children of provincial governors' hostage in Rome (SHA *Pert*. 3.5-9; Hdn. 3.2.4).

In Herodian's narrative, a third claim was launched shortly after the Perennis affair.[267] Despite the fall of the powerful prefect, the fundamentals of Commodus' regime had not changed. The emperor's chamberlain, the freedman Cleander, took Perennis' place as chief minister. Relations with the Senate had not improved, and in Gaul and Iberia, a deserter called Maternus led a band of criminals on a plundering rampage in what the *Historia Augusta* calls the *bellum desertorum*.[268] In response, Commodus organised a military operation. Maternus shifted his activities to Italy and decided to attack Commodus during the *Hilaria* festival. However, Maternus was betrayed by one of his men and executed, Commodus conceding a public thanksgiving, and the people a public celebration for the emperor's safety.[269] Although there is some evidence to support the historicity of the *bellum desertorum*, it is not unreasonable to feel a degree of cynicism regarding Herodian's tale, although there is some evidence that there was an attempt made on Commodus' life at the festival.[270] A new type of *hilaritas* coin was issued in 187CE, and, given that this coin type was relatively rare, its appearance around the same time as the alleged plot is unlikely to be a mere coincidence.[271] Commodus also increased the size of the praetorian cohorts and his personal bodyguard, and began spending most of his time at his estates outside Rome.[272] The same year, in what was a standard imperial response to a crisis, Commodus also promised the plebs largesse as thanks for their loyalty.[273]

If we accept Herodian's narrative, the spatial aspects of the episode, as with the earlier two events, are noteworthy. The historian explicitly mentions the *lavatio* portion of the ceremony as the time-space for the attack. As the emperor would accompany the stone of

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[267] Herodian claims that the Maternus episode happened 'shortly after' the Perennis affair (1.9.10). An inscription on a writing tablet from Rottweil, which appears to mention the suppression of the revolt, has a date of 12 August 186CE that provides a *terminus ante quem* for this event: Grünewald (2004) 124-5.

[268] SHA *Pesc. Nig*. 3.4; Hdn. 1.10.1-3. The Maternus rebellion may well have been a precursor or forerunner of the Bagaudae. See Drinkwater (1984); Thompson (1952). For more on the *bellum desertorum*, see Alföldy (1971).

[269] Hdn. 1.10.5, 1.10.7. Herodian claims that the *Hilaria* was a festival that allowed participants to disguise themselves as any character no matter how important or exclusive.

[270] Alföldy, Hohl, and Grünewald believe the entire episode is a fiction: Alföldy (1971) 375; Hohl (1954) 17-19; Grünewald (2004) 46-7. On the other hand, Grosso considers the episode to be plausible as does Kaiser-Raiß: Grosso (1964) 235-8; Kaiser-Raiß (1980) 35-6.

[271] RIC 3, No. 150-1, 497-8.

[272] Hdn. 1.11.5.

[273] Hdn. 1.10.7. Cass. Dio 73.16.2; SHA *Comm*. 16.8. Duncan-Jones' compilation of imperial *congiaria* shows that Commodus increased his per year and per capita expenditure by at least 56% on Marcus Aurelius, Antoninus Pius or Hadrian's distributions (Duncan-Jones 1998, 248-250).

the Magna Mater down the Via Sacra, a parade would follow displaying imperial treasures, while spectators were allowed the license to dress up and 'play the fool.'[274] Any logistical advantage due to the carnival atmosphere would pale in comparison to the emotional impact on those witnessing an attack on the emperor as he performed his sacred duty. Such an act during a ceremony that served to reaffirm the collective, civic identities of the populace, surrounded by the tangibles of imperial power, would be an act of violent contention against the state in general. The Maternus episode may reflect rumours spread after the *Hilaria* to explain Commodus' behaviour post-festival or to explain a deepening sense of political instability. Even if the story was amplified or even staged by Commodus to explain his subsequent behaviour, the very idea that an outsider would dare attack the emperor during a religious ceremony inside his capital demonstrates just how isolated and vulnerable Commodus appeared to others. Coinage issued in 186-187CE depicting a healthy working relationship between the emperor, the army, and the Senate suggests that Commodus was engaging in a series of tactical counter-moves in order to dampen down perceptions of weakness and division.[275]

The actions of the early riser claimants created uncertainty and communicated to Rome's urban communities new possibilities for the conduct of contentious politics. Contention was initiated by actors who had the most institutional leverage, followed by action taken by groups increasingly distant from the state and increasingly less endowed with institutional influence or other resources.[276] Of course, the contention of early risers is only crucial if something of consequence develops from their actions. The cognitive framing introduced by the initial claimants provided the ideational and interpretative anchoring necessary for the development of an insurgent consciousness around issues perceived as illegitimate but subject to change through group action.[277] When a serious crisis emerged, the cognitive frames used by the early risers were able to be used by others to interpret events and provide possible solutions. In other words, their efforts opened up the institutional barriers

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[274] Hdn. 1.10.5. The *lavatio* took place on the 27th March, the day before the *Megalesia* began.
[275] Coins with Commodus and the Senate: BMC IV, 730, 732, 811-812, 814, 822. Commodus in the middle of four soldiers with the legend FID EXERCIT: BMC IV, 725, 729, 805.
[276] McAdam and Sewell (2001) 99.
[277] Petrova (2010) 148; McAdam (1995) 231.

through which the claims of other actors could pour.[278] Therefore, whether disaster would be experienced as a community crisis (as in Marcus Aurelius' time) or as failure of government was dependent on the conceptions of justice coaxed into being during the early years of Commodus' reign.

Crisis and conspiracy: the Cleander riot of 190CE

Around 190CE, a particularly virulent outbreak of plague, and severe food shortages hit Rome.[279] Dio claimed that the return of the plague was 'the greatest of any of which I have knowledge,' with two thousand people often dying in Rome in a single day. Herodian observed that the suffering was especially severe in Rome because of its high population density.[280] A large number of immigrants constantly flowing into Rome could partly explain why the outbreak was so severe since surviving a smallpox infection confers immunity upon an individual. It was not just the poor who suffered either: the epidemic was so severe that Cleander appointed twenty-five consuls that year. Dio, Herodian, and the *Historia Augusta* all depict this as a money-making venture by the avaricious freedman, but it is more likely that the plague had killed so many senators that multiple consuls needed to be appointed to ensure a sufficient number remained to take up essential administrative proconsular positions.[281]

The accompanying famine also appears to have been serious. There are indications that Egyptian grain supplies remained unstable after the original plague pandemic tapered off. In 186CE, Commodus organised a state-owned grain fleet to bring supplies from North Africa (*classem Africanam*), which was supposed to be useful 'in case the grain supply from Alexandria were delayed.'[282] This would be an unusual step since it was imperial practice to rely on (and encourage) private merchants to carry out the importing of grain. Moreover, the *Historia Augusta* notes that Commodus made matters worse by ordering 'a general

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[278] Tarrow (1998) 167.
[279] Hdn. 1.12.3. He claims that the plague and famine occurred at the same time. Dio states that the famine struck first, followed by the 'pestilence' (73.14.1). The *Historia Augusta* does not mention the plague at all, only the famine (*Comm.* 14.1). Whittaker (1964) claims the plague/famine occurred in 190CE, a date that I will adhere to.
[280] Cass. Dio 73.14.3; Hdn. 1.12.1.
[281] Cass. Dio 73.12.4; SHA *Comm*. 6.9-10; Hekster (2012) 237.
[282] SHA *Comm*. 17.7.

reduction of prices, the result of which was an even greater scarcity.'[283] It seems ensuring a stable food supply had been an on-going issue for Commodus' administration – it could explain why the emperor suspended the *alimenta* – but the situation appears to have got drastically worse in 190CE. The cumulative effect of both disasters within a short time-frame had a significant impact on the urban population. Dio alludes to the city's social anxieties at this time, describing a conspiracy theory that circulated around the city:

> Then, too, many others, not alone in the city, but throughout almost the entire Empire, perished at the hands of criminals who smeared some deadly drugs on tiny needles and for pay infected people with the poison by means of these instruments (73.14.4).

Such a scenario sounds implausible: Dio relates an almost identical account that occurred during the reign of Domitian, Livy a tale from the fourth century BCE.[284] The point, however, is that such conspiracy theories were circulating and undoubtedly believed by many. On the one hand, such stories fulfil a cognitive need to explain the unusual and deal with collective trauma by translating undefined anxieties into focused fears.[285] On the other hand, as conspiracies are essentially hidden transcripts, Dio's description indicates that marginal discourse had been propelled into the public sphere.[286] Why the appearance of this type of unofficial information is significant is that conspiracy theory tends to centre on the principle of *cui bono* – who benefits from the present situation, and perhaps more importantly, who is to blame?[287] Commodus had shown a distinct lack of leadership, fleeing to Laurentum when the plague arrived, and he was still absent when the famine hit.[288] Unlike Marcus Aurelius, who took authoritative measures to deal with the effects of the Antonine Plague, and who provided both spiritual and temporal leadership, Commodus, apart from his disastrous market intervention, had left the city to fend for itself.

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[283] SHA *Comm*. 14.1. Fixing grain prices was an unusual measure; the last intervention was by Nero in 64CE (Tac. *Ann*. 15.39).
[284] Cass. Dio 67.11.6; Livy 8.18.4-8.
[285] Moore (2005) 5.
[286] Landes (2006)
[287] Landes (2006)
[288] Hdn. 1.12.2.

The emperor's moral and physical absence allowed hidden transcripts to diffuse amongst the population, and a satisfactory answer to both questions (who benefitted and who was to blame?) was found. Conspiracy theories usually target socially marginal figures, and Commodus' powerful minister Cleander fit the brief. As an ex-slave and foreigner, Cleander was an ideal target at which to funnel grievances against the regime. Although he acted the part of the aristocratic politician, constructing baths and other civic amenities in Rome and elsewhere in the Empire, he had powerful enemies in the Senate, and the populace 'hated and despised' the minister.[289] What followed demonstrates that contextually specific and subjective conspiratorial perceptions framed the regime's failings, and made the imperial freedman directly responsible for the food shortages. Dio suggests that Cleander was deliberately set up by imperial officials. Herodian, meanwhile, claims that the freedman created the problem by buying up grain for later distribution. Either way, both versions infer that the circulation of rumours regarding Cleander's management of the *annona* generated the impetus for claim-making. Famine and plague combined made this new conspiracy a narrative that justified aggressive action, for the direr the conspiracy, the more liberated the response that is considered legitimate by its 'victims.'[290]

The result was a diffusion of contention in both social and spatial terms during the *Cerealia* festival.[291] Initially, theatre audiences launched verbal protests, blaming Cleander 'for all their hardships,' a performance that confirms the re-emergence of the theatre as a contentious space.[292] Dio does not mention the theatre protests, but only one grand, organised demonstration at the Circus Maximus followed by a march to Commodus' estate:

> There was a horse-race on, and as the horses were about to contend for the seventh
> time, a crowd of children ran into the Circus, led by a tall maiden of grim aspect,
> who, because of what afterward happened, was thought to have been a divinity. The

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[289] Cass. Dio 73.12.5; Hdn. 1.12.4-5. Enemies in the Senate: SHA. *Comm*. 6.11-7.1.
[290] Landes (2006).
[291] The Cerealia was an eight-day festival in April that began with *ludi scaenici* and culminated with *ludi circenses.* See *Ov. Fast*. 4.494, 4.620; Tac*. Ann.* 15.53*.*
[292] Hdn. 1.12.5. Whittaker and Birley among others follow the *Historia Augusta*'s line that Cleander's move against Arrius Antoninus, the proconsular governor of Asia, and the African faction in the Senate precipitated the riot in 190CE, but there is no evidence that Arrius, let alone Burrus or Aebutianus were especially popular with the urban population. SHA *Comm*. 7.1; Whittaker (1964) 352-3; Birley (1999) 78.

children shouted in concert many bitter words, which the people took up and then began to shout out every conceivable insult; and finally, the throng leaped down and set out to find Commodus (who was then in the Quintilian suburb), invoking many blessings on him and many curses upon Cleander (73.13.3-4).

As the *Cerealia* celebrated the grain goddess Ceres, the link between the festival and the current famine would have been evident to all, especially since the festival was celebrated in mid-April, at least a month before the grain ships arrived in Rome when supplies would be at their lowest.[293] Dio's description certainly suggests the initial demonstration was organised, and there were links between pantomime and circus factions that could have been used to facilitate the logistical side of the initial protests.[294] However, a crowd cannot be forced into making collective claims on such a large scale. Crowd dynamics certainly play a part, but spectators must choose to act on their own opportunities and grievances.

The opening contention, as with the theatre protests, followed the established verbal repertoire for the Circus. The children's chanting of 'many bitter words' were likely negative acclamatory formulas known to the crowd as Dio uses the same phrasing (πολλὰ καὶ δεινά) to describe the synchronised insults uttered by the Senate and people together after Commodus' death.[295] However, since the emperor was not present at the races, the audience took the protest to him at his holiday villa, which was over 8km away. A protest march was an innovative form of Roman contention. Crowds would often flock some way out of the city limits for *adventus/profectio* ceremonies, but concerted movement through and beyond urban spaces was almost always state-sponsored. Along the way, they continued to use verbal formulas from the Circus (blessings for Commodus, curses for Cleander) that advertised a cohesive message and provided a sense of legitimacy to both participants and observers. The complex form of collective locomotion demonstrated the significance of the issue as it required extensive interaction among at least some of the participants, indicating that a collective identity had formed around the issue of Cleander.

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[293] Earliest possible arrival of the Egyptian grain ships would have been May. See Rickman (1980a) 267.
[294] See Roueché (1993) 31-43. Graffiti at Aphrodisias links pantomime performers with particular factions.
[295] Cass. Dio 74.2.

The aim of the protesters was to air their grievances to the emperor in person, as they would do at the shows. Commodus had been restricting his public appearances of late. Usually perhaps, contention at the shows would have continued regardless, but the collective trauma of the Antonine Plague had been re-awakened by the latest outbreak, and the framing of the crisis as a regime issue forced protesters to adapt the usual circus repertoire. Certainly, the transfer of the protest from the Circus to Commodus' private space transformed what was a usually tolerated form of communication into a transgressive and potentially dangerous one. This latent danger was confirmed in what happened next. Once the protesters arrived, they 'raised a fearful din' demanding Cleander's execution. In response, the freedman sent out a detachment of soldiers to deal with the crowd. Dio uses the vague phrasing 'some soldiers' (στρατιώτας τινὰς), but Herodian specifies that it was the imperial cavalry (οἱ βασίλειοι ἱππεις), almost certainly the *equites singulares* who were under Cleander's command.[296] This scenario makes sense since the *equites singulares* could cut off the marchers as they proceeded along the Appian Way by coming along the *vicus Sulpicicius*, a direct road from their *castra.*[297]

Despite sustaining injuries and fatalities from the cavalry, the crowd refused to disperse, reassured by its size and by the supportive presence of other soldiers who were present but who stood by instead of actively repressing the demonstration. Whittaker suggests that Dio's use of δορύφορος to describe the soldiers indicates that they were praetorians presumably summoned by Cleander, their nominal commander. However, it makes more sense that it was the urban cohorts, not the praetorians who were on hand. Urban troops manned the Circus and surrounding streets during the festivities and would have reached the villa far quicker than a detachment of praetorians who would have to be summoned from their camp over 11km away.[298] Moreover, when describing the following violence, Herodian claims that it was the city troops (οἱ τῆς πόλεως) who came to the aid of the people and that the urban cohorts despised the *equites singulares*, which may be why they

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[296] Commodus had previously bestowed the title *a pugione* ('Master of the Dagger') on Cleander that gave him unofficial control over the Praetorian Guard and the *equites singulares*. See Whittaker (1969) 76, n.1.
[297] Whittaker (1969) 79, n.3.
[298] Cass. Dio 73.13.5; Whittaker (1969) 351. G.P.S. data indicates that the distance from the praetorian *castra* to the Villa Quintili was 11.3km. This route would take an ordinary person almost 2 ½ hours walk. A soldier's march would be quicker, but there would have been a substantial delay if Cleander summoned them after the arrival of the crowd.

did not join in actively repressing the demonstration.[299] Unimpressed with the power Cleander had over their position, the Guard and its prefect (who was subsequently executed) may have decided to drag their feet when the freedman summoned their support.

In Dio's account, the violence was limited to the area around the imperial villa. In Herodian's version, the crowd broke under the onslaught of the cavalry and headed back to the city where a prolonged battle broke out in its narrow, winding streets:

> The people were unable to withstand the assault, for they were unarmed men on foot fighting against armed men on horseback. And so they fell, not only because the cavalry attacked them and trampled [them with their] horses, but also because they were overwhelmed by the sheer weight of their own numbers, and many died in the pile-ups. The horsemen pursued the fugitives right to the gates of Rome and slaughtered them without mercy as they attempted to force their way into the city. When the people that had stayed behind in the city saw the horror of what had happened, they locked the doors of their houses and climbed onto the roofs, from where they pelted the horsemen with stones and tiles. The cavalry began to get a taste of their own medicine because there was no-one to fight with at close quarters and the people were hurling things from a safe distance….A large number were killed on either side before the urban cohorts, who hated the cavalry, came to the rescue of the people (1.12.7-9).

What was a demonstration and localised skirmish between protesters and troops became in Herodian's words a 'civil war.'[300] It has been suggested that Herodian's narrative is a re-working of Thucydides 2.4.2, but roof tiles and the accompanying stones that held them down frequently served as projectiles in Roman urban conflicts.[301] Certainly, rulers understood what damage tiles could do: Dio tells us that Caracalla had his troops occupy

[299] Hdn. 1.12.9.
[300] Hdn. 1.13.1
[301] *E.g.* Cass. Dio 48.9.4-5; Tac. *Hist*. 3.71. See Barry (1996) 73-4 for further examples of tile throwing and urban warfare in the Graeco-Roman world.

city rooftops before massacring the residents of Alexandria in 216CE.[302] Tiles were an effective and dangerous weapon, but expensive to replace and were therefore only used in times of real emergency. The impassioned defence of the city against well-armed soldiers reflects the fact that those involved saw themselves under attack by outsiders to their community and its ideals, just as in war.[303] Herodian has Commodus' sister Fadilla articulate this sense of invasion in an apocryphal aside, telling her brother that 'our own people (*i.e.*, the soldiers) are doing the sort of thing we never expected to happen to us at the hands of any barbarian.'[304] As with the earlier theatre performance, Commodus was expected to acquiesce to, or at least acknowledge the demands made by the protesters who had congregated outside his villa. Violent suppression of the protesters interfered with the people's right to communicate with their emperor, and therefore broke the implicit and long-standing agreement that emperors would tolerate this type of collective claim-making. Commodus' reluctance to 'play the part' at the Circus, and his inability to lead the city through pestilence and famine had put so much pressure on a traumatised population that they had had to resort to an innovative and transgressive use of space as a way of articulating their demands. The invasion of city streets by the imperial cavalry, however, put protesters in the position of having to physically defend their neighbourhoods, homes and families, and the spatial and social diffusion of the conflict forced the populace to prioritise their local collective identities over their obligations to their emperor.

(i) Popular justice

As the urban population gained the upper hand over the *equites singulares* and received the support of the urban cohorts, two things happened. Commodus realised the danger and ordered Cleander's execution and gave his body to the crowd.[305] The hidden transcripts that had fuelled conspiracy theories demanded a resolution of the injustice that the freedman essentially personified. If Cleander had been executed in response to the initial demonstration at the imperial villa, the crowd might well have gone home satisfied, but the violence inflicted by the emperor's soldiers amplified this sense of injustice. Commodus had

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[302] Cass. Dio 78.22.2.
[303] Barry (1996) 60-61.
[304] Hdn. 1.13.2. Dio has Commodus' mistress Marcia rather than his sister warn him (73.13.5).
[305] Cass. Dio 73.13.6; Hdn. 1.13.3.

finally listened, and the crowd now acted as extra-legal enforcers of a justice originally denied. In a re-enactment of the treatment meted out to Vitellius, Sabinus and Sejanus decades earlier, a crowd paraded the hated minister's head, dragged his body through the streets, and mutilated his corpse before consigning the body to the sewer. As with Tiberius' right-hand man, Cleander's children and known associates were also subjected to the same indignities.[306] The enactment of this violent popular justice ritual was a performative response that articulated the damage inflicted upon the crowd by the emperor and his administration, and a hated freedman was an ideal scapegoat. Positive perceptions of Marcus Aurelius' response to disaster were lodged in recent memory, and the stark contrast between father and son's regimes made the situational framing clear and explicit.

Passing a public sentence upon Cleander using symbolic, recognisable actions gave a sharp definition to the political identities at play, the boundaries between the two parties and the relations between and within those boundaries.[307] It was also a competitive display that signalled the capacity of the urban plebs as a collective entity to resist the repressive capacity of the emperor's troops. By acquiescing to the scapegoating of his favourite and allowing the assembled populace the political space to exact their own justice, the emperor was able to preserve his regime's legitimacy. In fact, although Commodus expected additional violence, the people welcomed him back into the city after the riot, escorting him to the palace with a procession.[308] Their privileged ability to communicate face-to-face with the emperor was reconfirmed, and since it proved successful, the crowds could retire with the knowledge that the emperor understood his end of their compact. The scale of the Circus protest, which was the most severe bout of urban collective violence in over a century, posed a serious threat to Commodus' regime despite a rapid demobilisation afterward. During the initial early riser performances, audiences had remained passive. In the case of the Circus protest, what had initially begun as a stylised performance, was quickly amplified by large numbers of spectators who identified with existing but previously non-salient collective identities. The progression of contentious performances from

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[306] Tac. *Ann*. 5.9.
[307] Tilly (2003) 84.
[308] Hdn. 1.13.7.

Colosseum, theatre, and Circus to the streets thus illustrates the widening edges of contention in the latter part of the 180's in both social and spatial terms.

Such a scale-shift meant that Commodus needed to reimpose imperial authority over the contestable Circus space. He did this through a symbolic colonisation of the arena that reinforced his domination of the socio-spatial order.[309] Not only did Commodus personally participate in the games, but he also harnessed the huge popularity of the chariot-races in the last years of his reign. Dio comments that he held many races at the Circus, not necessarily for religious reasons, but to enrich the faction leaders and delight the populace.[310] Through this programme, Commodus was able to reassert control by viewing his subjects from the middle of 'his' arena. With no military glory to advertise and no real power base in the Senate, the emperor's divine legitimation as Commodus-Hercules appropriated the power of these institutions and reconstituted them in his own form.[311] As Hekster comments, 'Commodus' behaviour created an extreme form of reciprocity. Rather than being an anonymous inspector, the emperor was there to be looked at. Those who were subjects could see to whom they were subjected, and what he did to merit his position at the top.'[312] In essence, the emperor's personal stewardship of spectacle space theatralised its contentiousness, and by doing so, he could overcome the latent threat of the location and constrain opportunities for contention. Commodus' employment of an unabashedly populist platform also was an attempt to deflect long-standing grievances away from his regime, the reversal of the usual SPQR to PSQR on inscriptions is a case in point.[313] However, this policy had another effect. It reinforced the symbolic significance of the Circus space as contestable, contentious space, which would have implications in the future. Furthermore, Commodus' amplified performances of consensus and reciprocity lifted the bar both for himself and future emperors.

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[309] Martin and Miller (2003) 152.

[310] Commodus' personal participation in the games: SHA *Comm*. 11.10-12, 12.10-12, 15.3; Cass. Dio 73.17.2-3**.** Increased frequency of chariot races: SHA *Comm*. 16.9; Cass. Dio 73.10.2, 73.16.1.

[311] Cass. Dio 73.15.2; Hdn. 1.14.8.

[312] Hekster (2005) 169.

[313] In 191CE it was noted in the *Actis Urbis* that the gods had given Commodus to the *Populus Senatusque Romanus*. On the so-called bronze of Lascuta, the usual order has also been changed (*CIL* 2.5041).

The violent conflict of 190CE was a culmination of multiple strands of contention that had been building through the initial years of Commodus' reign. As the emperor closed his regime around socially marginal favourites and increased repression, the resulting instability of socio-political alignments created political opportunities. Early risers offered an alternative discourse that allowed contention to diffuse into new social and spatial sectors and forms. These conditions fostered the perception that actors had an opportunity to engage in independent action in order to address the injustices caused by Commodus' poor moral leadership at a time of social crisis.[314] The street battle and the popular justice meted out to Cleander's corpse, family and friends was a predictable result, given the emergence of hidden transcripts into the public sphere.

Exogenous factors were a principal driver of contentious action, but only because the regime response was deemed insufficient. A second shock illustrates this point. A devastating fire swept through Rome in 191CE, and the sources all describe a clustering of portents and prodigies during this time, yet Commodus' response was to ritually re-name the city, legions, grain fleet, Senate, and the populace after himself.[315] As crowds had done in protest at Caligula's behaviour, residents stayed away from his extravagant games from 'shame and fear.'[316] Non-attendance of the games, and the recording of omens show that resistance remained, although it had reverted to more passive subversion. A decrease in active contention was expected given Commodus' theatrical appropriation of the city's spectacle spaces, and his emergent megalomania, but the hidden transcripts that mobilised crowds against Cleander continued to circulate. Only now, people believed that the divine were conspiring against Rome and its people, and their displeasure, in Herodian and Dio's retelling at least, was the emperor's fault alone.[317]

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[314] Diani (1996) 1056.

[315] Fire: Hdn. 1.14.2; Cass. Dio 73.24.1-2. Portents: Hdn. 1.14.1; Cass. Dio 73.24.1; SHA *Comm*. 16.1-3. Legions: Cass. Dio 73.15.2. Fleet: SHA *Comm*. 12.7. Senate: Cass. Dio 73.15.6. The people: SHA *Comm*. 15.5.

[316] Cass. Dio 73.20.2; Hdn. 1.15.7. Caligula: Cass. Dio 59.13.5, 13.7.

[317] Hdn. 1.14.7: 'with so many disasters befalling the city in rapid succession [the people] no longer looked with favor upon Commodus they attributed their misfortunes to his illegal murders and the other mistakes he had made in his lifetime.'

193CE: From crisis to coup—who legitimises the emperor?

The assassination of Commodus, accomplished behind closed doors on New Year's Day 193CE was no contentious performance, yet the opportunity for such action was mainly predicated around popular discontent in Rome.[318] Commodus' legitimacy was largely based upon a strong procedural claim that recognised his dynastic rights, and the traditional roles and ideological expectations of the *populus*, Senate and army. However, if those roles changed, the parties in question still had to accept extant claims, or else they would weaken. The emperor's actions, especially in the last eighteen months of his reign, had begun to pick away at some of the foundational basis of his authority. The Senate's place as a political actor had been downgraded, as selected courtiers and the Praetorian Guard were elevated in its place. The emperor's relative lack of success in fulfilling the expectations of his main constituents weakened his performance claim. It is also clear that the discursive mechanisms that the emperor employed to emphasise his centrality to notions of imperial strength and unity, a crucial component of a personalism claim, had not been widely accepted.

Commodus may have attempted to 'coup-proof' his regime through his close association with the Guard, but the erosion of his legitimacy claims provided an opportunity for insiders to attempt what those involved in the Lucilla conspiracy had failed to do almost a decade earlier. An assassination by court members was neither legitimate nor just, however, and new claims had to be constructed by potential imperial candidates. The conspirators had picked a replacement that they hoped would be amenable to Rome's political actors. This choice was questioned however, as was the next. Competing imperial claims created an unstable political environment where those involved assessed and tested extant boundaries as shifting opportunity structures affected the viability of different contentious performances. This conflict, in turn, aided the diffusion of political contention to include

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[318] Dio and Herodian present the murder as an *ad hoc* response by the courtiers Laetus, Eclectus and Marcia to the discovery of their names on the emperor's hit-list, but more realistically, it was the result of a well-planned conspiracy: see Hdn. 1.17.5-7; Cass. Dio 73.22.1-4. Lena Gerling's research has also demonstrated that widespread public discontent, especially when occurring in urban centres, can act as a trigger of *coups d'état* in autocratic regimes by opening a window of opportunity for leadership removals by the ruling elite: Gerling (2017) 1-36.

new political actors and object pairings; processes that shaped the forms, dynamics, and trajectories of urban collective action during 193CE.

Fundamental to the instability of that year was the question of who and by what means imperial candidates could establish real authority. The differing outcomes that followed the assassinations of Caligula, Nero, and Domitian indicate that whichever group managed to take control of immediate events, be it the Senate in the case of Nerva, or the Praetorian Guard in the case of Caligula, they could shape the political environment to best suit their interests. The conspirator's choice of emperor was the elderly senator Publius Helvius Pertinax. As the current *praefectus urbi* and serving consul *ordinarius* of 192CE, Pertinax had a high profile with soldiers, politicians and urban plebs alike thanks to his civil and military achievements.[319] He was considered an 'exceedingly gentle and considerate' prefect compared to his predecessor. His leadership of the urban cohorts who protected civilians from the imperial cavalry in 190CE would have endeared him to the broader population and may have signalled his pragmatic approach to potential supporters.[320]

In the absence of any dynastic claim, Pertinax and his supporters had to establish a robust procedural basis for his accession that required the active involvement of the Senate, praetorians, and urban plebs. The procedure governing an imperial accession was not derived from any specific legal or constitutional rules. Rather, a relatively standardised accession ritual arose in which praetorians, then Senate, and finally the people proclaimed a new emperor by acclamation. The main functions of the procedure were to create or maintain stability through the orderly recognition of Rome's political groups and to create a sense of legitimacy and consensus. For example, following the assassination of Caligula in 41CE, Claudius was taken first to the *area Palatina* to be acclaimed as emperor by a group of praetorians before being taken to their camp where he was acclaimed a second time. On Nero's accession, the Praetorian Guard acclaimed the emperor in the Palatium and then in their *castra*, with the Senate formalising the investiture in the Curia afterwards.[321] Otho was

[319] Hdn. 2.1.4; Cass. Dio 74.4.
[320] SHA *Pert.* 4.3.
[321] Claudius: Joseph. *AJ* 19.162, 216-217, 223, 226; Suet. *Claud.* 10. Nero: Tac. *Ann.* 12.69; Suet. *Ner.* 8; Arena (2007) 327, 330-331.

declared emperor in the *castra*, before addressing the Senate the following day (after the murder of Galba).[322] Nerva, who rose to power in similar circumstances to Pertinax, was acclaimed by the praetorians in the hours after Domitian's assassination, who were quickly offered the expected *donativum* before the emperor's official investiture by the Senate.[323] Commodus had already been raised to the position of co-emperor in 177CE, but he still followed the basic procedure of imperial accession on his father's death, delivering an *adlocutio* and promising a *donativum* for the troops, before entering the imperial palace, and then finally addressing the Senate.[324] Such a process underlined the primacy of the Guard. Their support needed to be secured before a candidate could fulfil his traditional obligations to the Senate. Whether an emperor could retain and strengthen his initial claim depended on diffuse support from all three groups, but in general, legitimacy was almost always bestowed by the politically powerful, and the people's role was less important in the regime transition process. These power dynamics, however, were actively challenged as Pertinax approached the rites of accession.

(i)   The legitimacy claims of Pertinax

Given the uncertainty that accompanies any coup, Pertinax had to carefully construct legitimacy claims that would be accepted by all three political actors. The literature on coups suggests that ordinary people can indirectly influence power dynamics between emperors and elites as the ability of conspirators to remove a ruler successfully depends on there being enough public discontent with the incumbent to condone regime change.[325] Senatorial and public support for both the coup and the new emperor was expected, but whether the Guard supported the change was unclear. Pertinax followed accepted protocol by addressing the praetorians first in their *castra*, but the uncertainty was such that he went there directly on the night of Commodus' assassination in order to receive their acclamation. Such haste indicates that the imperial candidate and his supporters expected resistance. Trusted men were sent out to spread the news that Commodus was dead and that Pertinax was on his way to the praetorian camp to take command of the Empire. The

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[322] Tac. *Ann*. 1.36; Plut. *Otho* 1.1; Suet. *Otho* 7.1; Cass. Dio 64.5ᵃ, 8.
[323] Collins (2009) 100-101.
[324] Hdn. 1.5.1-8, 1.7.3, 1.7.6.
[325] Sudduth (2017) 1795.

news mobilised crowds who poured into the streets, temples, and altars to celebrate. Most of the crowd quickly rushed to the praetorian camp, fearing that the soldiers would be reluctant to accept the new emperor. Herodian states that the people were already inside the camp before Pertinax and his entourage even arrived, which strongly suggests that time was allowed for a crowd to mobilise as an insurance policy in case the soldiers proved reluctant to recognise Pertinax as emperor. Neither Dio's brief epitome nor the *Historia Augusta* mentions the role of the *populus* in the nocturnal drama although both concur that the praetorians were initially unwilling participants.[326] Dio's snobbish comment that the plebs at this time were not only 'gaining a reputation for boldness of speech' but also wanting to 'indulge in wanton insolence' makes more sense if they had forced the praetorians to submit to their choice of emperor than if they were merely celebrating the demise of a tyrant. Also, given the mode of popular contention utilised against Cleander and later interactions between praetorians and civilians at or near their *castra*, Herodian's version is credible.[327]

Political mobilisation by night was unusual and reserved for moments of real crisis and urgency.[328] Many people would have been out celebrating before the New Year festival the following day, which would have allowed the free circulation of the news put out by supporters of Pertinax, but the imminent meeting at the camp was perceived as an urgent situation. This transformation of what was an indefinite situation to one that was tangible reaffirmed extant collective identities within which mobilisation could take place.[329] Also, the gathered crowd had some distinct advantages over the soldiers despite a disparity in resources. First, the crowd seems to have been extremely large: Herodian says 'all the people' (πανδημεὶ) mobilised at the camp.[330] Likewise, communal sounds of a mass moving through the streets would have created an emotional zero-sum game in which the noisemakers gained confidence as their listeners experienced fear. The narrative makes no

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[326] Cass. Dio 74.1; SHA *Pert*. 4.5-8.

[327] Cass. Dio 74.2.

[328] For example, crowds mobilised at night to sing for Germanicus when rumours of his death reached the city (Suet. *Calig*. 6), and when Caligula fell ill, 'the people hung about the Palatium all night long…' (Suet. *Calig*. 14; Cass. Dio 59.8.3).

[329] On the day of the New Year festival the Romans went out of their way to greet each other and exchange gifts (Hdn. 1.16.2). For nocturnal festival activities, see Suet. *Iul*. 37, *Aug*. 31, *Calig*. 18, 54, 57, *Dom*. 4; Mart. 12.57.

[330] Hdn. 2.2.5.

mention of any forced entry. Although the *castra* had no ditch, it still had walls at least 4.5m high, so the Guard let the crowd in willingly, most likely because they were cowed by the arrival of such a large, nocturnal crowd immediately after the assassination of their benefactor.[331]

Analysis by economists from Harvard and Stockholm University has found that mass protests have a major influence on politics, not because large crowds send a signal to policy-makers, but because protests get people politically activated.[332] Thus, participants had not just learned from the Cleander riot that the pressure of a large crowd was an effective tactic, but it had also introduced new political actors into the fray. The memory of that successful contentious performance diffused across Rome's social networks and was applied to a new space, socio-political context, and claimant-object pair, providing those who mobilised in support of Pertinax with information about the potential consequences of their interaction with the Guard.[333] Confronted with such numbers inside their camp, the praetorians could either acquiesce or use violence against a civic body that was many, many times larger than their forces at a time when the political succession was unclear. Indeed, the soldiers conceded 'not because they were equally enthusiastic but because they were compelled by the great crowd, and were themselves few in number and unarmed.'[334] Their capitulation thus reinforced for the participants that their belief that a non-violent repertoire on a large scale could be successful against powerful opposition. With the immediate crisis at the *castra* successfully attended to, soldiers and civilians together brandishing laurel branches escorted the emperor to the imperial palace.[335] This would usually be the responsibility of the soldiers alone as a daytime procession, but the active participation of the crowd along with their earlier intervention qualified such action as innovative, even transgressive contention. The active participation of the crowd was as much an attempt to redress the growing power differential between soldier and civilian as it was about the accession of a new emperor.

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[331] Busch (2007) 327-8.
[332] Madestam, Shoag, Veuge, and Yanagizawa-Drott (2011).
[333] Tarrow (1993) 286; Tilly (2008) 16.
[334] Hdn. 2.2.1-2.2.8, 2.2.9. Dio only offers that Pertinax 'betook himself secretly to the camp.' (74.1)
[335] Hdn. 2.2.10. An escort to palace with laurel branches was the custom when the praetorians escorted the emperor to sacrifices or a festival. Lott (2004) 120.

(ii)   Legitimation and popular sovereignty

Pertinax needed to establish legitimacy and reinstate political stability. His relationship with the Praetorian Guard was tenuous at best, so the support of the Senate and urban plebs was essential. The restoration of a collaborative government, and the precepts of justice and moral economy formed the backbone of new imperial policy. Following the procession from the praetorian camp, Pertinax quickly convened a Senate meeting. Interestingly, they may have met at the Temple of Concord. *Concordia* was meant to represent the political harmony of Rome's citizenry so it may have been a deliberate choice by Pertinax.[336] The new emperor was extremely deferential, offering a conventional resignation that recognised the traditional authority of the body. Presented with a *fait accompli* though, the Senate dutifully added its acclamation, voting the emperor all the usual titles including that of *pater patriae*.[337] The immediate bestowal of this title may have been a tacit acknowledgement that the *pietas* owed to the emperor by his subjects should be a response to a claim understood as legitimate rather than compelled obedience, and therefore an implicit rejection of Commodus' authoritarianism.[338] Indeed, in his senatorial address, Pertinax promised a return to an institutionally constrained regime, an approach that exploited the traditional narrative that regarded collaborative government as a just political order. The Senate's continued cooperation was ensured by a series of political reforms that reoriented the regime's stance back to the *civilis princeps* model of rule. Pertinax 'always' attended and actively participated in Senate meetings, and mixed with senators socially, both practices discontinued by Commodus. Established senatorial hierarchies were enforced.[339] The emperor swore the traditional oath that he would not put any senator to death, and to indicate his 'democratic' outlook, Pertinax assumed the venerable title of *princeps senatus* as per ancient practice.[340] Caillan Davenport remarks that 'the ideological facade was

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[336] Okoń (2014) 48. The *Historia Augusta* (*Pert.* 4.9) claims that it was too early to find an attendant to open the Curia. Cass. Dio 74.1 places the senatorial meeting at the Curia, so either the *Historia Augusta* is wrong, or the Senate may have reconvened once the Curia had been opened. Given that the Temple of Castor may have been utilised for two further emergency meetings (Severus Alexander's accession in 222CE, and on the deaths of Gordian I and II in 238CE), as well as the earlier meeting after the death of Nero, it is probable that it was chosen on this occasion also.

[337] Cass. Dio 74.2; SHA *Pert*. 4.11, 5.5-6; Hdn. 2.3.3-4. Pertinax accepted the title of *pater patriae* on the day that he was declared Augustus, the first emperor to do so.

[338] Charleswoth (1943) 2.

[339] Precedence was given to those who had served as praetor over those who had merely been adlected: SHA *Pert*. 6.10, 9.9.

[340] Cass. Dio 74.5.

impressive…Like his predecessor Nerva, who was still being proclaimed a century after his death as the spiritual godfather of the Antonine and Severan dynasties, Pertinax understood how to utilise the ideologies of the past.[341]

Pertinax expanded this ideology claim over the coming weeks, reversing unpopular aspects of Commodus' rule, and attending to the precepts of the imperial moral economy. Where the former employed repression and populism, the new emperor's policy was one of conciliation, moderation, and justice. Treason trials were abolished, informers banished, and the stigma removed from the previously accused. Customs tariffs were repealed, and Italian farmers given fallow land and tax immunity. The *congiarium* promised by Commodus was paid, and careful attention was given to the grain-supply. A fixed sum was set aside for public works, highway repairs, salary arrears for imperial officials, and the nine years' *alimenta* arrears.[342] Such economical management and consideration for public welfare was in Dio's words 'everything that a good emperor should do,' while Pertinax's 'consistent and deliberate imitation of Marcus' reign,' according to Herodian, 'delighted the older people, and won the goodwill (*eunoia*) of the others without difficulty.'[343]

These policies established Pertinax's ideological and foundational claims to legitimacy. It was at the same time, a shrewd approach to shared governance. Modern research has demonstrated that leaders who accede to a measure of elite restraint are more likely to die in their beds of old age than leaders who reject such control.[344] In contrast to Commodus' policy, Pertinax at least paid lip service to the idea that he was nominally accountable to the Senate and urban population in accordance with implicit cultural norms. The co-optation of the Senate as a body meant there were few incentives for senators to mobilise in opposition, an important consideration since there were better-connected senators than the son of a freedman. Meanwhile, the just distribution of resources to the urban plebs restricted opportunities for popular contention. That is not to say that Pertinax had ceded the emperor's powers to other political actors. His symbolic gestures were an attempt to

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[341] Davenport (2006) 35.
[342] SHA *Pert*. 6.8, 7.1-5, 9.2-3; Hdn. 2.4.8; Cass. Dio 74.5.
[343] Hdn. 2.4.2.
[344] Márquez (2016) 64.

channel grievances into the institutionalised forms of political contention that had predominated during the majority of the Flavian and Antonine periods.[345]

Pertinax may have established a good relationship with the Senate and urban plebs, but the new regime offered few real benefits to the Praetorian Guard. It is telling that one of the emperor's first official measures was a decree ordering the praetorians to curb their 'arrogant treatment' of the people.[346] Arrogance may have been a rather mild rebuke considering that Pertinax's decree expressly forbade the use of axes (*dolabra*), presumably used by soldiers to break down doors and help themselves to people's possessions.[347] While this decree would have been popular with the plebs, it was a clear sign to the Guard that the privileged position they had held under Commodus was under threat. The *Historia Augusta* claims that the praetorians planned on replacing the emperor as early as the third day of the new reign, and there was also some opposition to Pertinax's accession within the Senate and imperial household.[348] Separately, they may not have had the opportunity or resources to challenge the popular Pertinax, but one event provided both. It appears that Pertinax was planning on reorganising the Praetorian Guard by placing the unit under the command of his father-in-law, the new *praefectus urbi* Flavius Sulpicianus.[349] This development may have precipitated a change of heart for the praetorian prefect Laetus, who mobilised the Guard by punishing soldiers in Pertinax's name. Physical repression was the last straw, and a group of soldiers stormed the palace, indirectly aided by staff who left all the entrances open. In an echo of Quintianus' attack on Commodus, Dio tells us that a lone soldier attacked Pertinax first, exclaiming; 'the soldiers have sent you this sword.'[350]

The assassination was comparable to that of Commodus a mere three months earlier, but the political actors involved had changed. It is true that Laetus and others were actively conspiring, but the mobilisation of 200-300 praetorians and their corresponding course of action was an in-house decision as subsequent events reveal. Once the emperor was dead,

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[345] Schock (2004) 31.

[346] Hdn. 2.4.1, 2.4.4; Cass. Dio 74.8.

[347] Coulston (2000) 91.

[348] Senate: Hdn. 2.3.1; SHA *Pert.* 10.1. Imperial household: Cass. Dio 74.8; SHA *Pert.* 8.1, 11.5.

[349] Cass. Dio 79.11.1 tells us that Flavius Sulpicianus had been sent by Pertinax to the praetorian camp 'to set matters in order there. As Appelbaum (2007) 204 remarks, how else could the prefect of the city set matters in order in the camp of the Praetorian Guard unless it was to appoint another prefect or restructure the chain of command?

[350] Cass. Dio 74.9-10; Hdn. 2.5.2-3; SHA *Pert.* 11.1-13.

the praetorians cut off his head, fastened it on a spear and carried it through the city back to their camp.[351]

There are two important elements to the praetorian's execution of Pertinax. First, the use of a spear (*hasta*) was emblematic of the core function of the Guard, but it also had a broader significance. Verrius Festus' definition *'hasta summa armorum et imperii est'* demonstrates that the spear was viewed as a potent symbol of sovereign power – indeed Andrew Alföldi argues that multiple imperial writers conceptualised the spear almost as an active ruler.[352] The use of such a weapon then, was not just one of practicality, but a lesson in the Guard's ability to wield executive power. Second, we can see a strong parallel between the praetorian's actions, and those of the crowd that paraded Cleander's corpse through the streets. In other words, the soldiers had appropriated a popular justice ritual. By doing so, they 'legitimised' their collective violence as a just act of self-defence. There was a precedent for their behaviour: the praetorians did virtually the same thing in 69CE when they killed Galba and paraded his head on the end of a spear.[353] This time, however, they made this display public, tying it to the popular justice meted out to Cleander and his associates. Popular justice by ordinary people usually 'served as a context for the symbolic disciplining of the elite by the masses.'[354] Such collective behaviour represented the hidden transcripts of subaltern groups. The Praetorian Guard held a great deal of power as regime members under Commodus rather than subjects or challengers. Through their use of space and ritual, the praetorians made the popular justice repertoire modular and transformed their assassination of Pertinax into a public, contentious claim. It was a powerful political statement for the Guard as a collective, meant to both persuade and intimidate Rome's other political actors.

Dio succinctly summed up the failure of Pertinax's brief tenure, observing that the emperor 'failed to comprehend...that one cannot with safety reform everything at once, and that the restoration of a state, in particular, requires both time and wisdom;' still a primary tenet of

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[351] Cass. Dio 74.10; SHA *Pert*. 14.7**.**
[352] *Fest*. 55.3; Alföldi (1959) 14-15: *E.g.*, Val. Max. 7.8.1, 7.8.4; Stat. *Silv*. 4.4.43; Juv. 3.30; Mart. 7.63.7; Sen. *Ad marc*. 20.5.
[353] Suet. *Galb.* 20.
[354] Forsdyke (2012) 158.

modern-day change management. This was not just a political succession but a regime change. Regime change requires suitable opportunities, but such opportunities also tend to intensify divisions within a regime and embolden oppositional forces.[355] Overnight the Praetorian Guard went from a privileged position to one of political insecurity. In response, they manufactured an opportunity by exploiting the temporary weakness of the imperial system. Their rapid reaction to the potential threat bypassed Pertinax's attempts to forge legitimacy, and his reign ended a mere three months after his accession.

(iii)   'Bought' legitimacy: Julianus, the Praetorian Guard and the escalation of popular contention

The deposition of an emperor so soon after a similarly brutal transition had a significant impact on political opportunity structures by increasing instability and by impacting civilian-military relations. Given the populace's active role in Pertinax's accession, it would be expected that his murder would provoke a reaction from them. Indeed, as rumours of Pertinax's assassination raced through the city, the praetorians barricaded themselves in their camp as a mob in the 'grip of unreasoning fury' ran about the city looking to take revenge on the assassins.[356] The Praetorian Guard had rejected a regime that hinted at a return to the 'good old days' for the people, but their fury was not just based on recent events. Pertinax's decree proves that the Guard had revelled in the power that Commodus' dependence brought, although the mistreatment of civilians by soldiers was not just restricted to his regime. Indeed, the arrogant violence of soldiers was universally recognised. Epictetus warns that if a soldier wanted your mule, it was best to give it to him. If you refused, the soldier would take it anyway and you would receive a beating as well.[357] An edict from the prefect of Egypt in the early second century complained of the insults and abuse that private citizens had to bear from a greedy and unjust army, while in his last satire, Juvenal described the power a soldier could wield over the urban populace:[358]

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[355] Márquez (2016) 209.
[356] Hdn. 2.5.9- 2.6.1.
[357] Epict. *Diss*. 4.1.79. See also Petr. *Sat*. 82; Apul. *Met*. 9.39.
[358] PSI V, 446.8-10 = Sel. Pap. II, 221 (Edict of Mamertinus, Prefect of Egypt, 133-7 CE): 'And so it has come about that private citizens are insulted and abused and the army is accused of greed and injustice.' Also see Ulp. *Dig*. 1.18.6.5-7; P. *Oxy*. XIX, 2234 (31 CE).

Let me first deal with the benefits enjoyed by all soldiers,

Not the least being that no civilian will dare to assault you,

Rather if he's beaten himself, he'll give out that he wasn't,

Reluctant to show the praetor his missing teeth, the lumps

On his face, the black swollen bruises…

… It's easier to find a false witness against a

Civilian than one who'll tell a truth that reflects badly

On a military man's honour, and his superior status (16.7-11, 32-34).

The opportunism of the praetorians had escalated under Commodus and showed that the emperor had lost the ability to enforce the constraining boundaries that limited the behaviour of urban political actors. Violence inflicted by governmental agents was a justice issue, and by privileging his soldiers over the populace, Commodus threatened the strong connective structures between regime and subject that affirmed imperial legitimacy. The closer security apparatus is to the centre of power, the more probable it is that repression could be employed on the population because coercive agents can extract enhanced resources and status by applying oppressive measures on behalf of the emperor.[359] This threat entrenched perceptions of injustice among the populace, and encouraged the development of oppositional identities. It also explains why crowds massed at the praetorian camp the night of Pertinax's accession, since there was a pre-existing belief that the soldiers would try to impede any restoration of a traditional regime. Pertinax's murder only confirmed these perceptions.

A military coup had negated the people's role in legitimating the emperor, and the mood in the city was once of defiance.[360] Crowds gathered to chant: 'with Pertinax in control, we lived secure, we feared no one. To a dutiful father! To the father of the senate! To the father of all good men!'[361] The sentiments of the triple repeat echo a crowd's cries of *'salva Roma, salva patria, salvus est Germanicus'* after rumours of Germanicus's recovery made

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[359] Josua and Edel (2015) 293; Davenport (2007) 491.
[360] SHA *Pert*. 14.6: 'but the people felt great indignation at his death, since it had seemed that all the ancient customs might be restored through his efforts.'
[361] Aur. Vict. *Caes*. 155.6.

their way around Rome in 23CE. In both cases, the highly emotional and spontaneous reaction reflected the belief that each man's death was a community crisis, for the communal articulation of *pietas* was directly linked to the welfare of the state (*salus publica*). The Guard was also supposed to owe the emperor *pietas* since they had sworn an oath to him, and their rejection of this oath and the common good exacerbated the already highly contentious civilian-soldier relationship, activating collective identities through which rumours could spread and mass mobilisation could take place. At least a full day passed before calm finally settled over the city. Despite widespread agitation, no attack on the praetorian camp materialised, which allowed the Guard to begin negotiating with potential imperial candidates.[362] Our sources present the infamous 'auctioning of the empire' by the soldiers to the highest bidder as a low point of urban Roman politics.[363] As he had done with Otho, Dio presented the successful applicant, Didianus Julianus, as a man who shamefully bought his way to the imperial purple. His offer of an enormous *donativum* of 25,000 *sesterces* was larger than Marcus Aurelius's gift of 20,000 and considerably more than Pertinax's offer of 12,000.[364] The *Historia Augusta* also comments that Julianus promised that he would restore Commodus' good name as a not so subtle hint that his regime would model that of their former master.[365]

As Flaig argues, the giving of a *donativum* was a symbolic gesture that cemented the affective bond between an emperor and his troops.[366] Negotiating the size of a *donativum* before an acclamation, however, made a mockery of the standardised sequence of events that made up the procedural basis of a legitimacy claim. It also made the emperor appear subservient to the Guard since he had to buy their support rather than earn it through virtue and position.[367] Julianus did attempt to follow protocol by addressing the Senate immediately after winning the support of the Guard, yet his speech offended many. He offered no *recusatio imperii*, instead committing the faux pas (in Dio's eyes at least) of

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[362] Hdn. 2.6.3.
[363] Given the parading of Pertinax's head on a spear, the auctioning of the empire could perhaps also be seen as being conducted *sub hasta,* that is, under the sway of the spear when legal auctions took place.
[364] SHA *Marc.* 7.9, *Pert.* 15.7, *Did. Jul*. 3.2 (here it says Julianus gave 30,000); Cass. Dio 74.11.2-5; Icks (2014) 92.
[365] SHA *Did. Jul*. 2.6.
[366] Flaig (1992) 451-59.
[367] It should be noted that despite the mostly hostile narrative, in theory Julianus was a better candidate than Pertinax or his successor Septimius Severus in terms of pedigree, connections and career accomplishments. Birley (1999) 103; Leaning (1989).

praising himself as the best man for the job.[368] The result was that Julianus managed to alienate both the plebs and Senate within hours of his accession.

The first episode of popular contention occurred as the newly acclaimed emperor made his way to the Curia. Reflecting the urgency of the transition, this procession like that of Pertinax took place at night. In stark contrast to Pertinax who was accompanied by the people as well as the imperial troops (without arms), Julianus proceeded under heavy guard. The gathered crowd made their opposition known by refusing to offer the customary congratulations, instead shouting curses at the emperor.[369] The hostility was less about Julianus the man, than the fact that he had made an alliance with the despised Guard, cutting the people and Senate out of the accession process. As a consequence, opposition to the new emperor could be framed around multiple injustices, providing strong incentives for ordinary people to protest. Without a doubt, the massing of nocturnal crowds reveals that the city was not just well-informed but also mobilised for action. Nor did they disperse after the night's events. The following day, groups gathered to discuss the goings-on where people spoke their minds openly and were 'getting ready to do anything.'[370] Herodian notes that many believed that Julianus had bought the empire, and even the more sympathetic *Historia Augusta* notes that negative rumours about the emperor swirled 'from the very first day.'[371] These gatherings suggest that Rome's hidden transcripts were facilitating mobilisation for political purposes. Although the sources do not specify where people gathered, we can speculate that the usual spaces for social interaction were employed. Ammianus Marcellinus records that groups of people often gathered (*circulos multos collectos*), in the *fora*, *compita*, the streets, and other meeting-places to discuss affairs. In fact, the fevered discussions regarding Julianus' accession could be described as *circuli*, that is, the unofficial gathering of people to discuss events in a way that signified more than just idle chat.[372]

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[368] Icks (2014) 93.
[369] Hdn. 2.6.13; Cass. Dio 74.12.
[370] Cass. Dio 74.13.2.
[371] SHA *Did. Jul*. 3.8; Hdn. 2.6.13.
[372] Amm. Marc. 28.4.29; O'Neill (2001) 96-97.

A type of non-elite discourse, *circuli* often formed at moments of crisis (including during the night), and were recognised as a venue for venting anger and planning popular action.[373] The *Life of Probus* explicitly links the *circulus* with political action in an incident where soldiers gathered to discuss (*per multos circulos*) who should be the next emperor, with their acclamation of Probus shortly after.[374] They were, therefore, highly political and represented currents of dissent. It is also no coincidence that carriers of hidden transcripts like astrologers, fortune-tellers, and philosophers were known to have found audiences *in…vulgi circulis*.[375] Our source's descriptions of groups of people exchanging rumours and information in public spaces are noteworthy then, not just because they represented hidden transcripts, and thus widely-held beliefs and opinions, but also because they showed that people were continuing to mobilise and plan. Crowds had recently occupied the praetorian *castra*, and the processional route to the Curia. Such diffusion of the spatial and temporal elements of contention means that a diffusion of political actors was also taking place. The greater the diffusion, the higher the number of individuals affected, a strong predictor of continued mobilisation and contentious behaviour.

Indeed, when Julianus arrived at the Curia to conduct a sacrifice, an assembled crowd 'as if by preconcerted arrangement' yelled curses and launched a shower of stones.[376] Stone-throwing (*lapidatio*) was an old Republican popular justice custom. It was meant to intimidate and was a symbolic means of articulating the rights of the people to exact justice. The practice was rarely used in the imperial period though, and only in times of serious conflict with the regime. For example, stones were thrown at Claudius during the food riot of 51CE, a crowd threatened to stone the Curia during the Pedanius Secundus debate in 61CE, and stones were thrown at Antoninus Pius during a food riot.[377] The attack on

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[373] Livy 34.37. Linking *circuli* with anger: Livy 7.12, 32.20. Tacitus (*Agr*. 43) noted that on the death of Agricola, the *vulgus* gathered in the Forum and formed *circuli* to discuss the politically sensitive issue (*per fora et circulos illocuti sunt).* See O'Neill (2001) 97-104.

[374] SHA *Prob*. 10.4.

[375] Porphyrio on Hor. *Sat*. 1.6.114**.** As this passage shows, *circuli* often had at their centre a *circulator*; someone around whom a crowd will gather. Astrologers, magicians, and philosophers certainly fit this bill. See also Pers. 1.134; Sen. *Ep*. 29.7.

[376] Cass. Dio 74.13.3; SHA *Did. Jul*. 4.2-4. Herodian does not explicitly describe this episode but does describe the people cursing Julianus bitterly and taunting him for his continuous and disgraceful debauches whenever he appeared in public (2.7.2).

[377] Claudius: Tac. *Ann*. 12.43, Suet. *Claud*. 18. Pedanius Secundus: Tac. *Ann*. 14.42-44; Ant. Pius: Aur. Vict. *Caes*. 152.9. The attack on the Senate house in 61CE was also an example of *occentare*; an old popular justice

Julianus, so reminiscent of popular contentious performances of the Late Republic, was both symbolic and practical as an intimidation tactic and was a visible and recognisable means of articulating the rights of the people to exact justice.[378] Julianus offered a *congiarium* in appeasement but was loudly rebuffed, and as he attempted to return to the Capitol, the assembled crowd blocked his way. This action prompted the emperor to order an attack.[379] Dio claims that a significant number were wounded and killed in many parts of the city, indicating that Julianus' repressive measures went further than mere crowd control. In response, the people reacted as following;

> [the people] seized arms and rushed together into the Circus, and there spent the night and the following day without food or drink, shouting and calling upon the remainder of the soldiers, especially Pescennius Niger and his followers in Syria, to come to their aid. Later, exhausted by their shouting, by their fasting, and by their loss of sleep, they separated and kept quiet, awaiting the hoped-for deliverance from abroad (74.13.5).

Although both Herodian and the *Historia Augusta* mention protests at the Circus, Dio's narrative is far more detailed since he was probably an eye-witness to the unfolding events. He describes the official news of Julianus' accession being brought to him personally, Julianus' speech to 'us' senators, and in a comment that rings genuine, describes how the 'surrounding buildings echoed back the shout[s of the crowd demonstrating in the Forum] in a way to make one shudder.'[380]

The intervention of a mobilised crowd to protect the accession of Pertinax supports the notion that the people believed they had long-standing albeit dormant rights to be involved in the process of legitimising an imperial candidate, and Julianus' bargain with the Guard

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tradition advertising the infamy of an individual with shouted chants, founded on the tradition of attacking an individuals' house with fire. See Lintott (1999) 8-9 for discussion and Republican examples. See also Cic. *De rep*. 4.12; Plaut. *Most*. 587, *Pseud*. 556, 1145.

[378] As the opening lines of Ovid's poem *Nux* reveals (Ps-Ovid *Nux* 1-2). Examples of *lapidatio* in the Late Republic: Cic. *de Or*. 1.197, *Off*. 2.49, *Sest*. 62, *Mil*. 41, 43, *Sen*. 7, *Pis*. 28, *Att*. 4.1.6-7; 4.3.3, *Fam*. 5.17.2, *Dom*. 6-7, 10-18; Asc. 30C; Plut. *Cat. Min*. 28.2; Cass. Dio 37.43.3.

[379] Cass. Dio 74.13.3; SHA *Did. Jul*. 4.6.

[380] Cass. Dio 74.12, 74.13.4.

and subsequent repression fuelled perceptions that his regime was illegitimate. If *lapidatio* was employed as a communal self-help mechanism, the deliberate occupation of the Circus transmitted a more sophisticated and symbolic message of power that framed the performance as an overt challenge to existing power differentials. Praetorians were recognised political actors and an essential part of the accession process, yet their murder of Pertinax, who was regarded by the public as legitimate, and their backing of another candidate for personal gain undermined their role as legitimators and by extension, the legitimacy of Julianus himself. The new emperor could not immediately establish any strong ideological, foundational or procedural claims as a result. His repressive response at what was meant to be a consensus ritual demonstrated that he could not forge a personalism claim based around expected civic qualities. Indeed, rather than construct a working relationship with the people, Julianus exacerbated tensions by loftily announcing that he would not assist the populace since they would not affirm their consensus.[381] The emperor was unequivocal; he would not seek the acceptance of the population. Instead, he would safeguard his position through his direct dependence on the Guard and their repressive capacity.

The Circus Maximus had long been a site for the articulation of both public and hidden transcripts and its use at night in the absence of racing or usual ritual made it defiantly free space. The successful anti-Cleander demonstration three years earlier provided a template for contention at that site, and, in each incident, the space was used as an affirmation of plebeian collectiveness. In a spatial sense, this challenge was actioned differently. In the Cleander riot, the Circus was a permeable container of contention; it generated cohesion, which then facilitated movement through other urban spaces. Those who protested against Julianus utilised the Circus as an impermeable barrier, spatially affirming a clear political position for those present. Moreover, in contrast to the open Forum and streets where Julianus' soldiers could attack with impunity, the built structure of the racetrack provided a measure of physical security for the protesters. It was a place where they could use the strength of their numbers and the Circus walls as an effective defence from the well-trained Praetorian Guard. Additionally, the use of the night as a new and politically charged time-

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[381] Cass. Dio 74.13.5.

space was a significant development. Both Pertinax and Julianus' official accessions took place at night and people mobilised in real time. The use of the Circus at night also broke usual social and spatial routines. Although they occupy the same physical areas, the night spaces used by protesters used darkness to pursue transgressive and counter-hegemonic goals. Robert Williams argues that night spaces incorporate the myriad tensions of the social processes that constitute them, and 'because of its transgressive meanings and societally harmful uses, darkness threatens to de-territorialize the rationalising order of society.'[382] Of course, Julianus and the praetorians had attempted to use night as a cover for their own transgressive actions, and the urban populace responded in kind. Central to disruptive actions is innovative behaviour which, as McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly argue, 'incorporates claims, collective self-representations, and adopts means that are either unprecedented or forbidden within the regime in question.'[383] Innovation and political instability go hand in hand, and the Circus demonstration was the result of a ruptured moral economy, consequential shifts in political opportunity structures and a large uptick in general feelings of uncertainty. The protesters had 'emplaced' their claim by establishing it among the symbolic associations of the occupied time-space, while issuing a challenge to their opponents. Julianus' only options were to either violently invade the Circus and further damage his reputation or allow the subversion of the space to continue, thus demonstrating his weakness in the face of such a defiant challenge.

Moreover, the occupation of the Circus indicates the crowd favoured a non-cooperative approach, one that would avoid bloodshed whilst signalling to potential allies that the emperor did not have the consensus of the city. At the same time, the population's refusal to cooperate lowered the value of seizing power for the praetorians. If large numbers of people refused to cooperate, the punishment cost for each person was small, while the risks for the vastly outnumbered Guard increased regardless of their training and resources.[384] As news arrived that there were two more potential challengers, Septimius Severus in Upper Pannonia and Clodius Albinus in Britain, public opposition to the regime continued to grow, further exposing the vulnerability of Julianus and his backers.

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[382] Williams (2008) 518.
[383] McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2002) 8.
[384] Sutter (1999) 131, 136.

(iv)   The Augustan model: Severan legitimacy

The mass protests under Julianus offered opportunities for challengers. Pescennius Niger may have been popular, but Severus moved first, making a lightning-quick march on Rome. As he bore down on Rome with his hardened Pannonian legions, Severus wrote to the city's leading men and had his agents post placards up around the city. Severan supporters also intercepted the proclamations and letters Niger sent to the people and Senate proclaiming his own accession.[385] The strategic control of both formal and informal communication networks demonstrates that Severus understood how crucial rumour and material forms of contention were during a crisis. Rumour filled both informational and psychological needs and would spread when people were fearful, angry, or uncertain about what was going on. Julianus had put the Praetorian Guard in charge of the city's defences, but their unpractised hands, let alone their ability to withstand an invading force, drew the derision of the populace.[386] If Rome believed that Severus and his forces held a stronger position than Julianus, such views were boosted by the authority of written communication. Those who hung around porticoes, shops, temples, and *compita* exchanging news could be directly influenced by the posting of pro-Severan *libelli* in and around those spaces. It is no accident that when Severus finally occupied the city in early June, he billeted his soldiers in the very temples, porticoes and other spaces where people would gather in *circuli*.[387] In other words, the city's hidden transcripts and written contention seemed more trustworthy than the public transcript put out by the regime.

With a lack of official information regarding the other challengers creating a crisis of confidence, Severus could present himself as a potential ally to those opposed to the current regime. Nonetheless, the city feared both his intentions and his Pannonian troops, an understandable reaction given the last time a general marched on Rome was 69CE. When news was deliberately circulated that Severus and his troops had already secretly entered the city in disguise, Rome panicked.[388] The populace proclaimed Julianus a coward

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[385] SHA *Sev*. 6.8.
[386] The Guard had not seen action since the Marcomannic War ended in 180CE: Cass. Dio 74.16.2-3; SHA *Did. Jul*. 5.9-6.1; Hdn. 2.11.9.
[387] SHA *Sev*. 7.2-3.
[388] Hdn. 2.12.2. There may have been an infiltration from an advance guard. However, it is more likely that supporters circulated the news that Severus was already in town in order to quash any popular opposition to

and Niger a hesitant sloth. The praetorians, terrified at the thought of fighting battle-hardened barbarian legions, quickly followed Severus' written orders and had Pertinax's murderers arrested. The staff of the imperial palace deserted, and the people tore down the senatorial decrees. There was nothing left for the Senate to do but capitulate. Julianus was sentenced to death, and Severus named emperor.[389]

Julianus' regime had evaporated in a matter of days. If Pertinax's main mistake was attempting to change power differentials too quickly, Julianus' mistake was to ape the Commodian model of a repressive, closed-regime type without establishing real authority first. Commodus at least had inherited strong legitimacy claims. Julianus, on the other hand, began his reign with little credibility and was unable to construct legitimacy claims derived from any other source other than the Praetorian Guard. The corrupt bargain struck between Julianus and the Praetorian Guard not only bypassed popular sovereignty, it was also framed as an unjust travesty of the usual legitimacy process, which in turn opened up opportunities to challenge, resist, and deny the construction of a new, military-backed regime. As the concept of imperial legitimacy and justice took on new meaning, this cultural construct was tested through acts of popular contention and entered the political culture in a more pliable form.[390] Severus had taken possession of Rome without encountering any real resistance. If he wanted his reign to last longer than his immediate predecessors, he would have to settle multiple claims. Once a pattern of coups has begun, they tend to continue until a sufficiently skilful leader manages to domesticate the military or consolidate power in his own person. Indeed, one of the best predictors of the risk of a coup is another recent coup, since, as Samuel Finer has noted, 'the claim to rule by virtue of superior force invites challenge; indeed it is in itself a tacit challenge to any contender who thinks he is strong enough to chance his arm.'[391] Three violent transitions in six months alongside the first capture of Rome by a military commander in 124 years reinforced the instability of the political environment. The people were energised, the praetorians dangerous, and both groups had shown themselves capable of making vehement

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the advancing main guard. In any event, Severus made his grand entrance into the city after Julianus' execution. SHA *Sev*. 6.6: *ingens trepidatio.*
[389] Cass. Dio 74.17.3-5; Hdn. 2.12.6; SHA *Did. Jul*. 8.6-9, *Sev*. 5.9-10.
[390] Tarrow (1993) 286.
[391] Finer (1962) 17-18; Márquez (2016) 113.

contentious claims against the regime. The treasury was empty, and a costly civil war loomed. Severus had to address the claims of not only Niger and Albinus but also the competing claims of the city's political actors. Military occupations are always unpopular and require no small measure of moral justification. Dio presents Severus' spectacular *adventus* as a ceremony of affirmation with soldier, pleb and senator alike celebrating their good fortune, but a perhaps more accurate summation of the city's reaction was that of fear and panic. Crucially, Severus defused immediate tensions by departing the city shortly after his accession, taking his occupying forces with him.[392] Despite his absence, the new emperor still needed to establish authority over the city's constituent actors. He was enormously successful, primarily through shutting down political opportunity structures, establishing multiple legitimacy claims, and by meeting the obligations of the imperial moral economy.

Severus' initial focus was to construct ideological and procedural claims tailored to those affected by the policies of Julianus and Commodus. His first act was to cashier the Praetorian Guard for breaking their oath to Pertinax, banishing them sans clothes and equipment from the city.[393] Ideologically, this strategy allowed Severus to avoid any impression that he was buying the troops' loyalty, and their brutal dismissal reminded all that they were meant to be the protectors of emperors, not the makers of them. Instantly, Severus had redressed the power imbalance between the Guard and Rome's other political actors. Next, Severus tackled the cultural and material expectations of the civilian population. Pertinax was declared a god and was given a lavish public funeral. Dio, who was a participant in the ceremony, described how Severus, now styled Lucius Septimius Severus Pertinax, gave the *laudatio* for the traditional and reverential ceremony. The funeral gave some credence to the emperor's claimed intention of modelling his regime on that of Pertinax, and by extension, Pertinax's exemplar, Marcus Aurelius. Indeed, this connection was made more explicit after the defeat of Niger when Severus announced himself to be the son of Marcus.[394] Pertinax's deification was also an act of *pietas* that reconciled Severus with the gods and offered a measure of concord for the city. A *congiarium* and shows were

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[392] Hdn. 2.14.5. Severus needed to attend to Pescennius Niger, who had been proclaimed by his troops at Antioch.
[393] Hdn. 2.13.2-11; Cass. Dio 75.1; SHA *Sev*. 6.11.
[394] Birley (1999) 105; Favro and Johansen (2010) 24.

provided for the people, and the public benefits supporting the imperial moral economy were assiduously managed. In particular, the supply and distribution of grain that was so problematic for Commodus and Pertinax was reorganised for greater efficiency. Severus forbade the practice of *adareatio* (the payment of taxes in cash) for Egyptian peasants whose grain was needed to supply Rome. He also merged the *frumentationes* and *cura aquarum* into a single office, at around the same time that the construction of aqueduct-powered flour mills took place on the Janiculum Hill. These improvements meant that the grain-dole could now be distributed as a flour ration, reducing the impact of corruption and hoarding on open market prices.[395] The *Historia Augusta* claims that Severus was the first to institute a free daily oil allowance, although it is more likely that he incorporated oil transport and distribution networks into the *annona* system.[396] Streamlined supply chains meant plentiful supplies for the population: we do not hear of any shortages during Severus' reign, and a surplus equivalent to seven years' tribute, or 75,000 *modii* per day was held in the city's granaries at the time of the emperor's death in 211CE.[397]

A stabilised food supply reflected well on the regime, and a return to some semblance of economic steadiness also generated significant political capital. Although Severus was forced to debase the coinage in order to pay for his wars, a lag in price and wage increases enabled the government to reap net surplus revenues that exceeded the short-term effects of inflation, providing a sense of recovery for Rome's inhabitants.[398] Such benefits were the material aspects of a new narrative affirming the righteousness of the new regime. Undeniably, Severus' ideological claims were inextricably connected to his pursuit of procedural legitimacy. Injustice undermines legitimacy, but even a government not initially viewed as legitimate could achieve stability if it produced just norms. The just nature of a properly functioning moral economy went hand in hand with the new regime's traditional approach to law and social order. When resident in Rome, Severus would spend mornings holding court, allowing litigants and advisors the opportunity to speak freely. [399] He also

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[395] Taylor (2010) 201-2.
[396] SHA *Sev*. 18.3; Broekaert (2011) 620.
[397] Taylor (2010) 209; SHA *Sev*. 8.5, 23.2.
[398] The *denarius* was reduced in fineness to about 46%. As Harl (1996) 126-7 notes, the immediate effect of debasement was reduced by the good stock of coins, and since Severan *denarii* weighed and looked the same as earlier coins, they were accepted at customary rates of exchange against *aurei* and base metal fractions.
[399] Cass. Dio 77.17.1-2; Hdn. 3.10.2**.**

promised the end of confiscations without trial and the use of informers and took the traditional oath not to execute senators. Law and order meant stability, but it also represented something more: the re-building of *societas civilis*, a citizen-state held together by justice and existing for the mutual benefit of the community.

Foundational myth and Severan control of public space

To be clear, Severus' reimaging of a rejuvenated citizen-state was part of an agenda to cloak his increasing authoritarianism within a cultural and legalistic framework.[400] A vital part of this agenda was to create, manipulate and control public space in order to bolster imperial legitimacy and boost regime capacity. In terms of legitimacy, Severus claimed his entitlement by invoking the past by instituting the largest building imperial programme in Rome for many years. Buildings and temples damaged by the fire of 191CE were restored or rebuilt, and new construction projects begun.[401] Although the Severan redevelopment of the city was not on the same scale as Augustus' programme, it still followed the Augustan tradition of employing urban architecture as a means of establishing regime legitimacy by fostering the perception that the emperor alone created Rome's newfound peace and prosperity.[402] Severus' re-fashioning of the visual environment was a deliberate manipulation of collective memory, and was aimed at addressing the anxieties many Romans were beginning to feel about the centrality and stability of their city.

Augustan ideology went further than mere bricks. The Secular Games of 204CE, a rare and spectacular religious festival, was a conscious imitation of those put on by Augustus in 17BCE.[403] Even the triumphal arch erected in 203CE to celebrate victory over the Parthians honoured Severus for the same achievements trumpeted by Augustus in his *Res Gestae*, and was symbolically located diagonally opposite the arch erected to celebrate Augustus'

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[400] Wallace-Hadrill (1982) 43.

[401] The construction and repair programme included the *Templum Pacis*, *Bibliotheca Pacis*, *Porticus Margaritaria et Piperitaria*, *Templum Divi Vespasiani*, *Aqua Claudia, Templum Herculis et Dionysii*, Pantheon, *Septizodium*, and the *Porticus Octaviae.*

[402] For an excellent overview of the Severan building programme, see Gorrie (1997).

[403] The surviving fragments of the *commentarii* of the *ludi saeculares* held by Augustus and Severus make it clear that Severus modelled his celebration on that of Augustus. For the preserved fragments, see Pighi (1965) 107-119, 137-175. See also Birley (2002) 155-160; Barnes (2008) 264. On the Secular Games, see Rantala (2017).

diplomatic success over the Parthians two centuries earlier.[404] By fusing his achievements with those of Augustus, Severus could insert himself into Augustan tradition and Rome's collective memories of grandeur and glory. At the same time, the combination of myth and architecture created Severan foundational myth and ideological legitimacy claims. Both stressed societal order, the transcendental nature of the regime, and most importantly, the centrality of the people in the state-building process that legitimated an emperor's rule.[405] This last point also suggests that Severus was not only aware of the latent power of a politically activated populace, but also of the grievances regarding their position that had festered during the latter years of Commodus' rule, and the few short months of Julianus' reign.

(i)   The Septizodium

The Severan building plan had yet another purpose. Asserting robust legitimacy claims was imperative, as an emperor who provided social goods affirmed the rights and identities grounded within the bounds of Roman collective identities. Moreover, it was those collectives that constituted sites for the realisation of popular claim-making and political participation.[406] Severus was aware of the potential for mass mobilisation. He had been quick to control unofficial and official information channels before his accession, but controlling the city's public spaces was another matter. The most contentious space, the Circus Maximus, could only be controlled through physical force. Severus' solution was to provide new or refurbished public spaces in which he could shape the collective experiences and memories attached to them. The placement and design of one building in particular, the Septizodium, demonstrates how the emperor attempted to redirect attention away from the Circus and create new spatial routines associated primarily with his regime. A large and lavishly decorated nymphaneum, the Septizodium was constructed on a prominent site on the Palatine Hill.[407] Charmaine Gorrie has noted that Severus created a sizeable artificial terrace on the Palatine extending in the direction of the Circus. This terrace substantially

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[404] The inscription states that the Senate and people of Rome set it up 'on account of the restoration of the Republic and the extension of the Empire of the Roman People by their outstanding justice at home and abroad:'*CIL* 6.1033 = *ILS* 426.
[405] von Soest and Grauvogel (2017) 289.
[406] Soysal (2004) 1.
[407] Ammianus Marcellinus describes the Septizodium as an *operis ambitiosi nymphaenum* (15.7.3).

enlarged the plateau on the top of the hill where the Septizodium was located. As Gorrie points out, the Septizodium 'seems to have been intended to create an imposing façade for the hill when viewed from the Circus Maximus;' visually advertising a Severan presence above the track.[408] The Septizodium was also located at a busy urban hub. The Via Appia through the Porta Capena terminated here, as did the streets that flanked the Circus and Palatine. This meant that it quickly became a popular meeting place: during Ammianus Marcellinus' time, the nymphaneum was still a *locus celebris* and leisure space for the urban plebs.[409] With one prominent building, Severus was able to create new space and social routines directly linked to his dynasty and promise of stability and renewal. The Septizodium shifted attention away from the contentious routines of the Circus and reminded spectators of the power that loomed above them, more important at a time when the *pulvinar* and imperial palace were not occupied by the emperor. The Severan presence could be maintained through new social routines, rather than empty buildings.

Furthermore, Severus increased the regime's repressive capacity. He doubled the size of the praetorians and expanded the ranks of the urban cohorts and *vigiles*.[410] Hélène Ménard believes that the *vigiles* in particular now had close links with the regime. Their barracks were restored along with the praetorian camp, and the prefect of the *vigiles* in 193CE was none other than the emperors' soon to be right-hand man Gaius Fulvius Plautianus, whom Dio claimed later became so powerful that he occupied the real position of emperor.[411] Severus also better defined the powers of the *praefectus urbi*, especially around the prefect's responsibility for keeping the peace. Ulpian records that the prefect had to station soldiers (*milites stationarii*) at the spectacles to maintain order and 'to keep himself informed of all that goes on.'[412] The prefect also had the power to prosecute members of illicit *collegia*, could banish anyone from the city and the spectacles and forbid them their trade or business; the latter suggests a deliberate targeting of the transient urban sub-groups who acted as carriers of hidden transcripts and as mobilisers of

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[408] Gorrie (2001) 663.
[409] Amm. Marc. 15.7.3-4; Gorrie (2001) 664.
[410] Bédoyère (2017) 221. Herodian 3.13.4 says Severus quadrupled the garrisons, most likely an exaggeration.
[411] Cass. Dio 76.14.1, 15.1; Hdn. 3.10.6-7; Sablayrolles (1996) 51-53; Ménàrd (2004) 61.
[412] Ulp. *Dig*. 1.12.12.

contention— actors, magicians, philosophers, and other prophets.[413] By controlling the visual and spatial narrative of the city, and restoring economic and political stability, the emperor could confidently proclaim himself as *restitutor Urbis*.[414] Not only did Severus' building programme and capacity provide spatial control, but his deliberate invocation of Augustan ideology also allowed him to employ mythologised versions of the past as an instrument of politics in the present. As the late Edward Said wrote, 'collective memory is not an inert and passive thing, but a field of activity in which past events are selected, reconstructed, maintained, modified, and endowed with political meaning…. Memory and its representations [therefore] touch very significantly upon questions of identity, of nationalism, of power and authority.'[415] The reconstruction of collective memory helped to diffuse potential contention around conflicting discourses between elite, plebeian, and soldier. Instead, they could all identify and be part of a shared political culture that recognised the regime as the ideological descendant of Rome's first emperor.

(ii)   The Circus Maximus

We would expect the Severan regime's repressive capacity and ability to control public space as a constraining factor in terms of transgressive contentious politics. A string of victories against internal and external enemies also provided Severus with the political and economic resources to pursue coherent policies and to meet the expectations of Rome's political actors.[416] An absence of famine, plague, or other major social catastrophes also meant there were no real exogenous factors that could imperil Rome's new prosperity, although civil war did foster anxieties. As we have seen, changes in opportunity structures strongly affect the viability of contentious repertoires.[417] Expanding political opportunities and competing legitimacy claims allowed the performance of innovative collective action under Pertinax and Julianus. The contraction of these opportunities and expanded spatial control under Severus meant that public claim-making returned to established, contained contentious repertoires. Indeed, only two instances of public claim-making are recorded

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[413] Ulp. *Dig.* 1.12.1.14, 1.12.1.13.
[414] *E.g.*, RIC 288, RSC 606; BMC 359. Lusnia (2014) 345 sees the issue of the *restitutor Urbis* coin type in 200-201CE as marking the moment when the city of Rome took a central place in Severus' propaganda effort, with several building projects under way contributing to the ongoing construction of the emperor's image.
[415] Said (2000) 185, 176.
[416] Goldstone and Tilly (2001) 182-3.
[417] McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2002) 43-45.

from Severus' reign. Both employed traditional acclamatory formulas and took place at the Circus Maximus. The first occurred at the last races before the Saturnalia of 195CE. Niger had been defeated, but Severus had to turn his attentions to Albinus immediately. According to the eyewitness account of Dio, the prospect of another civil war motivated an audience to:

> indulge in the most open lamentations… I, too, was present at the spectacle, since the consul was a friend of mine, and I heard distinctly everything that was said, so that I was in a position to write something about it. There had assembled, as I said, an untold multitude and they had watched the chariots racing, six at a time (which had also been the practice in Cleander's day), without applauding, as was their custom, any of the contestants at all. But when these races were over, and the charioteers were about to begin another event, they first enjoined silence upon one another and then suddenly all clapped their hands at the same moment and also joined in a shout, praying for good fortune for the public welfare. This was what they first cried out; then, applying the terms 'Queen' and 'Immortal' to Rome, they shouted: 'How long are we to suffer such things?' and 'How long are we to be waging war?' And after making some other remarks of this kind, they finally shouted, 'So much for that,' and turned their attention to the horse-race. In all this they were surely moved by some divine inspiration; for in no other way could so many myriads of men have begun to utter the same shouts at the same time, like a carefully trained chorus, or have spoken the words without a mistake, just as if they had practised them (76.4.2-6).

The second episode took place much later around 205CE when an audience took up a chant regarding the now all-powerful Plautianus: 'Why do you tremble? Why are you pale? You possess more than do the three.'[418] Dio claims he was amazed that so many people could carefully synchronise an applause-and-chant routine, yet both performances were based upon recognisable rhythmic chants. Calling Rome 'Queen' and 'Immortal' for instance, followed a well-known laudatory formula. The second part seems to have been an

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[418] Cass. Dio 77.2.2: The three being Severus and his two sons (who had the title of Caesar).

improvisation of a petition often shouted at emperors at the games, or what was a typical response to lousy entertainment at the shows.[419] The Plautianus chant, meanwhile, was a basic triple repeat and relatively easy for large numbers to deliver the same message together.[420] That the only contentious episodes that we know of during Severus' reign occurred at the Circus, demonstrates its continued centrality in popular politics. Public criticism was risky, given the increased capacity of the imperial regime: the mockery of Plautianus, for example, belied the fear that the prefect engendered among ordinary people and senators alike.[421] Thus, the tactical shift from destructive and confrontational forms of contention that carried high personal risk to the large-scale Circus mode allowed audience members to subsume their identities into an anonymous (and safe) collective. Indeed, given that each act was only an indirect rebuke of Severan policy allowed participants to sidestep the dangers associated with targeting the emperor personally.

The return to permitted, contained contention may be evidence that Severus' expanded spatial and social control of the Circus and associated spaces constrained transgressive contention. On the other hand, we must also consider that the collective memories generated by multiple subversive contentious performances at the Circus were independent of Severan constructions of identity, and the site had been re-signified multiple times as a place of popular power over and above imperial hegemony. In both cases, Severus did not attempt to repress or restrict such modes of collective claim-making, although he took evidence of discontent seriously. After the first incident, he moved *Legio II Parthica* to Mt Alba, a mere 19km from Rome. As the legion had never been permanently stationed in Italy, we should view this move as a direct response to the demonstration.[422] After his defeat of Albinus, the emperor had the challenger's head displayed to the city on a pole and instigated a wave of repression against eminent senators and supporters of Albinus. He even defended Commodus (now his divine 'brother') in a fiery speech in the Senate.[423] Yet,

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[419] Aldrete (1999) 126; Potter (1996) 141.
[420] Triple repeat: see Aldrete (1999) 103, 138.
[421] Hdn. 3.11.3: 'He was an object of dread when he appeared in public; not only did no one approach him, but even those who came upon him by chance turned aside to avoid him.'
[422] Ricci (2000).
[423] SHA *Sev.* 11.4-6; Cass. Dio; 76.7.3-4.

Severus' careful cultivation of the imperial moral economy meant that he could not directly punish his citizens without forfeiting the façade of benevolence.

The relative safety of the Circus as a contentious space ensured that it remained Rome's primary site for collective political participation, even when overt resistance dwindled under Severus. Not only that, because of its centrality in the preceding years of conflict, it had also become an essential symbol of the memorial heritage of the urban community. Of course, the mere act of gathering a large crowd together strengthens the relational and symbolic solidarities of that group. Indeed, the mere act of putting oneself in a prominent position and occupying it is an act of claiming to be part of 'the people,' or the 'opposition' or any other special interest group.[424] Moreover, what had happened in a place will, through the accumulation of collective memories, inform the character of the space as an outcome of that action. In other words, contention transforms the political significance of both places and spatial routines, which means there is an important feedback loop between place and action.[425] Thus, the Circus Maximus had become a true *lieu de mémoire*; a site that represented, popular culture, hidden transcripts, urban collective memories, and Roman identity.[426] As a free space and site of memory, the Circus was a safe location for the airing of hidden transcripts. Certainly, the contentious performances under Severus support this. Both sets of acclamations represented collective perceptions of Severan policy. Despite imperial surveillance and manipulation of civic spaces, the civil war and the outsized influence of Plautianus were evidently debated on street corners, *tabernae*, and private homes. The use of acclamations as a performance of hidden transcripts thus demonstrates that subaltern politics continue to flourish despite a drop in open contentious politics during Severus' reign. The Circus had become an institutionalised accretion to the repertoire of popular collective action, and the flexibility and strength of the acclamatory repertoire meant it was still able to be safely deployed under a more authoritarian regime.[427] It is important to note that while the sentiments expressed at the Circus were undoubtedly the distilled product of hidden transcripts, there was another, implicit message attached. Both

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[424] Shaw (2017) 123.
[425] Therborn (2006) 512.
[426] The conception of *lieux de mémoire* posits that collective memory is vested in places considered important symbols of the memorial heritage of a community. See Nora (1996).
[427] Tarrow (1993) 301.

instances were meant to remind the emperor of the pleb's strength as a corporate entity. As a consequence, the relationship between collective identity and the Circus was reinforced, demonstrating that the multiplicities of space remained a powerful factor in Roman popular politics.

The diffusion of contention between 180-211CE

Contentious cycles rarely develop exponentially, as spirals of opportunity do not work in the same ways for different political actors during the entire length of a cycle.[428] The contraction of political contention during the vast majority of Severus' reign must be understood as a process of re-stabilisation and re-routinisation of interaction patterns between regime members, in that the relationships between actors regained a measure of stability.[429] The resumption of stable political relations may, at first glance, suggest that the protest cycle initiated during Commodus' reign, had been extinguished with a successful coup. Undeniably, there are significant parallels between the events of 193CE and those of 69CE. Both years hosted a series of coup attempts, praetorian violence, popular 'justice' enacted by both soldiers and civilians, and a march on Rome by a challenger's legions. While there are definite similarities, the protest cycle initiated by the early risers of Commodus' time sparked spatial and social diffusion of contention. Conflict heightened across the social system in 193CE, as innovative, confrontational and violent performances increased. According to Kolins Givan, Roberts, and Soule, 'diffusion is heavily conditioned by political agency, and is a creative and strategic process marked by political learning, adaptation, and innovation: it is not simply a matter of political contagion or imitation.'[430] We know diffusion happened because of the scale of protests after 190CE. Even under Severus, popular contention remained a mass affair, proving that many people continued to act in concert. Dio's amazement that such a large crowd could chant together has more to do with his ignorance of underlying subaltern politics and the process of diffusion that had taken place.

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[428] Tarrow (1998) 202.
[429] Koopmans (2004) 37-38.
[430] Kolins, Givan, Roberts, and Soule (2010) 4.

Diffusion was, therefore, a crucial development because it made future mass contentious events more likely, since the actions of each political actor evolved in response to the actions of the others.[431] In Oliver and Myers' words, this action-reaction scheme created 'one large coevolving environment in which the characteristics and actions of any actor is constrained and influenced by the characteristics and actions of all other actors in the environment.'[432] The behaviour of the emperor, civilians, Senate, and military provided a clear path for each constituency to follow, and as new political actors joined, politics became less about special interests and more about protecting cultural norms. Social diffusion also relies on the work of social networks and informal communication channels, for when ideas or actions are diffusing, it is by the exchange of information that actors become linked.[433] As far as we can tell, mobilisation for every instance of contention was by informal word of mouth rather than official channels. The source material provides no real hints as to what social networks, if any, made up the composition of the protesting crowds. However, the repeated references to the circulation of rumour and informal communication indicate that local networks of family, friends, neighbourhood, and trade groups likely acted as mobilising units for each assembly.

Spatial diffusion also took place during these years. The occupation of spaces that were previously uncontested (like the praetorian *castra*) or used in different ways to perform contention (like the Circus Maximus) questioned existing norms and political order by challenging previously legitimate uses of those spaces. As collective action spread to these new sites and times, those who protested displayed their commitment to collective action, and the impact of their performances increased accordingly.[434] The incorporation of new sites of contention went hand in hand with collective action framing. The murder of Pertinax and the 'auctioning' of the Empire were viewed as unjust usurpations of the people's voice, which drew in new actors and helped to form new political identities. Since repertoires and frames are transmitted through interpersonal contact, and claim-making tactics and interpretive frames interact in complex ways, they can be adapted or modified by new

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[431] Oliver and Myers (2003) 174.
[432] Oliver and Myers (2003) 173.
[433] Oliver and Myers (2003) 183, 185.
[434] Tilly (2000) 146, 148; Monforte (2015) 8.

political actors as they diffuse.[435] The mass nature of the conflict at the praetorian camp and Circus occupation demonstrated that people who may never have participated in transgressive contention before felt compelled to join in. In earlier periods, most contentious activity arose from the spectacles, where people had already congregated. In contrast, much of the contention of 193CE took place at night or in new spaces. Normal rhythms of life were disrupted in the name of claim-making, reinforcing the innovative quality of the political contention.

Innovation was not just restricted to the participation of new political actors. A shift in political opportunity structures as a result of rapid changes in political contexts offered stimuli to rapid originality in contentious performances.[436] Confrontational contention took over from contained forms. New types of contention were introduced aimed at either obstructing political processes or communicating claims through the transgressive occupation of space. Established repertoires became increasingly modular as collective action diffused across a wide range of social and geographical space and was adapted to a variety of political conflicts.[437] This shift in space and outcomes can be seen in the development of mass protest between 190-193CE. Diffusion has direct consequences, for when protest diffuses horizontally from one site to another, it enlarges the scope of contentious politics.[438] While the successful outcome of the Cleander riot provided an action template for protesters to follow, its primary goal was still conventional: to force face-to-face communication with the emperor. Once Commodus acquiesced, the people renewed their consensus. The occupation of the Circus in protest at the military regime of Julianus was more radical. It was no coincidence that popular discontent was performed at that location, where imperial legitimacy and social consensus were supposed to be affirmed. Yet, no two-way discourse was sought. Through a dramatic reimaging of imperial space, the protesters advertised that the consensus relationship between themselves and the emperor was broken and thus, Julianus' legitimacy. As the Guard used their collective strength and political power to intervene and force regime change, their actions put them in direct

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[435] Kolins Givan, Roberts, and Soule (2010) 2-3.
[436] Tilly, and Tarrow (2015) 12.
[437] Tarrow (1993) 300.
[438] Walsh-Russo (2014) 35.

conflict with the people, which solidified the 'us' versus 'them' boundary between each group. The subsequent creation and performance of this new claimant-object pair explains some of the spatial and social diffusion of discontent as the praetorian camp became a new site of contention.

Conceptions of legitimacy and justice laid the foundations of much of the conflict of 193CE. Neither Pertinax nor Julianus could successfully establish legitimacy claims with all of Rome's political actors. Severus, on the other hand, could. By adjusting the composition and size of his urban forces and providing his soldiers with additional benefits, the emperor reasserted his control over the military and gained significant capacity as a result. Severus' deliberate and consistent policy of presenting himself as a second Augustus appealed to a part mythical, part historical base of political unity and was a message that resonated with multiple political actors. Many contemporaries could have reasonably believed that Severus had inaugurated a new Augustan age, and those who may have remained unconvinced could be persuaded instead by his charismatic leadership as repeated military victories contributed to Rome's glory.[439] After escalating contention under the three previous emperors, the re-establishment of stability, preservation of traditional political structures, the assertion of Roman power overseas, and the emperor's provision for an orderly dynastic succession did much to rectify the impact of Severus' contentious political succession and that of his predecessors.

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[439] von Soest, and Grauvogel (2017) 289-290.

Chapter 3: Collective identity and evolving perceptions of imperial justice

> …nothing is more terrifying than a military force exercising dominant power and driven by uneducated and irrational forces. (Plut. *Galb.* 1.4)

Although Severus was able to contain conflict, his military monarchy unbalanced the 'parallelogram' linking emperor, praetorians, Senate, and urban plebs. Despite nearly two decades of relative calm, four violent regime transitions occurred during the following ten years. Employment of new and transformed frames of meaning, symbols and ideologies, performances, and repertoires point not only to a continuity with the past and the cyclical nature of Roman contention, but also the emergence of new grievances, collective identities, opportunities, and threats.

The lavish week-long public funeral accorded to Severus in 211CE (closely resembling those for Augustus and Pertinax) demonstrated the extent to which the emperor had succeeded in reconstructing consensus.[440] His peaceful death from old age was, however, the last afforded to an emperor until Diocletian. Within months of their joint accession, Caracalla had his brother Geta killed. Caracalla then met his end while on campaign in 217CE, at the hands of one of his soldiers. The reign of Caracalla's erstwhile Praetorian Prefect Macrinus lasted little more than a year before he too was deposed. A new boy-emperor, Elagabalus, occupied the throne for only four years before the Praetorian Guard rioted in 222CE, killing the emperor, his mother, and other court insiders. Civilians and soldiers then joined together to lynch imperial administrators. This alliance quickly broke down and in 223CE, when the most extreme violence Rome had experienced since 69CE erupted into a three-day street fight between the praetorians and the *populus*. After so many years of stability, how had the political environment deteriorated to the point of armed conflict between two of Rome's major political actors? For a start, many of the same disputes that plagued the city in the early 190s re-emerged: the influence and impact of the emperors' repressive

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[440] See Favro and Johanson (2010).

capacity, deteriorating relationships between elite actors and the imperial regime, and a waxing and waning attendance to the moral economy all remained unsolved issues.

The years 212-222CE also saw the rise of other factors that directly contributed to the outbreak of political conflict in the city. As the Principate transformed into a true military dictatorship, the hierarchies, norms, and identities attached to the previous *status quo* were affected. The issue after Severus' death was that there was no real legitimacy claim for a military monarchy as such that appealed to non-soldiers. Without any legitimising myths or ideologies to bolster the new political arrangement, the dependence of Severus' successors on the military, and the privileged status of the Praetorian Guard was perceived as injust by other actors.[441] As the military gained in power and identity, competing civilian identities developed as people saw themselves as the 'losers' under the new regime type. Accordingly, collective identities underwent a process of politicisation. In the case of the Praetorian Guard, their self-awareness as the most dominant political actor in Rome led them to assert their identity in more tangible ways. In response, civilian identities also underwent a process of politicisation, culminating in a triangulation of adjacent power struggles, and an escalation in political contention.[442]

(i)   The evolution of a military collective identity

After Severus, the evolution and subsequent polarisation of civilian and military identities was a primary driver of the collective violence that erupted in Rome in 222-223CE.
In terms of mobilisation for contentious purposes, collective identity can be demarcated by three core elements: the salience of shared characteristics, an awareness of a shared grievance, and opposition to the dominant order that are all conjoined within a collective action frame.[443] These factors, salience, awareness, and opposition, were interpreted within a frame that provided context and clear parameters for actors to interpret the activities and status of others, and thus by extension, their own sense of identity. This process also facilitated the creation or hardening of social boundaries between groups based on subjective perceptions of differences that resulted from unequal political access and

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[441] Simon and Klandermans (2001) 326.
[442] Simon and Klandermans (2001) 322, 329.
[443] Au (2017) 2.

resource distribution.[444] As we have seen, strong legitimacy claims were an effective way of tying Rome's political actors together under an umbrella of collective identity. Consequently, when claims were universally accepted, political contention was constrained as the claimant-object pairings of emperor-urban plebs, emperor-military, and emperor-Senate were all contained within the same identity boundaries. As the emperor and his regime were the primary addressees of claim-making, those claims almost always included statements about the legitimacy (or illegitimacy) of regime policies, institutions, and actors.[445] Thus, provided an emperor could maintain his legitimacy claims across all groups, opportunities to redraw or deactivate these boundaries were limited. This constraining effect, though, did not extend to different claimant-object pairs or the shifting perceptions defining the boundaries that separated one group from another. The continued isolation of imperial regimes from their traditional allies among the political elite left emperors highly dependent on military support. In particular, the overtly pro-praetorian stance of Caracalla reactivated long-simmering tensions between civilians and soldiers that led to the formation of a master frame based on perceptions of injustice. In addition, highly salient social boundaries and identities also provided new avenues for political contention.

The root of these new identity issues was Severus' pro-military policies. Realistically, Severus cannot be given all the credit for the development of what was now a military monarchy: the conscription of 'barbarian' recruits, new military strategies, centralisation of imperial administration and a more open career path for the talented rather than just the socially connected had begun years earlier.[446] Notwithstanding his ability to extract the broad acceptance of Rome's political groups, Severus was clear by what means imperial power should now be sustained. On his deathbed, he exhorted his sons Caracalla and Geta to, 'be harmonious, enrich the soldiers, and scorn all other men.'[447] It may seem like a straightforward manifesto, but Severus had spent years cultivating a more diffuse, and hence enduring, support with the military. The dynastic transmission of power, whether biological or through adoption, held particular appeal for soldiers, as the accession of rather

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[444] Lamont and Molnár (2002) 168.
[445] Haunss (2007) 170.
[446] Faulkner (2009) 234.
[447] Cass. Dio 77.15.2.

unsoldierly candidates like Claudius, Elagabalus, Gordian III, and Valentinian II shows.[448] Severan policy was to restore and reinforce this norm. As early as 195CE, Severus had proclaimed himself to be the son of Marcus Aurelius, brother of Commodus, grandson of Antoninus Pius, and great-great-grandson of Nerva.[449] When Caracalla was seven, Severus changed his name to Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. Less than three years later, again following Antonine precedent, Severus proclaimed Caracalla as co-emperor, Geta as Caesar. The emperor also deified Commodus, who remained a popular figure among the troops.[450] These forged associations with the venerable Antonine name provided Severus with a dynastic claim that was universally popular with the troops. Another strategy to encourage military loyalty was ritually to increase the visual and symbolic interaction between emperor and soldier. The *acclamatio*, *adlocutio* and *sacramentum* ceremonies encouraged fidelity, but these were one-off occurrences. So, Severus expanded the various ways in which he and his wider family were linked to the army. Julia Domna was honoured both as *Mater Augusti* and *Mater Castrorum.* Military standards (*signa militaria)* were profoundly symbolic of a unit's collective identity, and Severus ensured that emperor-worship replaced the cult of the standards. Neil Faulkner argues that such steps indicate that the imperial cult was assuming central ideological significance in military ritual. [451]

While Severus provided relatively moderate *donativa* (at least in comparison to the payments of Marcus Aurelius and Julianus), he doubled military pay and introduced the *annona militaris*. Now, soldiers were provided with rations and other resources without the cost being deducted from their pay as was the previous standard, giving the recipients more cash in their pockets. In addition, Severus granted soldiers the right to wear the gold rings that indicated equestrian rank, and possibly also the ability to marry legally whilst serving.[452] Such innovations were likely aimed at increasing recruitment after multiple wars and the Antonine Plague had taken its toll on active numbers.[453] However, such social

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[448] Omissi (2018) 19.
[449] *CIL* 8.9317
[450] SHA *Comm.* 17.11.
[451] Faulkner (2009) 241.
[452] Hebblewhite (2017) 91; Develin (1971). Note, Hebblewhite interprets Herodian's words as the ability to legally marry, but as Eck (2011) points out, inscriptions show that soldiers still couldn't legally marry as late as the mid-third century. Rather, what Herodian appears to mean is that Severus made it easier for soldiers to live with their unofficial 'wives'.
[453] Phang (2001) 382.

benefits taken together with the substantial financial rewards on offer were also an essential ideological step designed to acknowledge the military's elevated socio-political position.[454] A hundred years earlier, Pliny minimised his description of Trajan's *donativum*, and indeed the significance of the military in general, in favour of an extended discussion of the much larger *congiarium* provided for the plebs.[455] Severus, and Caracalla after him, changed this stance. Mark Hebblewhite points out that both emperors 'were more willing that any emperor before them to publicly acknowledge and even celebrate their role as the providers of *praemia militiae*. In turn, this affected how the army viewed this function of the emperor.'[456] Undoubtedly, these developments indicate that Severus was cultivating diffuse rather than specific support from the troops. The Empire's military was now diverse (in both ethnic and geographical terms) and powerful and the obedience bounded by the traditional concept of *pietas* was perhaps less robust than a soldier's view of *virtus* as an essential imperial quality. Providing an enhanced social status, victories, material benefits, and inserting imperial imagery further into the social and spatial routines of soldiers created new cultural norms and therefore a strong basis for diffuse support. If Severus could claim to be *Pius Felix Invictus*, then his soldiers could certainly say the same.[457]

An enhanced socio-economic status had a positive impact on military collective identities. Collective identity among the troops had always been strong. Any group that shares pain, privation, and a standardised, collective working environment tends to form resilient and cohesive social bonds. Now, soldiers had more money, privileges, and opportunities for social mobility. A positive self-identity, even pride, borne from the emperor's recognition of their vital supporting role generated feelings of solidarity and a more unified sense of identity. In particular, the Praetorian Guard, the most elite component of the Roman military, already had a well-developed sense of collective identity. When Severus replaced the entire Guard in 193CE, he restocked its ranks with soldiers from his Illyrian legions. These men had lived and served together for many years before arriving in Rome and were a comprehensive unit before their promotion. The Guard's role and spatial separation from

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[454] Hekster (2008) 36.
[455] Plin. *Pan.* 25.2.
[456] Hebblewhite (2017) 75.
[457] Mattern (1999) 197, n. 117.

the city already differentiated them from the civilian population, but the new Pannonian troops appeared more 'foreign' than the previous incumbents of the praetorian *castra*. Dio's comment that the new recruits were nothing more than 'a throng of motley soldiers most savage in appearance, most terrifying in speech, and most boorish in conversation' seems to refer directly to the shift in the ethnic composition of the Guard.[458] The *paenula* cloak, part of the everyday praetorian uniform, dropped out of use around this time, suggesting that the new soldiers appeared less 'Roman' than their predecessors. These visible and audible shifts made it easy for the urban populace to infer ethnic stereotypes regarding Illyrian savagery, and the poor reputation of the Guard in general among Rome's inhabitants would have only accentuated the trepidation and hostility many felt towards the unit. To be sure though, such stereotyping was employed not so much to define the soldiers themselves, but the plebs themselves as urban, central characters versus the newcomers from the Empire's peripheries. Anxieties about the people's role as political actors, and the power shift away from Rome as a result of an overt military monarchy framed the new praetorians, like Cleander years earlier, as potential scapegoats for the creeping authoritarianism of the regime. Any sense of shared community between civilian and soldier was, by this point, buried under vast social, political, and economic disparities.

In spite of these developments, Severus' military reforms did not cause immediate conflict in Rome. This was partly due to the emperor's near-constant campaigning; most of the Guard accompanied the emperor abroad, and only a small rump of soldiers near retirement age remained. The Guard was thus a small and subdued force in Rome for many years, but on the accession of Caracalla and Geta, Severus' last British campaign was abandoned and all remaining praetorians returned to the city. As the structure and stability of Severus' rule mirrored that of Marcus Aurelius, the regime transition to his sons, like that for Commodus, was initially smooth. Within a year, however, hopes of harmonious shared rule were abruptly dashed. Untethered, Caracalla immediately expanded the military-centric policies of his father, a strategy that initiated a swift process of identity polarisation between praetorians and civilians.

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[458] Cass. Dio 75.2.5-6. He is exaggerating when he claims that with this change Severus had 'ruined the youth of Italy, who turned to brigandage and gladiatorial fighting in place of their former service in the army.'

The spatial dimensions of imperial injustice under Caracalla

Collective identities can unify groups by drawing connections and a sense of solidarity with one another, but how collectives view themselves and others is central to most conflicts. The people and Senate understood only too well that the political environment had shifted in favour of the praetorians and the broader military. This shift had also been articulated spatially. The praetorian *castra* and the imperial palace complex were now the nexus of power and authority in the city, not the Curia or Forum. The city's eyes were attuned to movement in and between those spaces as performative, albeit private, spaces, as the accession events of Pertinax and Julianus proved.

The Senate had lost substantial ground under Severus. The purge of prominent, pro-Albinus senators in 197CE, the gradual replacement of Italians with provincials, and the emperor's overt reliance on his army instead of senatorial advisors all but ruptured the respectful and theoretically cooperative relationship that Pertinax had tried to rebuild.[459] A striking example of the change in relations can be seen on the Palazzo Sacchetti relief, where a group of senators is depicted in an audience with Severus, his sons, and imperial councillors. While Severus sits on the old magisterial symbol of authority, the *sella curulis*, the senators stand below the emperor, reminding the viewer that the emperor and Senate were not equals. Jussi Rantala argues that the relief encapsulates the shift from the old Antonine policy of cooperation to a new ideology of a more autocratic regime.[460] Senatorial governors found their power increasingly undermined by equestrian procurators, and equestrians increasingly filled important administrative posts with military experience that answered directly to the emperor.[461] Equestrian praetorian prefects also accrued substantial legal powers and control of the military *annona*. It was no coincidence, then, that a mere six years after the death of Severus, Rome would receive its first equestrian emperor in what was a powerful example of shifting power dynamics.

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[459] Cass. Dio 75.2.1-3, 76.8.4; Hdn. 3.8.6-7; *SHA Sev.* 13. The *Historia Augusta* provides 41 names although the authenticity of the list is much debated. For a discussion, see Jacques (1992); Rantala (2013) 44.
[460] Hannestad (1988) 68; Rantala (2013) 48.
[461] For example, the new province of Mesopotamia added after the Parthian wars was governed by an equestrian rather than a senator. Severus also put the newly created *Legiones Parthicae* under the command of equestrian *praefecti* as well. Mennen (2011) 142.

The dismissal of the customary, advisory role of the Senate in favour of the physical capacity of the military had repercussions in terms of urban political opportunity structures. The downgrading of the Senate's position as social leader and regime ally opened up divisions within the elite, and usual political alignments became more precarious. Political space including physical space previously regulated by long-established socio-political norms was now more accessible and contestable for political actors who stepped into the void left by the unravelling of the cooperative relationship between Senate and emperor. So, as Rome's built environment hosted new spatial routines and social interactions between actors, the political significance attached to each underwent a period of transformation. Similarly, while the privileging of the military gave the emperor the ability to repress contention, it also reduced the ability of the elite to challenge or make claims upon the government.[462]

Together, the erosion of established norms made Rome's political space more contestable. Typically, in its most diffuse form, control over the military is sustained by cultivating social support outside the army, among core groups that underpin the regime and within society at large.[463] The downgrading of the Senate left the urban plebs as the only real potential civilian force in the city, and, as Severus had demonstrated, military and popular support were enough to sustain an emperor's legitimacy. He understood that a functioning moral economy was concerned with notions of justice and reciprocity. He also appreciated the close relationship between identity and the built environment, creating and manipulating urban space in order to shape identities and routines that were inextricably linked to the Severan dynasty and its authority. Caracalla, however, utilised public space in a much different way. He interpreted his father's words to 'scorn all other men' in ways that transgressed both spatial and social norms.

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[462] That is not to say the traditional urban elites were now powerless. Although the senatorial order lost their hold over high-level military and administrative positions, the small and cohesive nature of the order, and its close bonds with Rome and Italy remained intact. A core of senatorial families that made up the inner elite were able to maintain or even improve their positions during the third century. This tiny nucleus of senatorial *gentes* provided a considerable percentage of ordinary consuls, African proconsuls and city prefects, which ensured a measure of continuity for Rome especially in terms of grain supplies and urban policing. See Mennen (2011) 79-80.
[463] Brooks (1999) 20.

For a start, the new emperor had no intention of ruling in partnership with Geta and had his brother murdered a mere ten months after their joint accession. Caracalla immediately rushed to the praetorian camp, claiming that he was a victim of a pro-Geta plot.[464] Tellingly, the emperor focused his pitch less on the 'justice' of his brother's murder, but on the specific benefits he could offer the unit. He offered a substantial *donativum*, but more importantly, a public partnership. According to Dio, Caracalla told the hastily assembled soldiers; '[I want to] live with you, if possible, but if not, at any rate to die with you. For I do not fear death in any form, and it is my desire to end my days in warfare. There should a man die, or nowhere.'[465] Given that this passage directly precedes Caracalla's address to the Senate after Geta's murder, the arrangement demonstrates that Dio believed that the army was the most powerful actor; the Senate a mere formality to be quickly dealt with.[466] However, what is more pertinent here is that Caracalla referenced military identity and claimed it as his own imperial persona. His declaration of brotherhood and solidarity was a signal to the Guard that their position was set to rise if they accepted his proffered partnership. Unsurprisingly, they accepted and proclaimed Caracalla as sole emperor although news of what had actually occurred at the palace had filtered out.[467] In essence, the emperor had 'bought' the support of the Guard like Julianus, but praetorian support for Caracalla was predicated less on money and more on social and political recognition. In 193CE, the idea that an emperor could 'buy' the support of the Guard was a travesty. The Severan system, though, had prepared the ground. Neither Dio nor Herodian offers much indignation at what transpired at the camp. Caracalla's declaration that he would be a 'praetorian' emperor just confirmed the military monarchy built by Severus.

It was evident to the rest of the city that something momentous was happening. Herodian claims that 'consternation seized the people when they saw the emperor speeding on foot through the middle of the city in the early evening.'[468] As with the urgent movements of Pertinax and Julianus during the night of their accessions, this was imperial movement at

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[464] Cass. Dio 78.3.1-2; Hdn. 4.4.4. The *Historia Augusta* strikes a more cynical note, claiming the soldiers only let Caracalla into the camp after the promise of an enormous donative (*Geta* 6.1-2).
[465] Cass. Dio 78.3.2.
[466] Ward (2011) 21.
[467] Hdn. 4.4.8.
[468] Hdn. 4.4.4.

the 'wrong' time of day and in the 'wrong' direction. In terms of spatial dynamics, Caracalla's more frenzied dash revealed another truth. The emperor was going to where the power was – neither the palace nor Curia, but the praetorian *castra*. As the populace milled and discussed unfolding events, Caracalla ordered the praetorians to immediately collect their donative from the deposits and treasuries stored in the city's temples.[469] Large sums were held at these locations. The municipal treasury, for example, was located in the Temple of Saturn. State funds were stored there, and ordinary Romans deposited their valuables there as well as in the temples of Pax, Castor, Mars Ultor, Vesta, and Ops Consiva.[470] It is doubtful that the soldiers discriminated between state and public funds, or even restricted themselves to the agreed donative. Indeed, Herodian claimed that in one day Caracalla had 'recklessly distributed all the money which Severus had collected and hoarded from the calamities of others over eighteen years.'[471] Where Marcus Aurelius and Pertinax sold off imperial possessions to pay the bills, Caracalla commanded his soldiers to help themselves from the temples. For all intents and purposes, the people paid the praetorians' donative, not the emperor.[472]

Aside from the unjust appropriation of public funds, the temple raids were a transgressive breach of cultural, social, and spatial boundaries. Temples were focal points in times of both celebration and crisis. Along with porticos and altars, temples were where crowds gathered on the death of Commodus, and where Severus posted his soldiers. *Collegia* also met regularly in the temples around the Forum when they planned for public festivals.[473] Fundamentally though, temples were sacred space, and while control over these spaces was vested in the gods, the community as a whole also had a claim.[474] Profound differences separated the identities that appeared in more formal, public life, and those that operated in routine social existence. Thus, the identities that Romans embodied at consensus ceremonies were examples of public or disjointed identities. Embedded identities, on the

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[469] Cass. Dio 78.3.2; Hdn. 4.4.7.
[470] Hdn. 1.14.3 describes the collective mourning when the Temple of Pax burned during the fire of 191CE containing the possessions of many who were made paupers by the conflagration. Castor/Mars Ultor: Juv. 14.258; Vesta: Plut. *Ant*. 21.3; Ops: Cic. *Phil*. 2.37, Vell. Pat. 2.60. See also Bromberg (1940).
[471] Hdn. 4.4.7.
[472] SHA *Marc*. 17.4-5, *Pert*. 7.8, 7.11.
[473] Temples: Hdn. 2.2.3, 8.6.7. *Collegia*: McHugh (2017)13.
[474] Russell (2016) 117.

other hand, were the identities based on kinship, friendship, trade, and neighbourhood networks. Roman religion had both 'public' and 'private' forms, which meant that temple space, depending on the ritual, could be considered as either.[475] Both disjointed and embedded identities were part of the spatial experience associated with sacred space, and the transgression of these spaces placed both forms of collective identity at odds with the regime. Temples were where the community asserted its collective identity, not just on an individual level with the gods but as Romans. Caracalla's actions transformed these spaces into contestable, contentious locations. [476]

The violation of religious space, public funds, and private possessions impacted relations between the city's political actors. The pillaging of temples by soldiers usually took place during times of war, and very rarely by Romans against Roman sites. Our sources condemn the looting that took place during the chaos of 69CE, but they also acknowledge that the normal order had broken down.[477] In this case, the accession of Caracalla (and Geta) was uncontested, and Rome had enjoyed many years of peace. The praetorians' deeds combined with the circulation of the news of Geta's murder framed Caracalla's inaugural acts as manifestly unjust and illegitimate, and the already contentious boundary between soldier and civilian was made even more so, since such an attack by power-holders and perceived enemies on embedded identities formed the basis for potential new grievances.[478] In fact, we can identify a bidirectional causal relationship between collective identities and grievances, in that collective identity fosters stereotyping processes and enhances the salience of the 'us-them' boundary.[479]

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[475] Festus offers a definition of the two: 'public rites are those which are performed at public expense for the *populus*, and those for the hills, districts, *curiae*, and shrines, but private rites are those which are performed for individual people, families, and clans: Festus 284 Lindsay; in Russell (2016) 102. See also Cic. *Har. resp*. 14.

[476] Hanagan, Moch, and te Brake (1998) 7, 9.

[477] For instance, Josephus (*BJ* 4.649) describes the looting and burning of the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus by the Vitellians; Tacitus (*Hist.* 3.33) the looting of the temples at Cremona by Flavian soldiers on their way to Rome. See also Cass. Dio 64.17.3; Tac. *Ann*. 3.71-2; Rutledge (2007) 187-188. Caesar was also censured for tearing down the temples on the site of what would eventually be the Theatre of Marcellus, and also for appropriating the sacred funds deposited there: Cass. Dio 43.49.2-3.

[478] Tilly (1999) 264.

[479] Simon and Klandermans (2001) 325.

A continued disregard for cultural and spatial norms reinforced not only the link between identity and grievances, but also the framing of the regime's actions as unjust and transgressive. At about the same time as the temple raids, Caracalla ordered a purge of Geta's supporters (Dio cites 20,000 victims) and prominent administrators.[480] Many of the executions took place in public, including seemingly 'safe' spaces, like the baths and streets, even the dining table.[481] For instance, Caracalla allowed the Guard to execute their prefects Papinian (Aemilius Papinianus) and Valerius Patruinus. The soldiers publicly killed the commanders in a highly degrading manner: according to the *Historia Augusta*, Patruinus was killed in front of the Temple of the Deified Pius, and his and Papinian's bodies dragged through the streets without any regard for decency.[482] Next on the list was Lucius Fabius Cilo, Caracalla's erstwhile tutor and the former *praefectus urbi.* The praetorians looted Cilo's house, seized him from the baths and dragged him along the Via Sacra. In full view of the populace, they tore his clothes off and disfigured his face. The sight of a distinguished senator and former soldier dragged along the street stripped and beaten led to an outcry not just from the plebs but also the urban cohorts, whom Cilo used to command. It is unclear whether the *urbaniciani* protested because of Cilo's personal qualities, but Dio's text suggests that they shared the public's outrage at the praetorians' degrading and unjust actions.[483]

The reaction of the urban cohorts should not surprise. They had protected civilians from the brutal repression of Commodus' cavalry, and we could speculate that the *urbaniciani* may have intervened to protect civilians from the depredations of rogue praetorians over past decades. As with the urban populace and the praetorians, a cultural and geographical divide had developed between the urban cohorts and the Guard. The *castra urbana* by this time was separate from the praetorian camp, and as Ulpian emphasises, each unit had a very

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[480] Cass. Dio 78.4.1. His figures are a likely exaggeration.
[481] SHA *Geta* 6.3, *Cara.* 4.4; Hdn. 4.6.1; Cass. Dio 78.4.1.
[482] Cass. Dio 78.4.1; SHA *Cara*. 4.1-2. The charge against the two prefects is unspecified.
[483] Cass. Dio 78.4.1: 'The soldiers tore the clothing off [Cilo's] body and disfigured his face, so that the populace as well as the city troops began to make an outcry.' The *Historia Augusta* (*Cara*. 4.6) claims it was the city troops who had seized Cilo. The only possible motive for the urban cohorts was that they had a personal grudge against their former prefect Cilo, but given his reputation, this seems unlikely. It was the praetorians who were in the middle of a very public purge of the emperor's enemies and who had just pillaged the city's temples. It is implausible that the city troops would join in, particularly against the wishes of the populace. Also see SHA *Comm.* 20.1.

different relationship with both the city's inhabitants and the emperor: the praetorians were campaign-hardened soldiers, while the urban cohorts were primarily a police force, with a mandate to uphold justice and protect the people.[484] The identity and lived experience of the two units were thus vastly different, and it is probable that the city troops identified more strongly with the rights and collective identities of their fellow city dwellers than with the praetorians. Their united front overawed Caracalla (τὸν Ἀντωνῖνον καὶ αἰδεσθέντα αὐτοὺς καὶ φοβηθέντα), so much that he intervened and shielded Cilo from the soldiers using his cavalry cloak, and the *Historia Augusta* claims that the disorder intensified to the point that the urban cohorts staged a mutiny that the emperor had to put down.[485] Caracalla's back down was no small matter either; the emperor was wearing military dress in solidarity with the Guard, and he had ordered the executions in the first place, yet he was obliged to retreat in the face of loud opposition. He even had the soldiers who attacked Cilo executed for their actions in an obvious sop to the outraged crowds.[486]

The butchery of prominent officials and politicians on the streets was an alarming disregard of norms. Temples, streets and baths and other civic spaces were primarily utilised for non-power forms of behaviour: talking, walking, eating, praying, and working. If justice was to be executed at these 'unofficial' locations, it was meant to be performed by the community in defence of their rights. Even when performed by other political actors, popular justice was always a claim against the regime. Here, the repertoire's spatial and performative elements were appropriated and subverted by the emperor and his praetorians. At the same time though, the verbal contention of the urban cohorts and populace can be interpreted as a demonstration of popular justice, and as a defence of the social and spatial norms that were being publicly trampled. It was not a ritualistic performance, but the uproar had the effect of shaming the emperor into a measure of retreat. The populace would not have their temple funds returned, but a message had been sent to the regime nonetheless.

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[484] A statue base with a dedication to the *Genius centuriae* by a *miles cohortis urbanae*, dated 182CE, suggests the creation of the urban cohort's camp in Regio VII as early as Commodus' reign (*CIL* 4.217= *ILS* 2106). The urban cohorts may have participated in the Marcomannic War, but the emergency was such that Marcus Aurelius recruited gladiators, slaves, bandits, and *diogmitai*. Ulp. *Dig.* 1.12.1.12; SHA *Marc.* 21.6-8; Ricci (2011) 488, 491.
[485] Cass. Dio 78.4.1; SHA *Geta* 6.4.
[486] Dio claims it was because the soldiers had not been successful.

(i)   Framing repression and legitimacy

The regime's trespass of what was considered permissible and appropriate made the borders between identities visible, and further expanded Rome's contestable public spaces. Potentially, Rome's streets were now symbolic sites for the articulation of popular rights against spatially produced or manifested injustice, and the transgressive use of space also provided the populace with a subjective assessment of the threat that the new regime posed.[487] Visible injustice allowed the development of a master frame, which is a collective action frame that is wide in scope, and is flexible and inclusive enough to be applied by actors for a specific cause, and as Robert Benford points out, a master frame can drive contention even when political opportunity structures are not immediately conducive for action.[488] Since effective master frames accord with people's experiences, values, and belief systems, the extensive relationship of conflict between civilians and soldiers provided a contextual basis to the souring relationship between the city's political actors. One of the fundamentals of the imperial moral economy was the notion that the empire's resources should be justly distributed. People observed not only the outsized influence of the Guard but the open hands of the soldiers into which were poured pay increases, huge donatives, and other inducements.[489] Nonetheless, some of the key obligations of the imperial moral economy were still being met. Severus' stockpile of grain suggests there were no major issues with the *frumentationes*, and Caracalla's enormous baths remained under construction along with porticos, new streets, and temples. However, where legitimacy and conceptions of social justice had previously been in step, the injustice of the emperor's privileging of the praetorians, and his use of military repression meant that the two concepts were now distinct. Since moral economy and the underlying diffuse support that it generated implies a relational conception of legitimacy, the perceived injustice of the city's new power dynamics impacted how the civilian population viewed the emperor and his regime, affecting political opportunities for popular contention.

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[487] Dikeç (2009) 1; Wikström (2005) 52.
[488] Benford (2013) 1.
[489] Cass. Dio 78.9.1, 78.24.1.

Caracalla's permissiveness towards the Guard was especially unpopular. Shortly after the Cilo incident, a Circus crowd protested the privileging of the praetorians and his use of the military by chanting in unison; 'we shall do the living to death, that we may bury the dead.'[490] Emperors were meant to tolerate collective claims made at the spectacles. However, at a subsequent show:

> The emperor did something that had never been done before; while he was watching a chariot race, the crowd insulted the charioteer he favoured. Believing this to be a personal attack, Caracalla ordered the soldiers to attack the crowd and lead off and kill those shouting insults at his driver. The soldiers, given authority to use force and to rob, but no longer able to identify those who had shouted so recklessly (it was impossible to find them in so large a mob, since no one admitted his guilt), took out those they managed to catch and either killed them or, after taking whatever they had as ransom, spared their lives, but reluctantly (Hdn. 4.6.4-5).

Herodian, of course, is not wholly accurate when he claims that no emperor had done such a thing – Caligula and Vitellius were both accused of using soldiers to punish contemptuous audiences – but in terms of the last century, such a brutal reprisal against civilian spectators was unheard of.[491] Violent repression of Circus contention and the indiscriminate theft and murder of civilians was yet another spatial expression of imperial injustice, and it revealed that the emperor was unwilling to uphold the expectations embedded in popular conceptions of *libertas* and *civilitas*.[492] However, the most problematic aspect, in terms of opportunities and grievances, was that Caracalla failed to offer any effective framing that could be used to re-interpret his actions as justified and legitimate. Although most research represents repression and legitimation as oppositional strategies of political rule, if repression against a group can be successfully framed as just, it can actually generate legitimacy in the eyes of other actors. Consequently, to decrease the costs of repression and reduce the risk of de-legitimisation, autocratic regimes will often put forward discursive

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[490] Cass. Dio 78.10.3.
[491] Caligula: Cass. Dio 59.28.11. Vitellius: Suet. *Vit*. 14.
[492] See Wallace-Hadrill (1982) for an excellent discussion on the centrality of *civilitas* in imperial discourse.

justifications for the use of repression.[493] Both Commodus and Severus attempted to legitimise their repression of the Senate by claiming that purges were needed to root out conspiracies. Severus' message revolved around notions of stability (i.e., repression was required to stamp out last remnants of civil war), and the absence of any real backlash from other segments of the population suggest that such discursive strategies worked.[494]

Caracalla's message on the other hand was that the emperor and the Guard would do whatever they liked, regardless of existing norms. The three acts of imperial aggression were thus not considered justified, nor legitimate by any section of the population. The Circus Maximus was one of Rome's most important free spaces, and the violence inflicted upon its audience threatened its existence as a site for safe mass contention, as well as the *libertas* and *civilitas* that were components of the cultural work performed there. The city refused to accept these violations quietly. Caracalla left Rome shortly afterwards, claiming that city life was 'intolerable,' indicating that Rome remained in a state of belligerent agitation.[495] He did not return. Nor was the populace's subjective perception of Caracalla's repressive strategies inaccurate. In 216CE, the emperor stopped in Alexandria ostensibly to visit the tomb of Alexander the Great, but in reality to massacre the city's young men as punishment for their lampoons. Dio records that after the massacre, Caracalla 'abolished the spectacles and the public messes of the Alexandrians and ordered that Alexandria should be divided by a cross-wall and occupied by guards at frequent intervals, in order that inhabitants might no longer visit one another freely.'[496] Alarming accounts of what took place there would have filtered back to Rome, confirming that the brutal repression of a circus audience was entirely in keeping with the emperor's *modus operandi*. Dio also observed that during the Alexandrian massacre, 'even some shrines were despoiled' by Caracalla's soldiers; an indication that his forces understood that they could transgress cultural norms with impunity.[497] It is mere conjecture, but if Caracalla did return to Rome or

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[493] Edel and Josua (2018) 882.
[494] This type of frame, where opponent's activities are labelled as harmful to the state is what Snow and Benford define as a diagnostic master frame. Edel and Josua (2018) 884; Snow and Benford (1992).
[495] Hdn. 4.7.1.
[496] Cass. Dio 78.23.3.
[497] Cass. Dio 78.23.2.

directed any further repressive measures at the Circus, it would likely have been contested. The alternative was Alexandria and explicit tyranny.

It is not as though Caracalla was ignorant of the close relationship between framing, identity, and collective action. For instance, he did attempt to frame his fratricide as an act of self-defence, celebrating his 'safe deliverance' by issuing the famous Antonine Constitution in 212CE. It guaranteed citizenship to nearly all free-born residents of the empire and was aimed in part at forging a stronger sense of collective identity and support for the emperor in the capital as well as the wider empire.[498] In an edict issued shortly afterwards, Caracalla 'wished to render thanks to the gods together with all who were now his people and with all others who should join his people.'[499] The issuing of the *Constitutio* was meant to be interpreted as an example of the emperor's *pietas*, and for his immediate urban audience, it offered a reciprocal moral contract. Accepting citizenship forced a tacit acknowledgement that a thanksgiving was needed, and Caracalla's actions were justified. In return, the populace would offer their consensus. As the offer of citizenship was universal, the expected consensus would be amplified, and Caracalla could shore up his claims to legitimacy in the wake of an illegitimate act. Thus, the emperor not only offered an obvious *quid pro quo* in terms of obligations and benefits, but he also subsumed these expectations into the social and religious aspects that characterised *pietas*. The deliberate (but astute) manipulation of the familial bonds between an emperor and his subjects was an astute move, but unfortunately, the framing of the decree as a example of imperial justice was entirely at odds with the behaviour of the emperor and his troops; the humiliating treatment of Cilo, imperial tutor and benefactor, was hardly a good example of Caracalla's piety.

The reciprocal nature of the agreement also meant that in return for taxation and acceptance, Caracalla would guarantee his new citizens access to the legal system.[500] This may have been welcome news elsewhere in the empire, but those living in Rome had

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[498] Ulp. *Ad edictum* 22. Dio's claim (78.9.4) that the decree was motivated by Caracalla's desire to reap a massive increase in taxes has been largely dismissed by scholars, although fiscal considerations could have been at play. See Imrie (2018) 134 for a brief discussion.
[499] *P.Giss.* 40, col.1.1-11.
[500] Imrie (2018) 133.

already witnessed the execution of imperial justice by soldiers in the street. The promise of suffrage did not mesh with existing injustice frames. Part of Severus' legitimacy claims was the successful delivery of traditional values. Natalie Kampen states that Severus' plans to revitalise 'traditional' conduct in times of social change had 'as its deeper goal the strengthening of family, class, and community relationships.'[501] This worked when emperor, *familia,* and administration adhered to those principles. Caracalla's disregard for accepted rules of engagement and lack of toleration was a stark contrast with the policy of his father who preferred covert spatial control within the bounds of established routines and behaviours. If new citizens were already engaged with, and defensive of, traditional Roman norms of justice and governance, the *Constitutio* had just enlarged the base for collective claim-making in the city.

On the surface, the change in regime policy from Severus to Caracalla may not seem to have been a substantial one. It was Severus who expanded state capacity, menaced the Senate and boosted the position of the military. Yet, Severus wielded a scalpel, using repressive measures only occasionally against those who posed a direct challenge to his authority, and as only one of many strategies used to influence and control Rome's political actors. He tolerated established forms of contention and framed his actions in ways that suggested that due process and legalities were followed. Caracalla, on the other hand, was far more indiscriminate, employing physical violence as one of his government's main control strategies. The emperor's proclamation that he was a fellow soldier strengthened already robust military identities. For civilians, the regime's transgressions of social and spatial norms threatened their embedded identities, and position as political actors, and without framing that presented his repressive acts as legitimate or justified, the opposite became the accepted truth. Current political opportunity structures offered more constraints than opportunity, but if they shifted, the boundary between civilian and military collective identities could become more oppositional and polarised.

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[501] Kampen (1991) 243.

Competing identities under Macrinus

In 217CE, Caracalla was assassinated by a disgruntled *evocatus* and two praetorian tribunes attached to his bodyguard, probably with the connivance of his praetorian prefect Marcus Opellius Macrinus who 'reluctantly' ascended the throne a few days later.[502] From the moment of his accession, Macrinus found himself in a bind. He had to construct legitimacy claims from scratch, but he could not leave the Parthian campaign launched by Caracalla in 216CE and travel to Rome to cement his authority. His absence meant that the divergent interests and now salient identities of the city's three political actors came into conflict with each other and the regime, offering multiple opportunities for contention.

First of all, Macrinus had to deal with the issue of Caracalla. The urban plebs were delighted with news of the regime change. Herodian claims that crowds, presumably at the shows, shouted for the new emperor every chance they got and were so hostile to the former emperor that his remains had to be smuggled into Rome at night.[503] In terms of material benefits too, there were hopes that imperial policy would change. As part of the celebrations of Caracalla's death, the people make a list of demands and enumerated all the irregular expenditures made from the public treasuries in the hope that these would be abolished and that a more balanced approach would follow.[504] However, as Macrinus well understood, Caracalla was extremely popular with his 'brother' praetorians, and the new emperor needed their support. He tried to compromise, allowing the populace to vent its anger whilst preventing any official sanctions against Caracalla, namely a *damnatio*, but it soon become abundantly clear that the new regime would remain a military monarchy. Macrinus curried military support by taking the name Antoninus, and the Guard continued to receive the lion's share of resources.[505] The troops were promised a donative of 5000 *denarii* each in addition to their first gift of 750 *denarii*, while the people only received a *congiarium* of a mere 150 *denarii* per head.[506] Next, Macrinus put a man named Flaccus in

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[502] Cass. Dio 79.5; Hdn. 4.12–13; SHA *Cara*. 6.6–7.2, *Macr*. 4.7-8. Both Dio and Herodian claim that Macrinus enlisted the *evocatus* Julius Martialis as the assassin. In the *Historia Augusta*, Martialis is simply an accomplice to the murder.
[503] Hdn. 5.2.3; Cass. Dio 79.9.
[504] Cass. Dio 79.18**.**
[505] Cass. Dio 79.17.
[506] 1000 *denarii* were given in hand. See RIC IV 67, Cohen 23 (6 Fr.)

charge of the *annona* (τῶν τροφῶν) who promptly discontinued the *frumentationes* and the distribution of presents at the games given by the major praetors. It may be that Caracalla had squandered the vast stockpiles of grain left by Severus leaving the new regime with empty warehouses. Discontinuing the grain-dole while the praetorians were still receiving the extra benefits (including rations) provided by Caracalla was a reminder that the needs of the Guard were more important than the imperial moral economy.[507]

Dio asserts that military setbacks, the 'greed and strife' caused by soldiers, and Macrinus' conciliatory attitude towards Caracalla caused rumblings of discontent in Rome.[508] Unsurprisingly, it appears rumours began circulating that the new emperor planned on ruling like his predecessor. The *Historia Augusta* lists lurid examples of Macrinus' alleged bloodthirsty nature, and states a circus audience member cried out:

> Peerless in beauty the youth,
>
> Not deserving to have as his father Mezentius (*Macr*. 12.9)[509]

For many, Macrinus' regime now seemed more like a threat than an opportunity. During the races held to celebrate the birthday of his heir Diadumenian, another circus crowd expressed its discontent:

> [it] raised a great outcry, uttering many laments and asserting that they alone of all mankind were without a leader and without a king; and they called upon Jupiter, declaring that he alone should be their leader and adding these very words: 'As a master you were angry, as a father take pity on us.' Nor would they pay any heed at first to either the equestrian or the senatorial order who were…praising the emperor and the Caesar, to the extent of saying… in Greek: 'Oh, what a glorious day is this! What noble rulers!' and desiring the others, too, to agree with them. But the crowd

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[507] Cass. Dio 79.22**.** The reverse of a silver denarius from 217CE displays Annona holding stalks of grain alongside overflowing *modius* and a cornucopia, suggests that Macrinus was eager to advertise the arrival of the grain ships from the provinces and the resumption of the *frumentaria* (RIC IV 26, RSC III 47).
[508] Cass. Dio 79.27.
[509] The lines refer to excerpts from the *Aeneid*: the first half-line refers to an Arcadian killed by Tolumnius (12.275); the second describes Lausus, son of Mezentius (7.654).

raised their hands toward heaven and exclaimed: 'There is the Romans' Augustus; having him, we have everything.' So truly, it would seem, is there innate in mankind a great respect for that which is superior and a great contempt for that which is inferior; and so the populace thenceforth regarded both Macrinus and Diadumenianus as absolutely non-existent, and already trampled upon them as if they were dead (Cass. Dio 79.20).

As with the Circus demonstrations under Severus and Caracalla, the shouting appears to have been a subversion of traditional imperial acclamations. Instead of asking Jupiter to assist the emperor, the crowd instead asks Jupiter to intercede since the emperor was unable to lead them.[510] The 'have pity' formula was also a well-known phrase used in favour of defendants or gladiators at the spectacles, indicating that the demonstration, as with earlier examples, did not have to be organised beforehand and was likely a spontaneous act.[511]

An episode of mass contention a mere five months into the new reign proved that Macrinus' conciliatory approach towards the Guard had not endeared him to Rome's populace. On the contrary, the privilege of the praetorians had already activated the salience of civilian collective identities as people saw their social position downgraded by military dominance. The Circus performance also highlighted another development. Although the threat of violent repression constrained mass popular contention under Caracalla, and despite fears that Macrinus would be no different from his predecessor, crowds very quickly utilised the acclamatory repertoire under the new regime. This eagerness was due perhaps to the fact that Macrinus was absent from Rome, as were most of the praetorians. The reduced risk of repression allowed crowds to utilise the Circus once again as a safe free space, and given its scale, the space was able to foster a sense of collective empowerment, and arouse intense emotions.[512] Significantly, the chants also

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[510] For imperial acclamations that invoke Jupiter to increase the state/emperor: Ov. *Fast.* 1.613; *ILS* 452.3. Potter (1996) 136.
[511] Crowds had acclamations that could work in favour of a defendant. In *The Martyrdom of Saints Carpus, Papylus, and Agonothice* 43, 45, the crowd called on the officials to 'have pity' for Agonothice. In: Potter (1996) 141.
[512] Rao and Dutta (2012) 625.

demonstrate that the contentious repertoire had become detached from the emperor. Where verbal contention used to be part of a two-way, face-to-face interaction between spectators and emperor, the long absences of Severus and Caracalla from Rome had made this aspect redundant. The repertoire was now moored to the Circus as the city's principal site for popular political protest.

(i)   A divided elite?

An intriguing feature of the anti-Macrinus demonstration suggests that there were competing elite perceptions of the new regime. Although Caracalla's death was no doubt a relief for a beleaguered Senate, the accession of Rome's first equestrian emperor certainly rankled Dio. In his view, Macrinus' elevation was a disruption of the social order and upset any remaining sense of concord with the elite classes.[513] Dio's attitude suggests that the acclamation of a non-senatorial emperor had the potential to drive identity politics among the elite. The political position of the Senate had been substantially downgraded by successive emperors, but as members of a social order, senators had to cleave to the stereotypes of their class as a bulwark against the enhanced mobility of equestrian officials and military men. In fact, perceived polarisation between different groups exceeds actual polarisation in terms of policy views if political conflict becomes more salient.[514] Therefore, as some senators slanted their beliefs towards the stereotype of their class, they became more pessimistic about their social and political prospects, and more conservative in their outlook, which in turn created more social space between them and the city's other political actors.

The Circus demonstration is illustrative of this process. As Dio's narrative points out, while the general audience shouted, the senatorial and equestrian orders replied in Greek. Like the before-mentioned chants, senatorial acclamations by this point had become recognisable hymn-like rhythms, based on the recitation of the imperial titles and wishes for a long reign, good health, and divine favour. As the extended litany addressed to Commodus

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[513] *E.g.* Cass. Dio 79.41**.** Some scholars have made much of the rise of the equestrian order during the third century, as equestrians replaces senators in many administrative and military posts. However, as Mennen points out, this is a problematic view because the equestrian order was far more heterogenous than the senatorial order: Mennen (2011) 135.
[514] Gennaioli and Tabellini (2019) 3.

in 192CE demonstrates, they could be altered as easily as popular acclamatory formulas.[515]

Usually, Latin would have been used in official senatorial oratory, so the use of Greek could have been a deliberate attempt to use language to constitute themselves as a culturally and politically superior group.[516] If this was the case, the employment of 'elite' language as a form of contention was an interesting development. As a rule, verbal contention at the spectacles was a popular, non-elite form of contention, since it was an effective way of safely presenting a mass, collective claim. Elites, on the other hand, had more direct ways of accessing the government, and as 'insiders,' did not usually participate in non-institutionalised, episodic and public manifestations of their political identity. Their involvement in this circus demonstration indicates just how much they had been shut out of imperial regimes since Commodus. Why elites mounted a counter-demonstration came down to opportunity, and those who held high status were conscious of their collective interest in preserving their privilege.

 After the hostility of Caracalla, the Senate, in particular, would have looked to ingratiate itself with the new emperor through a public demonstration of their loyalty. Considering that Macrinus assumed the usual imperial titles for both himself and his son without waiting for a senatorial vote, the order needed to win the emperor's approval, not the other way around, if they were to have any chance at reclaiming their former position.[517] There may have been reasons to feel hopeful; Herodian describes a letter that Macrinus allegedly wrote to the Senate in which the emperor promised to restore a collegial relationship with the body following the example of Marcus Aurelius and Pertinax. Even if this were an invention of Herodian, a Senate that could lead and placate the crowds in the absence of the emperor could prove useful. Perhaps then, their use of Greek might have been employed to demarcate their chants from that of the rest of the audience. Even if some in the audience did not fully understand what was being shouted, it would have been clear

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[515] The formulas of the senatorial acclamations in SHA *Alex. Sev*. 6.3, 10.8 for example correspond with those by the *Acta Fratrum Arvalium* for Caracalla and Elagabalus: *CIL* 6.2086; Arena (2007) 332-333.
[516] Dio and Herodian both understood that Greek remained a cultural marker of Roman elitism: their narratives were accessible for Greek audiences of course, but as Scott points out, the assumption that Dio's audience also knew Latin is frequently apparent in his work. Scott (2018) 16.
[517] Assumption of imperial titles: Cass. Dio 78.16.2. For a fuller accounting of Macrinus' relationship with the Senate, see Davenport (2012) 196-202.

that they did not agree with the spectator's chants.[518] Consequently, although Macrinus' elevation was evidence to at least some senators that their status remained under threat, it was in the best interests of the elite to win the emperor's favour. Cultural identity was now more pertinent than social mobility.[519] However, on a practical, if not symbolic level, the intervention of the elite failed miserably, since the crowd refuted their Greek chants with more shouting, presumably in Latin. The elite's attempt to perform a public transcript was emphatically rejected, and the hidden transcripts of the audience held sway. Severus and Caracalla's determined efforts to downgrade the Senate as a political force meant that their collective public stance held far less sway than it would have in previous years. The order no longer spoke for the emperor, nor the people.

That is not to say that the elite's political preferences were homogenous. Macrinus' refusal of the cognomen Pius motivated an unnamed Greek poet to write an epigram that was translated into Latin and displayed in the Forum together with the original Greek version. The verses were reported to Macrinus at Antioch, who replied in kind. Unfortunately, his attempt was considered to have been much worse than the sub-standard Latin translation. As a result, the emperor became a laughing-stock in the capital.[520] Like the Circus demonstration, the posting of verses was an indirect way of communicating with an absent emperor. The method, however, suggests elite involvement. If chants were a staple repertoire of the masses, then the circulation of verses and epigrams had long been a more organised, literate form of resistance: negative verses were circulated about political opponents as far back as the Republic.[521] Posting written contention in public spaces not only ensured a broad audience, it also mimicked and subverted the public transcript. It was little wonder that Macrinus felt obliged to respond publicly using the same medium. Not only do the verses suggest that not all elites were positive about the new regime, it also highlights the role that collective identity played in the performance of contention. Certain

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[518] Potter (1996) 135.
[519] Hdn. 5.1.8. As Scott argues, since Herodian draws an implicit contrast here between the 'common' parentage of Pertinax and Marcus Aurelius (and their wise governance) and the hereditary claims of Caracalla and before him, Commodus, it is likely that the letter is a fabrication designed to highlight Herodian's concern regarding inherited rule. Scott (2008) 76.
[520] SHA *Macr*. 11.3-7.
[521] *E.g.,* Suet. *Iul.* 80; Sen. *Suas*. 6.9-11; Gell. 15.4.2-3. See also the negative verses circulated about Nero (Suet. *Ner*. 39.2)

collectives preferred specific repertoires, and each representative performance created visual solidarity among participants. These expressions of identity defined the bonds, interests, and boundaries between groups members that facilitated their claims and delegitimised others, as the opposing acclamations between elites and non-elites indicate.[522] An alliance between anti-Macrinus groups would have made the protest a more meaningful claim, but each group had different outcomes in mind. Those who bewailed the emperor's leadership were looking for charismatic leadership that prioritised justice and order; the Senate sought a revival of their political position. The competing identities on display at the Circus meant that in the absence of a cohesive urban stance, the military retained the best position to make political claims, but the solidification of separate group-based identities that played such a crucial role in political change was now out in the open.

(ii)   Military identity under threat: the reforms of Macrinus

In the absence of any real opportunities for other political actors to make tangible claims against the regime, the military could continue to dictate imperial policy. Macrinus' approach was one of conciliation and appeasement, but, as history constantly demonstrates, a politician who tries to please everyone almost always fails. The emperor's main issue was that he was beholden to the army, a liability that made him unpopular with everyone else in Rome. For the praetorians, Severus and Caracalla's strong support provided a further incentive to maintain a boundary between them and other groups, ringfencing their privilege and status. Identification as a praetorian had always provided a sense of community for its members, but the unit's revival as an authentic elite corps strengthened the bonds between soldiers, whose spatial and temporal routines emphasised the collective over the individual. In turn, these community bonds, centred around brotherhood, physical valour and masculinity contributed to a system of values, norms, and moral codes that informed their socio-political outlook.

The collective unity of the Guard was not the reason for their pre-eminence, of course, but it does explain how they became increasingly formidable as political actors. As we have seen, Caracalla was extremely popular with the army, but praetorian acceptance of

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[522] Au (2017) 2.

Macrinus may have had less to do with his office than with the unpopularity of the Parthian campaign. Caracalla had also recently formed a Scythian bodyguard of freedmen and slaves, using them instead of praetorians, a move that could have been interpreted as a threat to the Guard's preeminent position.[523] Praetorian reactions to perceived threats indicate that coalescing collective identities were becoming an instrument through which regime policy could be controlled. Yagil Levy argues that the interplay of two variables determines the choice made by soldiers faced with an undesirable situation: the presence of potentially subversive soldiers belonging to the same social group; and the group's social status within and outside the military.[524] The high status and collective identity of the Praetorian Guard gave them the potential to control not just who they legitimised as emperor, but the nature of the regime as well.

A demonstration of this burgeoning power took place during Macrinus' short reign. Although the usual donative was promised, the fiscal crisis created by Caracalla's wars and extravagance forced Macrinus into a series of military reforms aimed at saving much-needed money.[525] All privileges granted to existing personnel were preserved, but the pay and perks of recruits were reduced back to the levels set by Severus.[526] The connection to Severan policy and the targeting of recruits only was meant to reassure those already serving (and thus benefitting), but the army collectively interpreted the move as a direct threat to their position.[527] Dio astutely notes that Macrinus may have succeeded with his reforms if he had waited until after he had split up the legions and sent them back to their posts, as their ability to coordinate a collective response would have been reduced. However, the troops were still united in Syria for the Parthian campaign, and as a collective, they could discuss the negative implications of Macrinus' new policies. These discussions almost certainly included the emperor's new treaty with the Parthian king Artabanus V, to

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[523] Bédoyère (2017) 232-3.
[524] Levy (2017) 192.
[525] Cass. Dio 79.36 details a letter from Macrinus to the urban prefect Marius Maximus claiming that the emperor 'said that the usual pay could not be given to the soldiers on top of the donatives that they were receiving (for the increase instituted by Tarutas reached 80 million *sesterces* annually), but on the other hand it could not be given.'
[526] Cass. Dio 79.12, 79.28. Admittedly, this section is fragmentary; Scott argues that Xilphinus' epitome should be taken to mean Severan pay levels. As Caracalla gave them a raise (Hdn. 4.4.7), this meant that Macrinus reduced recruit pay by 50%. Scott (2008) 126.
[527] Scott (2008) 128.

whom Rome paid a 200 million *sestertii* indemnity in return for peace. The war was unpopular with the praetorians, but Macrinus' non-victory over a barbarian enemy did little to enhance his reputation with the army. Since the Guard was the premier military unit, their understanding of, and reaction to, Macrinus' reforms would influence how the rest would interpret events.

In truth, the strong collective identity that had coalesced around the Guard's political role meant individual praetorians were heavily invested in the well-being of the overall group, and a group with such strong identification could incur costs if they remained inactive to any potential threat or opportunity.[528] Praetorians were on duty at the Circus the day of the anti-Macrinus protests, and Dio claims that the protest was 'one important reason why the soldiers despised [Macrinus] and paid no heed to what he did to win their favour.'[529] The military as a whole was opposed to fiscal reforms, and the Circus demonstration proved that Macrinus had few allies in Rome. Unable to garner the specific support of the troops, nor tap into the diffuse support an emperor expected from Rome's populace, Macrinus was vulnerable. An opportunity thus opened for Julia Maesa and her wealth to do the talking for her son Elagabalus, and the emperor's military backing quickly melted away. Herodian bewailed the bestowal of special privileges upon the troops, directly linking these measures to a decline in discipline, and the backlash against Macrinus's austerity programme demonstrated the catch-22 that the social and political elevation of soldiers created.[530] Soldiers pledged co-operation around policies that specifically benefitted them as a privileged, stand-alone group, and the transfer of their support could undermine regime legitimacy. To be sure, this was not an entirely new development. But the closer identification of the military and particularly the praetorians as a distinctive, even superior, social group gave them the collective strength not just to act efficaciously to support or oppose an emperor, but as an oppositional force to other political actors as well.

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[528] Opp (2012) 77.
[529] Cass. Dio 79.20.
[530] Hdn.3.8.4-5; Hekster (2008) 36.

(iii) Identity, and the impact of Rome's military landscape

The role that military collective identities played in the fall of Macrinus was substantial, but when hostilities commenced between the emperor's forces and those supporting Elagabalus, they took place far away from Rome.[531] Those in the city could not see the performance of identity politics, only the consequences. Although the majority of praetorians who remained with Macrinus fought well, it was their collective discontent that had provided the opportunity for regime change in the first place. Urban perceptions of a praetorian collective were thus as visible as ever despite the off-stage events taking place in Syria. These perceptions were, in part, formed by the spatial dominance of the Guard in the urban environment. By the early third century, the number of troops stationed in Rome related to the total urban population had risen substantially. Where the soldier-to-civilian ratio was approximately was 1:125 under Augustus, and 1:80 under Marcus Aurelius, Severus reduced the ratio to 1:45/38.[532] Not only were the numbers of soldiers high, they were also extremely visible, even when off duty. Only they had the legal right to bear a sword in public, and as Pertinax's decree and repeated complaints from the public indicate, soldiers often wielded heavy, knobbed sticks (*fustes*) as well. Sword belts (*baltei*) were ornamental, with flashy attachments and pendants designed to jangle noisily when one walked down the street, advertising a soldier's political power and social status.[533] *Baltei* were potent symbols of military power – to strip a soldier of his belt was to humiliate him, as Severus clearly understood in 193CE – so a praetorian's military belt was as representative of his social cultural and political identity as the toga was to a civilian citizen.[534] The less glamorous stick, however, was a more potent reminder of the repressive capacity of the military. Combined with the sound of hobnailed boots on Rome's cobblestones, the *fustis* and the axe (*dolabra*) referenced by Pertinax in his decree were perhaps most representative of the everyday relationship between soldier and civilian.

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[531] Elagabalus was acclaimed by troops at Raphanae, Syria. Macrinus, meanwhile, was based at Apamea (also in Syria).

[532] These ratios are based on an estimated population of 1,200,000. Soldiers include praetorians, *equites singulares*, urban cohorts, *vigiles*, *classiarii*, and *peregrini*. Does not include the 5,000 strong *Legio II Parthica* based at Mt. Alba (22.2km from Rome). See Coulston (2000) 81.

[533] Coulston (2000) 90-91.

[534] Taking a sword belt off a soldier had long been used as a disciplinary measure within the army. See Val. Max. 2.7.9; Plut. *Luc.* 15.7; Suet. *Aug.* 24.

The power and identity of the Guard were also expressed spatially. The 'changing of the guard' occurred daily, when praetorians paraded from their camp to their various imperial postings on the Palatine Hill, a distance of some 2.7km.[535] Their *castra*, meanwhile, had become more prominent in recent years. When Tiberius constructed a combined camp for the praetorians and urban cohorts in 23CE, it was located in a thinly populated area outside the Servian walls. When Aurelian revamped Rome's defences in the early 270s, he integrated the walls of the *castra* into the new city walls.[536] This indicates that the height of the camp fortifications had grown substantially from the relatively squat 4.5m walls erected by Tiberius, and shows that the camp was now far closer to the urban sprawl. The imposing presence of the *castra* meant that it was used as an orientation point for the populace, as its inclusion in the *Notitia Regionum Urbis Romae* and the *Curiosum Urbis Romae* suggests.[537] Even the space around the camp was territory associated with the soldiers. The *Campus Praetorianus* was a large parade-ground (c.440 by 280m) used for drilling and formations and was surrounded by *rostra*, shrines, honorific and triumphal monuments, and wine-shops.[538] For the civilian populace then, the imposing *castra* and spatial routines of soldiers represented the power and collective identity of the Guard. Constantine showed that he understood this relationship between camp and collective identity when he destroyed the camp of the *equites singulares* after his defeat of Maxentius in the early fourth century. The imperial bodyguard, who had remained loyal to Maxentius, had their visible presence erased in what was effectively a collective *damnatio memoriae.*[539]

What happened within the *castra* walls was just as crucial in the formation of a praetorian identity. Civilians had free spaces, social networks, and collective identities that bound these social sites together. Praetorians too had their own free spaces within their camp and surrounding locales. They had their own colloquial language (*sermo militaris*).[540] Soldiers had shrines (many brought their provincial cults to Rome), *collegia*, shared working and

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[535] Dyson (2010) 211.

[536] Suet. *Tib*. 37; Tac. *Ann*. 4.2; Busch (2007) 321. Distance between the Palatine Hill and the praetorian *castra* taken from Google Maps (G.P.S).

[537] The *castra Misenatium,* for example*,* is delineated on the *Forma Urbis,* demonstrating its political and social importance*.* Busch (2007) 328, 330.

[538] Coulston (2000) 84; Tac. *Ann*. 12.36; Plin *HN* 3.67; Juv. 15.25-6.

[539] See Harries (2012) 119.

[540] For *sermo militaris*, see Carrié (1993) 127-128.

living spaces. Shared routines, spaces, language, and spatial separateness made the *castra* an island of military identity for the soldiers. This common identity combined with repeated hostile encounters with civilians created a boundary between them and Rome's civilian population, and the 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy was now explicit in both material and social form. Moreover, the transgressive and repressive approach of the Guard during Caracalla's reign made this boundary increasingly salient. Although the activation of the civilian-soldier boundary had a short-term constraining effect (since the Guard had demonstrated its repressive capacity), in the long term, this boundary affected the likelihood, intensity, scale, and form of collective violence between the two parties.[541] This is because political actors are not isolated, discrete beings with fixed attributes, but are socially embedded contributors who interact with others and undergo modifications of their boundaries and attributes as they interact. Accordingly, distinctive relations and identities formed across the soldier-civilian divide, based on past and current interactions. Distinctive relations and identities were also formed on each side that became shared representations of the zone itself.[542]

The institutional side of political opportunities – the access political actors had to the political system and how power was structured – had been modified by Caracalla and Severus' reshuffling of urban power dynamics. The discursive aspect of political opportunity structures meanwhile, the public visibility and significance and political legitimacy of political actors, claims and identities, had also undergone a significant shift as the Praetorian Guard paraded their new political power. This new tangible authority hardened the boundary between civilian and soldier in Rome, and even between the elite and non-elite, reconstituting the cultural identities of each group. Since the causal mechanisms of contention lie in the social interaction between opposing groups, the evolution of boundaries and separate urban identities was a crucial component of the conflict growing between the regime and its subjects.[543] How space was used and perceived by each group was, therefore, an important part of the process of identification and politicisation. In the six years since the death of Severus, collective identity and justice framing had become

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[541] Tilly (2004) 335.
[542] Tilly (2004) 328; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2002) 56.
[543] McAdam, Tilly, and Tarrow (2002) 56.

essential components of popular contention. What identity and justice meant to a praetorian or civilian in Rome now differed in fundamental ways, meaning that as each group fostered its own opposing grievances, stereotypes, and sets of expectations, boundaries hardened between them, amplifying the process of identity politicisation.

Collective identity begets collective violence: the riots of 222-223CE

(i) Military masculinities and Elagabalus

The standard narrative of Elagabalus' reign is one of failed religious innovation and scandalous behaviour. Much modern scholarship tends to assign causal significance to Elagabalus' cult activities, yet our three principal sources all agree that the conflict between the emperor and the Praetorian Guard that led to Elagabalus' execution in 222CE was directly related to transgressions of sexual and gender norms.[544] Such imperial behaviour was a long way from the moral tenets imposed by Severus, and Elagabalus' conduct had a negative impact on the Praetorian Guard, whose identity was tightly bound to Roman conceptions of masculinity and control. Through ongoing interaction and negotiation with other political actors, the praetorians' cognitive definitions concerning the ends, means, and fields of action were also sharpened.[545] Their sense of 'we' was, to a certain extent, divorced from the identities of others in Rome because of the hardening of the social and political boundaries that separated them. Nonetheless, while it was the Praetorian Guard who forced regime change in 222CE, they were joined by ordinary people who executed their version of popular justice against representatives of the administration, and the emperor himself. The unlikely partnership between two discordant political groups indicates that grievances and tensions were deep-seated and complex. Accordingly, the hostility and violence that ensued were reflective of coalescing identities, and the acceleration of socio-economic and political changes over the previous decade.

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[544] See Kemezis (2016) 349-50 for an overview of recent scholarship.
[545] Gawerc (2016) 193.

Emperors were now highly reliant on military support, and as Macrinus found, given the substantial leverage that the army had, soldiers had growing expectations in terms of access and even consultative rights with regards to imperial policy. Elagabalus presented himself as a military emperor in the mould of his so-called father Caracalla, but the gap between this persona and reality created a crisis for the Praetorian Guard, whose collective identity and political position were overtly tied to their patron-emperor.

As with Macrinus, there was an initial outpouring of enthusiasm on the accession of Elagabalus in 218CE.[546] Plebs, Senate, and soldiers all accepted a teenage priest from Emesa as a scion of the Severan dynasty, thanks to Julia Soemias' declaration that her son was the illegitimate son of Caracalla. That this tidy fiction was of prime importance is apparent from Elagabalus' assumption of the imperial name Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, styling himself as the 'son of the divine Antoninus, [and] grandson of the divine Severus,' even claiming Nerva as an ancestor. Declaring himself the blood descendant of the Five Good Emperors revived collective memories of bygone days, meaning the new emperor could offer all of Rome's political groups a sound ideological basis to accept his claim.[547] Still, Elagabalus' primary consideration in terms of legitimacy was the military. The persistent authority of the Severan lineage, which soldiers associated above all with victory and material benefits, was foremost in the new regime's crafting of legitimacy claims.[548] Caracalla might have still been highly unpopular with the wider population, but Elagabalus (or at least his supporters) understood the need to tap into military identities by visibly associating himself with his 'father' and his militaristic identity. Such connections were made early in the conflict between the Syrian faction and Macrinus. When Elagabalus was smuggled into the camp of the Syrian-based *Legio III Gallica*, he was allegedly dressed in the clothes that Caracalla had worn as a child: unsurprisingly he was proclaimed at dawn by an enthusiastic soldiery.[549] It was the soldiers of *Legio III* who styled the boy as Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, and who then persuaded the soldiers sent against them by Macrinus to desert, asking them 'Why do you fight against your benefactor's son?'[550] Caracalla's popularity amongst the soldiery was

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[546] SHA *Elag*. 3.1-3.2.
[547] *ILS* 467, 5843: '*divi Antonini filius, divi Severi nepos.*' Nerva: *CIL* 8.10347; Icks (2011) 12.
[548] Kemezis (2016) 374.
[549] Cass. Dio 79.31; Icks (2010) 332.
[550] Cass. Dio 79.32.

undimmed, and Elagabalus' appropriation of his likeness signalled to the troops that he would share the military-centric policies of his 'father.' Likewise, the busts of Elagabalus bear obvious physical similarities with those of Caracalla. The new emperor affected a military haircut and a uniform of trousers, tunic, and mantle also favoured by Caracalla and which by this point had become common dress for Roman soldiers.[551] Even the new emperor's religion may have appealed. Elagabal, the Syrian sun-god was similar to the Roman sun deities Sol Invictus and Mithras, who were both very popular with soldiers.[552]

Elagabalus' coup was built around a fictive relationship with the martial Caracalla, but he did not yet have the political and social connections elsewhere in Rome where he could find ready allies. Recognising this, the new emperor quickly paid out the enormous donative of 20,000 *sestertii* originally promised by Macrinus.[553] Letters were dispatched from the imperial headquarters, not just to the Senate, which was forced to recognise the honours that Elagabalus had already bestowed upon himself, but also to the praetorians and *Legio II Parthica* based at Mount Alba. Dio's epitome is fragmentary at this point, but we can assume the emperor was eager to assure the troops that his regime would be as favourable to their collective as that of his putative father.[554] Elagabalus' heavy reliance on the army meant that his regime had to reflect the legitimacy claims lodged with the troops in order for that support to be reciprocated. However, the praetorians, who provided the emperor and his regime with tangible authority in Rome, also had a collective theatre to maintain. Their self-definition was not just constructed around their current position as Rome's most powerful political actor, but around the elevation of military might as a crucial aspect of imperial leadership. Rome had been at war for more years than anyone could remember, and the Empire's pre-eminence had been built around the conscientious practice of manliness (*virtus*) and by a rejection of a life of effeminacy (*vita mollitiae*). Unfortunately,

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[551] Physical representation: See Icks (2011) 63. Military clothing: Dio 79.3.3 notes that Caracalla wore Germanic dress (*i.e.* tunic, trousers and mantle) during his Eastern campaigns like his troops. Elagabalus' dress of a long-sleeved, short tunic, a chlamys and trousers with a sash was virtually identical to the military uniform worn by the emperor in peacetime. See Dirven (20027) 28-30; Icks (2010) 332, 339-340.
[552] For a discussion and comparison of the three sun cults, see Halsberghe (1972) 117-129.
[553] Macrinus' offer was 20,000 *sestertii* to every soldier and a complete reversal of his earlier pay and ration cuts. He did not have the time or opportunity to pay.
[554] Cass. Dio 80.2.3.

the masculine, military imagery that Elagabalus used to create a close bond with his soldiers did not match up with the real Elagabalus.

Political identities aside, a Roman soldier was meant to embody manliness, and of all the sites where masculinities were constructed and reproduced, those associated with war and the military were the most direct. The essential qualities of a soldier, *virtus* and *disciplina*, embodied the cultural understandings of how Roman men were expected to behave.[555] Just as *virtus* was etymologically connected to *vir*, the ideal man (and soldier) was meant to be physically dominant, controlled, and active. As representatives of the Empire, the public image of the Guard and the emperor were supposed to express the very values that gave Rome dominion over 'lesser' peoples.[556] In the past, the personal qualities of emperors had previously been rather inconsequential as long as he provided benefits. The unabashed effeminacy of Elagabalus, however, exposed an aspect of the praetorians' self-definition that up to then had been fairly quiescent. Our sources revel in lurid physical descriptions of the emperor's degenerate unmanliness. Elagabalus' careful attention to his coiffure, his depilation of body hair and use of makeup were considered clear gender markers, as was his dancing, self-indulgence, wearing of women's clothing (including a hair-net), and his hobby of working in wool like a woman.[557] He referred to himself as wife, mistress, queen and corrected those who called him lord, and in describing the emperor's wish to be castrated, Dio uses the Greek *malakia*, a word that directly corresponds to *mollitia*.[558]

Elagabalus' effeminacy extended to his sexual passivity. Like Messalina before him, Dio accuses him of acting as an imperial harlot and adulteress, allowing himself to be caught and beaten by his 'husband' Hierocles, who was himself a slave and charioteer.[559] Although the emperor's homosexuality was not necessarily problematic, male-male relations were founded on power inequalities and his role as the penetrated associated him with the feminine and servile. The fact that a slave dominated an emperor, who stood at the apex of

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[555] Morgan (1994) 165. For definitions of *disciplina* and *virtus*, see Lendon (2005) 177-78, 312.
[556] Amm. Marc. 31.5.14, 14.6.10.
[557] Hair: Cass. Dio 80.14.4. Makeup: Hdn. 5.6.10. Removal of body hair and beard (acts ascribed to *cinaedi)*: SHA *Elag.* 5.5; Cass. Dio 80.14.4. Dancing: Hdn. 5.3.8, 5.5.9; Cass. Dio 80.14.3. Clothing: Hdn. 5.5.4-5, 5.3.6. Hairnet and wool work: Cass. Dio 80.14.4.
[558] Cass. Dio 80.11.1
[559] Cass. Dio 80.15.1-4.

the social hierarchy was a blatant transgression of Roman masculinity and cultural norms.[560] As Catharine Edward's work on the politics of immorality has shown, perceptions of effeminacy and submissiveness were enough to negate any ability that an emperor may have had as an acceptable leader.[561] Caligula and Nero also allegedly shared Elagabalus's penchant for acting, dancing, effeminacy, and homosexual marriages, and both lost the support of their troops. Allegations of *mollitia* also served to denigrate Otho as an inadequate ruler, and interestingly, the *Historia Augusta* claims that as an emperor Elagabalus imitated Otho and also Vitellius, both emperor killed by their troops.[562] Soldiers had also recently expressed opinions on an emperor's masculinity. Like Caracalla and Elagabalus, Macrinus wore a military-style tunic, but he adorned it with brooches and a bejewelled belt. 'Such luxury,' Herodian claims, 'does not find favour with Roman soldiers, who consider it more appropriate for barbarians or women.'[563] Macrinus' dress-sense may not have been a catalyst for rebellion, but it would not have helped his already fractious relationship with his troops. Elagabalus' behaviour went much further. His effeminacy was antithetical to the military identities and imagery that he so consciously cleaved to in his Caracallan presentation, and the source material makes it clear that it was through this pursuit of unmanliness that Elagabalus became hated by the soldiers.[564]

The emperor's adoption of his younger cousin, Alexander Severus, in response to growing objections over his behaviour, only served to highlight his deficiencies in the eyes of the Guard.[565] Alexander was intentionally presented by his backers as a traditional Roman youth shielded from the degenerate lifestyle of the emperor, and trained in the lessons of self-discipline, wrestling, and other manly pursuits. The contrast between two versions of masculinity was made stark, and Alexander proved extremely popular with the praetorians.

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[560] Edwards (1993) 68-97.
[561] Edwards (1993) 70; Bittarello (2011).
[562] SHA *Elag*. 18.4. For Otho, see Tac. *Ann*. 13.12, *Hist*. 1.13, 1.30; Suet. *Otho* 12; Juv. 2.99. In contrast to Elagabalus, Otho committed suicide after his defeat at Bedriacum; Tacitus (*Hist*. 3.50), Suetonius (*Otho* 12), and Plutarch (*Otho* 18.2) all present his death in a positive light as a result. See Bittarello (2011).
[563] Hdn. 5.2.4.
[564] Cass. Dio 80.17; Hdn. 5.8.1.
[565] Hdn. 5.7.1. He claims that Elagabalus' mother Maesa urged the adoption as she 'suspected that the soldiers were outraged by his eccentricities.'

The blame should not all laid at Elagabalus' door: Julia Mamea's payment of a secret donative to the praetorians probably helped shift support to Alexander.[566] However cynical this may appear, the precedent set down by Julianus and Caracalla meant such an approach would be well-received. At the same time, a closed regime was a vulnerable one. The process of preceding years whereby usual imperial allies had been demoted and repressed left Elagabalus, a teenager, at the mercy of his circle of advisors, who, with the benefit of hindsight, should have recognised the obvious disconnect between a powerful, elite military unit and a decadent boy-emperor.

Alexander's popularity with the praetorians unnerved Elagabalus, and he began plotting to remove his heir, which provoked an episode of collective claim-making by the Guard. Dio and Herodian's descriptions of the emperor's actions around this time are compressed, but the *Historia Augusta* provides a detailed timeline, and, given that this section is stylistically separate from the main body of the *Life*, the account is probably based on Marius Maximus' work.[567] The emperor ordered the Senate to strip Alexander of his title of Caesar, a demand that senators uncharacteristically tried to resist. At this point, no real harm had been done, but when Elagabalus ordered Alexander's statues inside the praetorian camp defaced with mud in a sort of *damnatio memoriae,* the Guard responded by sending a contingent to fetch the emperor, his mother and grandmother while the rest began demonstrating inside their camp. A power shift was under way.

Caracalla had earlier revealed that the *castra* was a powerful political space, and the summoning of the emperor and his *familia* spatially reiterated where the power lay. Caracalla of course, had taken himself to the praetorian camp voluntarily. This time, the soldiers did not petition Elagabalus at the palace or even invite him to visit, but physically carried him back to their power base, and the emperor's acquiescence amplified the Guard's powerful position, and was proof that both sides believed that the Guard had the upper hand. As with Caracalla's dash, the reversal of the usual movement between the imperial palace and camp would have been visible to the rest of the city, who now witnessed an emperor acceding to a soldier's summons. For the praetorians, their support

[566] Hdn. 5.8.3.
[567] Icks (2011) 77 n.68.

of an emperor who unashamedly played the woman reflected on their collective identity and constructions of hyper-masculinity. His unmanliness tainted them by association, and as a consequence, the praetorians enlarged their position as political actors. Instead of merely providing support and legitimacy, the Guard put itself in the position of moral authority. Their demands were unprecedented: the emperor had to comport himself more appropriately, hand over his 'lewd' companions to the soldiers, and to treat Alexander with the public respect and honour the Guard believed he was entitled to. Outnumbered and detained in hostile territory, Elagabalus was forced to agree, although he managed to save his favourite Hierocles with tears and wailing, a tactic not likely to garner any respect from hardened soldiers, but one that confirmed the soldier's decision to offer leadership to the morally corrupt and feminine emperor.[568]

The Guard's assertive stance had a significant effect on political opportunity structures. As Dio warns:

> Thus it is that persons, particularly if armed, when they have once accustomed themselves to feel contempt for their rulers, set no limit to their right to do what they please, but keep their arms ready to use against the very man who gave them that power (80.17).

It could be argued that the Guard exercised such contempt for imperial authority before, but summoning an emperor, and issuing a list of demands was not only a reversal of the usual power dynamic but also a protest on behalf of the unit, and a significant demonstration of politicised collective identity. The Guard was now operating as an independent centre of power, which, assuming that all other regime variables remained equal, offered the soldiers expanded opportunities to pursue future claims. Previous support had been predicated on money and status, but the claims made against Elagabalus indicated that praetorians had shifted their view on what their role as political actors entailed, which now included defending traditional concepts of imperial (read 'masculine')

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[568] Cass. Dio 80.19.2-4; SHA *Elag*. 14.2, 15.1-4.

power. Elagabalus' moves against Alexander merely created a pivot around which soldier's grievances could be translated into justified action.

Unfortunately, the emperor failed to grasp that the Guard now perceived itself as a moral watchman. Dio has Elagabalus complain to the Senate; 'yes, you love me, and so, by Jupiter, does the populace, and also the legions abroad; but I do not please the praetorians, to whom I keep giving so much.'[569] This stance could be interpreted as submissiveness, but Elagabalus followed Caracalla's precedent in other respects. He was ruthless enough to persecute senators and execute potential challengers.[570] Earlier, he had allegedly killed one of his initial supporters, Ganys, 'since no one of the soldiers dared to take the lead in murdering him.'[571] Even Dio admitted that Elagabalus at times could don a toga and give a credible performance as an elite Roman male.[572] What the emperor did not understand was the importance of aligning his lifestyle to the military identity he espoused as Caracalla's son, and that his not-so-private life hand threatened the principles and public image of praetorian masculinity.

The creation of behavioural guidelines and demands for court reform put the Guard in an even more dominant position over the emperor. Their physical ability to legitimise or depose emperors was a powerful form of social control, but this new position of moral arbiter was a significant extension of such control. There were some parallels between the Guard's attitude towards Elagabalus' behaviour and that of Nero; both emperors ascended the throne as teenagers, and both became less receptive to the advice of courtiers as the years passed. The praetorian Subrius Flavus who was involved in the Pisonian conspiracy of 65CE allegedly told Nero: 'there was not a man in the army truer to you, as long as you deserved to be loved. I began to hate you when you turned into the murderer of your mother and wife – a chariot-driver, an actor, a fire-raiser.'[573] However, the plan in 65CE was

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[569] Cass. Dio 80.18.4.
[570] Cass. Dio 80.7.1-4.
[571] Cass. Dio 80.6.3; Kemezis (2016) 374, n.91: Dio at first uses the name Eutychianus, then after 79.38.3 always uses the name Ganys. Nowhere in the surviving text are we explicitly told that Gannys and Eutychianus are the same person, but this is by far the most likely conclusion.
[572] Cass. Dio 80.14.3; Kemezis (2016) 384.
[573] Tac. *Ann*. 15.67.

to simply replace an unfit emperor with a more suitable candidate.[574] In 222CE, the Guard were less inclined to replace Elagabalus than they were to constrain his behaviour and to manage imperial policy. The proactive stance of the praetorians also demonstrated once again how much influence political elites had ceded since the early imperial period. Where some senators and writers in earlier times had gamely tried to publicly assert philosophical and political anxieties while emperors grew more autocratic and repressive, the fact that it was only the Praetorian Guard who could draw a behavioural line in the sand for Elagabalus (and expect compliance), shows how little influence they had left as a social collective.

Despite the Guard's demands, Elagabalus could not bring himself to comply, leaving the praetorians with a choice: obey or oppose.[575] The precipitating factor appears to have been the absence of Alexander in imperial ceremony. On New Year's Day 222CE, Elagabalus and Alexander were meant to appear in public together as joint consuls in one of the year's most significant religious and state occasions. However, Elagabalus refused to perform the traditional ceremony with Alexander, forcing his praetorian escort to threaten him into begrudging participation. He began the procession with Alexander but then refused to go any further than the Curia, leaving the city praetor to assume the vows for the state and conduct the usual ceremonies.[576] Elagabalus' practical failure to comply with the praetorians' demands regarding his private conduct joined with a pointed, public refusal to perform the agreed public script with Alexander tore at the public fabric of praetorian hegemony.[577] It was a rejection of the Guards' demands and a direct threat to their newly imposed domination.

Weeks later, in a misguided attempt to gauge support levels, Elagabalus started a rumour that Alexander was near death. The praetorians once again began demonstrating at their camp, and refused to send their regular contingent to the palace for the emperor's protection, demanding instead that Alexander be brought to the shrine dedicated to Mars

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[574] In his description of the Pisonian conspiracy, Tacitus claims that the empire would be handed over to Seneca as a 'consequence of his distinguished virtues:' *Ann*. 15.65.

[575] Elagabalus divorced his patrician wife Annia Aurelia Faustina and remarried the Vestal Aquilia Severa, and his lover Hierocles appears to have regained his position as the emperor's chief confidant.

[576] SHA *Elag*. 15.5-7. Coins issued in early 222CE that show the procession with the two consuls separate support this narrative. Icks (2011) 81.

[577] Scott (1992) 204.

inside the *castra*.[578] The invocation of the god of war was an implicit threat of course, but the soldiers' preference for Mars and Alexander as symbols of traditional Roman masculinity, could also be viewed as a deliberate rejection of their opposites Elagabal and Elagabalus. This second summons was also tinged with a measure of contempt and resolve. With their initial command, the Guard sent a contingent to Elagabalus, replicating the regular daily movement between the palace and camp. This time, however, they refused the emperor both their customary protection and a respectful escort. Also, members of the Guard would attend the emperor in person to receive their watchword. Their refusal to appear may have meant no new watchword was issued. Receiving a watchword was a transaction of subordinance, and a refusal to do so was further evidence that the Guard was determined to not only oppose the emperor's will but to impose their own.[579]

Indeed, when Elagabalus received the praetorian's orders, he realised he had pushed his luck too far. He rushed to the camp with Alexander but was quickly put under arrest and executed the next day along with his mother, Julia Soemias.[580] Both Dio and Herodian's accounts suggest that the second round of rioting and Elagabalus' execution were relatively spontaneous reactions that stemmed from the emperor's failure to follow their instructions. As the emperor had publicly broken the promises made in response to the Guard's first contentious performance, they were forced to defend their claim in order to reassert their authority.[581] Further details in Herodian's account suggest, however, that the Guard's act was, in the immediate context, a defensive one. According to his narrative, when Caracalla and Alexander arrived together at the camp, the soldiers welcomed Alexander enthusiastically but ignored the emperor. Elagabalus responded by ordering the arrest and punishment of the guards who had openly cheered Alexander and subjected the soldiers to a night-long harangue. Considering the provocation 'just' and wanting to rescue their comrades, it was at this point that the praetorians decided to kill the emperor.[582] Identity provided the impetus for the initial demonstration, but Elagabalus' intransigence was the final straw.

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[578] Hdn. 5.8.5. Cass. Dio only says that Elagabalus 'again formed a plot against Alexander' (80.20).
[579] Eaton (2011).
[580] Cass. Dio 80.20.
[581] The *Historia Augusta* (*Elag*. 16.5) claims the execution was a part of a pre-planned conspiracy.
[582] Hdn. 5.8.7-8.

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Although the grievances that motivated the two camp demonstrations were a marked escalation of the contentious politics of Elagabalus' reign, each adhered to established claim-making practices within the military. Each incident was essentially a mutiny, a conventional military repertoire that was, after all, a manifestation of their *raîson d'étre.* An army used physical violence to win a victory, and the height of manliness and military prowess was the exercise of *virtus* and *disciplina*. It may seem that a near riot was a text-book example of ill-discipline. However, as past mutinous incidents in the imperial forces demonstrate, mutinies very rarely occurred in the face of a foreign enemy, but as well-articulated contentious claims regarding benefits and living conditions.[583] The Guard's claim may had moved beyond issues relating to pay or the brutality of their commanders, but their behaviour still followed an established pattern.

That both demonstrations and the subsequent execution of the emperor took place inside the *castra* is also noteworthy. In past instances of praetorian insubordination, soldiers used other spaces; the imperial palace for Pertinax, the Gemonian Steps for Vitellius, and the Forum for Galba. The employment of the camp as a site for demonstrations, the articulation of demands, and finally, an execution establishes that it was operating as a free space. At its most basic level, free spaces (like the Circus) were places where communication could occur without deference to authority, and as a site where soldiers both performed their official duties and interacted socially insulated from the control of other elites, the *castra* fostered collective empowerment and identity.[584] The soldier's angry response to Elagabalus' orders to have the statues of Alexander defaced indicates that they considered it an infringement of their space and identity, and were prepared to defend both. Consequently, as a free space and independent centre of power, the praetorian *castra* allowed the praetorians to mobilise because it offered, in both spatial and social terms, an effective organisational structure. As Rao and Dutta argue, 'free spaces enable mobilization by offering an alternative organizational infrastructure. Free spaces are not just associations, but instead

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[583] One exception is the refusal of an army to embark from the north Gallic coast to invade Britain, led by Caligula: Coulston (2013) 45.
[584] Rao and Dutta (2012) 625.

embody schemas and routines that can be transposed into other settings and therefore can create political opportunities even when none might objectively exist.'[585]

The events of 222CE exemplified the Guard's position as guardians of the state and its cultural norms, including gender. Perhaps most importantly to the soldiers who had served abroad, their role included protecting the image Rome presented to its enemies, a position that can be viewed as a military expression of both *virtus* and *disciplina*. Elagabalus' rejection of partnership and military oversight threatened the Guard's position and made him the victim of a violent performance that was an intrinsic part of military identity. The Guard's empowerment was a radicalisation of the collective as a result of Elagabalus' actions, considered by them to not only be illegitimate, but antithetical to their identity and perhaps even 'Romanness' itself. Unquestionably too, the soldiers' insistence that Elagabalus present himself in person provided praetorians with an antagonist, which in turn aided the articulation of their grievances, and aroused emotions that aided mobilisation for collective action.[586]

This incident of praetorian collective claim-making was a critical development in contentious urban politics. Previous deeds including coups, assassinations, and demonstrations of support largely stemmed from the Guard's claimed position as political actors and legitimators, and were, to a certain extent, motivated by the promise of benefits. The execution of Elagabalus, however, was a collective decision motivated by conceptions of identity. An underlying assumption in terms of collective action and identity is, the more an individual identifies with a collective, the higher the chances that they will take part in collective action on behalf of that group. Participation in collective action, meanwhile, will reinforce group identification.[587] Not only did the Guard successfully make a claim against Elagabalus, but their contentious activity also reinforced the very identities that mobilised them in the first place, politicising the collective and making them a stronger and more

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[585] Rao and Dutta (2012) 628.
[586] Benford and Snow (2000); Rao and Dutta (2012) 640.
[587] Klandermans (2014) 8-9.

cohesive political actor. Mutinies have often been precursors of wider political challenges to the *status quo*, and the Guard's mutiny was a signal to other political actors.[588]

(ii)   Popular justice and de-legitimation: the disposal of Elagabalus

> Those who do not win the love of the Senate, the people, and the soldiers do not win the right of burial (SHA *Elag*. 17.7).

For the Guard, the removal of Elagabalus was just, but what occurred at the camp could be misconstrued. As there was no extant legitimising strategy that provided the praetorians with disproportionately outsized influence, let alone the power to impose social standards, the execution of Elagabalus could be viewed by other actors as yet another military power grab. The politicised identity of the Guard was based on this precise role, and they launched their contentious claim with a clear awareness of the broader societal context. Consequently, the conflict itself needed to be legitimised and strategically reformulated in a way that it would also appeal to potential allies.[589] The immediate execution of prominent members of the imperial court, including Elagabalus' hated lover Hierocles, and the prefects Comazon and Antiochianus certainly framed the Guard's deeds as yet another military coup.[590] To avert this, the soldiers subjected the emperor's body (and that of his mother) to a public ritual of popular justice. The heads of Elagabalus and Julia Soemias were cut off, and their bodies dragged through the city before the emperor was thrown into the public sewer (Herodian) or the Tiber (Dio).[591] Aurelius Victor claims the soldiers dragged the emperor through the streets in the manner of a dog's corpse, accompanied by the soldier's chants of '*indomitae rabidaeque libidinis catulam.*'[592] Dio similarly claims the emperor was dragged 'all over the city,' and he revels in Elagabalus' new nickname of 'The Dragged' (*Tractaticius*). Alföldy argues that this appellation refers to the manhandling of Elagabalus'

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[588] Rao and Dutta (2012) 627.
[589] Simon and Klandermans (2001) 327, 329.
[590] Cass. Dio 80.21.1.
[591] Hdn. 5.8.9 states that the emperor's body was thrown directly into the sewer; Cass. Dio 80.20 that it was thrown into the Tiber. SHA *Elag*. 17.1-3 gives the most detail, stating 'since the sewer chanced to be too small to admit the corpse, they attached a weight to it to keep it from floating, and hurled it from the Aemilian Bridge into the Tiber, in order that it might never be buried.'
[592] Aur. Vict. *Caes*. 157.6: 'young bitch of unrestrained, raging lust.'

live body, but since this occurred within the confines of the praetorian camp and not in the public eye, this seems unlikely.[593]

This sequence of events differed greatly from the praetorian's last imperial deposition. Then, Pertinax's head was brandished on a spear and taken back to the praetorian *castra* in a semi-public display of sovereign military power. The *hasta* would have been an appropriate symbol again in terms of Elagabalus; like Pertinax, he could be considered a personal enemy of the Guard and thus subject to military punishment. Instead, the soldiers dragged the bodies of the emperor and his mother into the city's streets, in full view of the city. The decision to subject Elagabalus to the rituals of popular justice suggests that the praetorians had aims beyond merely replacing their commander-in-chief. One reason why they employed the popular justice repertoire was to de-legitimise Elagabalus' regime. David Beetham defines de-legitimation as the 'process whereby those whose consent is necessary to the legitimation of government act in a manner that indicates their withdrawal of consent' and this withdrawal must be advertised.[594] Elagabalus' behaviour was not merely deviant; he threatened the authority and status of the praetorians who were the backbone of his regime. Popular justice was a form of social control and confirmation that military intervention was necessary and legitimate, and the ritualistic treatment of the emperor's body was thus a public withdrawal of their consent.

Defining the usually present role that violence plays in the de-legitimisation process, Daniel Bar-Tal and Phillip Hammack Jr. argue that de-legitimisation includes the categorisation of an individual or group into an 'extremely negative social category that excludes it, or them, from the sphere of human groups that act within the limits of acceptable norms and/or values, since these groups are viewed as violating basic human norms or values and therefore deserving maltreatment.'[595] By dragging the emperor's body through the streets in front of an assembled populace, the praetorians composed a visceral image of power reversal, symbolically stripping Elagabalus of his imperial dignity and thus absolving themselves and others of their social obligations towards him. In this way, the Praetorian

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[593] Alföldy (1976).
[594] Beetham (1991) 209-210.
[595] Bar-Tal and Hammack Jr (2012).

Guard did not usurp Elagabalus. The emperor was punished for his criminal acts – the 'just' provocation that Herodian describes.

This display of power, degradation, and justice had another goal: to draw in and win the approval of bystanders. Certainly, the dragging of bodies through the streets and their disposal in the Tiber was a ritual that was tailored for either the active or passive participation of crowds.[596] Given the complicated relationship that existed between the city's soldiers and civilians, framing Elagabalus' murder as an act of popular justice was an acknowledgement of the increased use of this repertoire by the masses in recent years. The mutilation and murder of Vitellius at the hands of soldiers and the urban plebs in 69CE was the last time an emperor was subjected to the 'righteous' will of the people, but threats made against Commodus and Caracalla were textbook examples of popular justice. On the accession of Pertinax in 193CE, the Senate called for Commodus to be 'dragged with the hook.' An assembled crowd outside the Curia likewise demanded that they be able to drag the emperor's body with a hook, tear it limb from limb and cast it into the Tiber.[597] Dio describes how the crowd then took up familiar chants from the shows to curse the former emperor:

> No one called him Commodus or emperor; instead they referred to him as an accursed wretch and a tyrant, adding in jest such terms as 'the gladiator,' 'the charioteer,' 'the left-handed,' 'the ruptured.' To those senators on whom the fear of Commodus had rested most heavily, the crowd called out: 'Huzza! Huzza! You are saved; you have won.' Indeed, all the shouts that they had been accustomed to utter with a kind of rhythmic swing in the amphitheatre, by way of paying court to Commodus, they now chanted with certain changes that made them utterly ridiculous (74.2).

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[596] Nippel (1995) 44-45.
[597] Note similarities with a crowd's shouts of 'Tiberius to the Tiber' and suggestions to use the 'hook and stairs' on the deceased emperor (Suet. *Tib*. 74). Caligula's corpse and statues were also attacked after his assassination in 41CE: Cass. Dio 59.29.7, 59.30.1ª.

Likewise, when news of Caracalla's death reached Rome in 217CE, there was a public outpouring of nicknames, gossip, and subversive views. Echoing the spontaneous damnation of Commodus, 'everybody' gathered to speak evil of the deceased emperor. People recited lists of Caracalla's bloody deeds and his victims, compared him to previous tyrants, and demands were made that that horse-race celebrated on his birthday should be abolished, and his statuary be melted down.[598] Just as assembled crowds described Commodus as 'the gladiator, the charioteer and the left-handed,' crowds called Caracalla by his original name, Bassianus; others called him Caracallus, or Tarautas, from the 'nickname of a gladiator who was most insignificant and ugly in appearance and most reckless and bloodthirsty in spirit.'[599] In both cases, the shouted abuse and threats were performances of the city's hidden transcripts. Through collective chants, the twin utopias of justice and revenge ordinarily marginalised in civic discourse were made public as collective claims.[600] Airing suppressed grievances strengthened feelings of solidarity and collective identity, and may have also started the process of politicising urban identities that would then bolster the degree of embeddedness of ordinary people's identities within local social networks.[601]

 By transferring the emperor's body from the 'private' space of the *castra* to the streets and subjecting it to humiliation under the gaze of the public, the praetorians could elicit the support of the *populus*, who recognised their 'own' repertoire, and its associations with justice and legitimacy. Given that punishment of Roman criminals had long been a public, brutal and highly theatrical way to establish and display authority, gain consensus, and negotiate identity and social status, the mirrored use of space and violence elicited the same imagery and emotions.[602] As Nicholas Terpstra puts it, public executions were, in essence, 'theatrical lessons in public retribution and social order, and like any staged presentation, the drama had to be didactic, cathartic, and compensatory.'[603] Hence, the disposal of Elagabalus was a further example of Roman political contention activating collective memory, and intentionally subverting institutional forms of authority.

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[598] Cass. Dio 79.17-18; Hdn. 5.2.2.
[599] Cass. Dio 79.9. See also SHA *Sev*. 21.10. The gladiator Tarautas was very short, as was Caracalla.
[600] Scott (1992) 102.
[601] Honari (2018) 8-9.
[602] Rebecchini (2013) 154.
[603] Terpstra (2008) 125.

The Guard's degradation of the dead emperor tapped into latent grievances held by the wider public. Michel Foucault argues that public punishment was a political ritual that 'reactivated power' and restored the absolute authority of the regime over the body of the victim. In this case, the praetorians were able to re-establish the claims of the people, by reminding them that they had the potential authority to correct the injustices of their superiors.[604] For those who approved, the public display of repudiation offered them a chance to effect their own symbolic rout of the regime. Part of the equation was the instant opening up of political opportunity structures as a result of Elagabalus' execution. The Guard had sanctioned the murder of an emperor and provided a template in terms of collective retribution. Their choice of ritual degradation drew in other actors, making Elagabalus' execution a collective act of justice, rather than a usurpation. Accordingly, the performative aspects of the display had an ideological function in terms of collective identity, and the 'us' versus 'them' divide between soldiers and civilians was replaced, temporarily at least, with an alliance. With the threat of repression removed and the praetorians as allies, the people could make their own collective claim in the brief window of opportunity offered by the uncertain political environment.

(iii)   Corruption as a collective action frame

Was there a popular claim to make against the imperial regime? There is little information regarding political contention of any kind during the majority of Elagabalus' four-year reign. His regime was extravagantly generous with *liberalitas* distributions to the people, regular offerings of lavish shows and religious ceremonies, and the construction of new theatres and circuses.[605] The emperor was therefore probably not as unpopular as the sources suggest, although, at some point before 222CE, derisory nicknames and opinions were circulating through the city.[606] Elagabalus' religious proclivities were also unlikely to have caused real outrage. As part of the many public festivities for his patron god Elagabal, the emperor distributed gold, silver, clothing and even animals to the assembled crowds, the gifts proving so popular that people were trampled or accidentally impaled on soldiers

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[604] Beik (1997) 63; Foucault (1977) 32-69.
[605] Hdn. 5.6.7-9; SHA *Elag*. 21.6-22.4.
[606] SHA *Elag*. 9.2-3.

spears.[607] Kemezis argues that, while any putative insult offered to Rome's traditional pantheon by Elagabal's introduction was potent material for hostile sources, it did not mean that it necessarily fostered active prejudices or grievances. He adds; 'nothing points to a situation in which Elagabalus' cult activities spontaneously outrage a pious traditionalist public such that it becomes impossible for them to tolerate him or for his handlers to continue using him as a figurehead and the latter are obliged to fall back on Alexander as a "Plan B".'[608]

We would expect, then, that the assembled city population would watch the rituals of degradation performed on Elagabalus, celebrate the accession of the popular Severus Alexander, then go home. What happened instead was that the people joined with the rioting soldiers and attacked prominent members of Elagabalus' administration, subjecting them to the same rituals of popular justice. Among unnamed others, Dio claims that the emperor's head of the *fiscus*, Aurelius Eubulus, and Fulvius, the *praefectus urbi*, were torn to pieces by a combined crowd of civilians and soldiers. Both men were well-known. Eubulus was so infamous for his lewd lifestyle and confiscations that his surrender had been demanded by the populace long before the riots (which suggests there was more contentious activity during Elagabalus' reign than what the sources record).[609] There is less information on Fulvius, but the prefect could be the senator and ex-consul Fulvius Diogenianus, whom Dio describes as 'decidedly not of sound mind.'[610] Significantly, the populace, not the Guard, lynched the men, nor does it appear that permission was sought. In earlier cases, victims were handed over by the higher authorities – Commodus and Vitellius handed Cleander and the urban prefect Sabinus respectively to a waiting crowd.[611] This time, participants used the opportunity offered by the praetorian's use of popular justice to exact their own emotional and violent response to a perceived governmental disregard for popular judgment and justice.

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[607] Hdn. 5.6.9-10.
[608] Kemezis (2016) 377.
[609] Cass. Dio 80.21.
[610] Cass. Dio 79.37: the text is very fragmentary here unfortunately.
[611] Sabinus: Tac. *Hist*. 3.74.

What Fulvius and Eubulus may have had in common was a role in an alarming increase in treason accusations and prosecutions. A rescript from the praetorian prefect Ulpian in 223CE curtailing such charges indicates that this was an issue under Elagabalus. Since the urban prefect had jurisdiction over legal cases within 100 miles of Rome, and the head of the *fiscus* was in charge of confiscations and the use of informants, both men were probably viewed by the populace as corrupt and directly responsible for grave acts of injustice.[612] In this vein, the lynching of Eubulus and Fulvius appears to have met the format for collective violence when employed against the most powerful. Wilfried Nippel states that 'the Roman way of demonstrating that a killing was to be understood as popular justice was expressed in the formula that the victim had been 'torn to pieces at the hands of the crowd' (*manibus discerpere*). This is the label the sources applied to almost all lynchings of Republican and Imperial times.'[613] Dio uses the verb διασπάω (to tear asunder), indicating that both men died in this manner.[614]

Elagabalus' private behaviour or religious policies do not seem to have been considered transgressive enough by the people to provoke any serious outrage before his death. Lynching was a relatively rare form of popular justice, and as the conditions that led up to the anti-Cleander riot demonstrate, complex factors made up collective action frames. One explanation is that perceptions that Elagabalus' administration was decadent and corrupt propelled injustice discourse from a hidden transcript to a master frame at a point of political opportunity. These perceptions were not recent, but a product of the preceding years. Centralisation and closed regimes meant that emperors relied on power bases that were increasingly disconnected from the social hierarchy that kept others in their place.

Widely held views of imperial corruption did not necessarily have to match corrupt practices in reality. The emphasis of the source material is on the changes in the social composition of imperial officials and favourites, and the increased political competition between regime factions; both factors that could taint a regime with accusations of corruption. Both

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[612] The *Digest* (49.14.1) records that the *fiscus* received much via penalties and forfeitures, whereby informers would provide information to the office and were rewarded for their pains.
[613] Nippel (1995) 44.
[614] Cass. Dio 80.21.

Macrinus and Elagabalus were criticised for the unsuitability of some of their high-ranking officials. Oclatinius Adventus, whom Macrinus elevated to the position of senator, consul, and urban prefect had lower social origins than Macrinus himself.[615] His two Praetorian Prefects, Ulpius Julianus, and Julianus Nestor, apparently lacked the right military or administrative experience, instead earning dubious reputations assisting Caracalla and his decadent pursuits.[616] Macrinus, according to Dio, incurred the censure of 'sensible people,' for sending a previously exiled ex-slave and a common soldier to govern Dacia and Pannonia respectively.[617] Dio's social snobbery is manifest throughout his history in his negative characterisations of those of a lesser station, and some aspects of his descriptions should be taken with a pinch of salt. Herodian, though, takes a similar tone regarding Elagabalus' administration:

> [Elagabalus] appointed all the actors from the stage and the public theatres to the most important posts in the empire... to charioteers, comedians, and actors of mimes he entrusted the most important and responsible imperial posts. To slaves and freedmen, to men notorious for disgraceful acts, he assigned the proconsular provincial governorships (5.7.6-8).

One of his most high profile employees, Publius Valerius Comazon (also known as Eutychianus) was said to have originally been a dancer.[618] It is notable too that the *Historia Augusta* repeatedly links episodes of Elagabalus' sexual misconduct to references of corruption at court.[619] Freedmen and slaves could gain admission to the emperor via informal means. The women of the Severan family meanwhile, also had considerable influence, as did other Syrian and Emesene courtiers. Senators and other grandees who could not, or did not, cultivate favour found their access increasingly restricted.

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[615] Cass. Dio 78.14.
[616] Cass. Dio 79.12, 79.14-16; Bédoyère (2017) 234.
[617] Cass. Dio 79.13.
[618] SHA *Elag.* 12.1.
[619] Kemezis (2016) 363.

To a certain extent, the composition of Elagabalus and Macrinus' courts was a pragmatic response to the nature of each violent regime change. New emperors need loyal supporters, and within a closed regime, those who do not possess close associations with elites are almost wholly dependent on the emperor for their position. In return, the imperial regime could continue to function without the usual co-optation with elites that was necessary for the smooth workings of government. In reality, both emperors had little choice but to promote their main supporters. Oclatinius Adventus was allegedly offered the throne before Macrinus and was powerful enough that the new emperor had to ensure his support by promoting him. Publius Valerius Comazon played a central role in the Syrian plot that propelled Elagabalus to the throne. His support, at least in the initial stages, helped to stabilise the post-conflict government of his charge. Nonetheless, these choices generated political competition from those who had been displaced, and accordingly, views that new power-holders were corrupt and uninterested in providing social goods.

Herodian, Dio and the *Historia Augusta* all present a rather standard representation of Elagabalus' regime as decadent, low-born, and ill-bred, which perhaps demonstrates the marked unease of elites with the failure of successive emperors to uphold the usual social hierarchies at court.[620] The anxieties and gossip of courtiers was one thing, but whether their outlook influenced the wider public's perception of imperial regimes was another. The closed nature of early-third century regimes and the increasing absences of emperors from Rome allowed rumour to supersede official information channels since rumours gain traction when people either do not receive or trust information from official sources.[621] Insiders from the imperial court were known to leak political snippets: the 'sale of smoke' for instance became a familiar abuse in the Antonine court.[622] We can speculate that the role of *circuli* during this time was a critical one. As the lynchings of Eubulus and Fulvius demonstrated, groups were politicised and activated around political issues and acts of injustice, and the role of such rumours and views allowed the populace to construct alternative transcripts of power.[623]

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[620] de Arrizabalaga y Prado (1999) 9-10.
[621] Shibutani (1966) 57–62.
[622] Mart. 4.5.7; Wallace-Hadrill (1996) 294.
[623] Davenport (2017) 96.

Given the ongoing process of identity polarisation and boundary formation between urban political actors, the importance of rumour and other forms of unofficial communication increased for ordinary people. This is because rumour articulated and bounded identity, collective memory, and legitimate group social practices. As Sally Merry observes, the dissemination of such views made explicit the structural inconsistencies and areas of greatest tension and competition of any given social group.[624] Henrik Mouritsen posits that imperial freedmen who acquired political power came to epitomise the erosion of civic freedom in general.[625] The backlash against Cleander, for example, highlighted the fears of elite and non-elite alike that a regime that allowed 'outsiders' so much power did not respect the usual rules of engagement. Indeed, long-held stereotypes regarding greedy and dangerous imperial freedmen could easily be extended to cover the new ethnically and socially diverse component of imperial courts. For some of the urban populace, whose own place in the world had been altered by Caracalla's *Constitutio* among other things, such stereotypes made sense of the shifting social environment.

High levels of perceived corruption can, therefore, have a more significant social impact than corruption itself. Often, when people view a regime as corrupt, they will begin to distrust it. Institutional instability and the deterioration of the relationships among the regime and its political actors can result. Moreover, perceptions of government corruption are known to have a relationship with socioeconomic status: what was considered political competition by the elite was viewed as evidence of corruption by the less wealthy or educated.[626] Rivalry between factions and the subversion of expected social hierarchies thus shaped narratives of corruption that emerged from within the imperial court. Reports that individuals suspected of abusing their positions for personal benefit rather than the common good encouraged opinions that Elagabalus' regime, in particular, was corrupt and deficient. Collective action frames were also bounded by this discourse, as perceptions of corruption increased the potential for contention, while a growing sense of injustice undermined the legitimacy and credibility of the regime.[627] This injustice framing could then

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[624] Merry (1984) 278-9; Wickham (1998) 12, 23.
[625] Mouritsen (2011) 100.
[626] Melgar, Rossi, and Smith (2010).
[627] Keene (2017) xi-xii.

be linked with the practices of imperial officials who had a direct impact on the populace. It was a process rather than a reflex. After Caracalla's death, Herodian claims that Rome was purged of the emperor's informants, including senators, equestrians, imperial freedmen, prominent women, and slaves.[628] Under Macrinus, crowds complained of the benefits unjustly flowing to the praetorians. The activities of Eubulus and Fulvius under Elagabalus were so unjust that a crowd decided them worthy of a lynching. That act of collective violence indicates that the emergence of a justice master frame constructed around issues of corruption in previous reigns was durable enough to enable participants to identify the issue at hand through the same lens and channel individual views and behaviour into patterned social action.[629] When the opportunity arose to act, the discursive repertoires that had developed interactionally with their targets were able to be articulated as a fully functional frame essential to the cognitive processes necessary for orienting collective action against members of the imperial regime.[630] The lynching of imperial officials as an extension of the praetorians' public performance of popular justice also shows that a sequence of politicising events had transformed participants' relationship with their social environment.

The initial acts of the Guard and their attempt to involve the public in their power struggle turned the issue of justice into a matter of general interest. With new allies and identified targets, the crowd could join the struggle and exact their own measure of justice and withdrawal of consent for Elagabalus' regime.[631] Accordingly, the collective identities of the civilian participants were politicised as a result of the military's own assertion of identity. Military identity and popular perceptions of corruption were two entirely separate issues. Both, however, were articulated by each group's framing process that drew them together in the pursuit of similar outcomes. In many respects, the politicisation of separate civilian and military identities was an intensification of extant collective identities, since politicisation implies that a cognitive restructuring of the social environment has taken place, further differentiating groups into categories of either (potential) allies or opponents.

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[628] Cass. Dio 79.18; Hdn. 5.2.2.
[629] Steinburg (1998) 846.
[630] Steinburg (1998) 846; Oliver and Johnston (2005) 189.
[631] Simon and Klandermans (2001) 324.

Although they were allies at this point, given the already contentious relationship between the two groups, the quantitatively stronger effects of politicised identity could impact future interactions between praetorians and civilians.[632] With a new emperor on the throne and previous targets of military and civilian wrath gone, these identities would shift from being in alignment to open opposition, precipitating one of the most severe episodes of violent contention yet to occur in Rome.

(iv)   The spatial symbolism of popular justice

One further aspect to the performance of popular justice was the incorporation of the Circus Maximus in the public degradation of Elagabalus. As Rome watched and participated in the ritual disposal of their former emperor, its public spaces became theatres of justice. In previous examples of political contention, one site was usually the location or the goal for claim-making. In this case, Herodian says the soldiers 'gave the bodies of Elagabalus and Soaemias to those who wanted to drag them about and abuse them,' and the *Historia Augusta* states that Elagabalus' body was dragged around the Circus Maximus before it was thrown into the Tiber from the Aemilian Bridge.[633] Unlike the Gemonian Steps or Forum, the Circus had never been used for executions or popular justice practices. There were almost certainly no races on that day, so participants made a deliberate choice to use the Circus as a parading ground for the emperor's body, and as the news spread, others would have gathered there in anticipation, creating an audience.

The inversion of imperial ceremonial is apparent here. Instead of heading an official procession and governing proceedings, Elagabalus' presence was involuntary. He was passively part of the arena because his power and the space had been appropriated by the people. This behaviour, moreover, shows how protesters had progressively manipulated, defended, and subverted the Circus from the late second century. The demonstration against Cleander mirrored routine political life and utilised the symbolism and the vast scale of the Circus to legitimise popular claims against the regime. The occupation in protest against Julianus was a performative defence of the people's right to withhold consensus. Likewise, the popular justice inflicted on Elagabalus was a deliberate subversion of power

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[632] Simon and Klandermans (2001) 327, 329.
[633] Hdn. 5.8.9; SHA *Elag*. 17.1-3.

structures and spatial routines. This progression was only possible because the Circus had been converted from a free space for popular expression to a safe space where claimants could gather and perform acts of resistance. In other words, the Circus Maximus provided an opportunity structure for contenders, and symbolised, if only temporarily, the power of popular contentious politics.

In contrast, the Tiber was an ancient site of ritual justice and purification. Mutilation, exposure, the use of a hook (*i.e.*, dragging), and disposal via the river or the sewers that led to it had overt links with traditional execution.[634] It was the final stage of a well-established and familiar ritual of abuse, vengeance, and damnation.[635] It is telling that this space (and ritual) was reserved for Elagabalus alone, Julia Soemias' body having been cast aside at some point during the collective abuse.[636] The use of the Tiber may indeed have been the choice of both civilians and soldiers working in concert, but it is certain that ordinary people took up the Guard's lead and executed popular justice in a manner that was symbolic and meaningful for them. These spaces were meaningful in terms of political contention for two reasons. First, space was not just a 'container' for claim-making. The urban environment constituted and structured social and cultural life, including contentious repertoires, and was central to scale-jumping strategies aimed at reversing power asymmetries between political actors.[637] Also, the diffusion of locations and the selection of spaces that could accommodate large crowds of people allowed participants to scale-up their claim – effectively, by dragging Elagabalus' headless body through the streets, participants had made Rome itself a claimant and recipient of the justice denied by the regime.

 Secondly, the praetorians were violent specialists. One of their functions was to kill the enemies of the state. They had already assassinated Pertinax and Julianus, so their initial deed was neither particularly shocking nor surprising. Ordinary people, on the other hand, did not regularly participate in violence, and very rarely against their social superiors. The

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[634] Examples of bodies dragged by hooks and thrown into the Tiber: Cass. Dio 61.35.4; Suet. *Vit*. 17. On Galba and the treatment of his corpse: Tac. *Hist*. 1.49.
[635] The Tiber and its bridges were intimately related to old cults and rituals at Rome, and as a traditional way to dispose of waste, the river offered expediency and purification. See Kyle (1998) 213-215, 222.
[636] Cass. Dio 80.20.
[637] Martin and Miller (2003) 144-5.

popular justice process drew Rome's inhabitants into a theatrical performance of symbolic violence, and by doing so, expanded the original claim against Elagabalus' government. Resistance had shifted from the shouting of abuse against Commodus and Caracalla to the man-handling and degrading disposal of Elagabalus. *Castra*, streets, Circus and Tiber now were all contentious sites, which drew more of the city (in spatial and social terms), into a round of claim-making that was, in itself, a considerable escalation of violence.

(v) Politicised identities: the riot of 223CE

Alexander Severus was acclaimed by the praetorians the same day as Elagabalus' execution, with the Senate following suit in subsequent days. Although the new emperor was only thirteen, his cultivated image as a temperate Roman, and his popularity with the Guard and people alike recommended a peaceful transfer of power. Still, the new emperor had two energised urban sectors to deal with and past violent transitions had proven that the immediate political environment would be unstable, offering multiple opportunities for challengers. It was clear, too, that Alexander's supporters understood the nature of the praetorians' grievances, for they would not have deliberately contrasted the young man's public image to that of Elagabalus if the emperor's life-style was palatable to the Guard. Besides, the formation of a civilian lynch mob also proved that hostility towards the regime went beyond the praetorian camp. *Damnatio memoriae* had been imposed upon Elagabalus, but Alexander's dynastic claim was the same as that of his cousin. He needed to make an explicit break with the previous regime lest he be associated with its sins. Pertinax understood the need to cultivate new allies in the wake of Commodus' demise and so too Alexander. Correspondingly, the new regime decided on an approach that would reduce underlying tensions. The message was simple: renewal and restoration, with an emphasis on precedent and tradition.[638]

If perceptions of corruption and injustice bring into question the legitimacy of an emperor's leadership and regime, then equally, good leadership supported by reliable and effective administrative structures will reduce perceptions of corruption and will, therefore, be more likely to be deemed to be legitimate in the eyes of its subjects.[639] Alexander's

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[638] Rowan (2013) 218; Hdn. 6.1.1-4.
[639] Honari (2018) 8-9.

administration, under the watchful eye of his mother Julia Mamaea and grandmother Julia Maesa, applied itself to this task, employing traditional practices and ideologies to win both the Senate and people as allies. Collective memory in the form of political myth often emerges as a legitimating device during times of social and political crisis and the regime's use of memory to reanimate a unified urban identity and cultivate diffuse support was a crucial part of Alexander's attempts to reconfigure the complex and by now problematic relationships between Rome's actors. As the new emperor already had a strong, albeit tainted, dynastic claim, his regime pursued a procedural legitimacy claim that recognised the roles and ideological expectations of each group. Recorded in the *Feriale Duranum*, the official religious calendar of a garrison based at Dura Europas, are two acclamation dates for Alexander: the 12th March 222CE when the praetorians acclaimed him, and the 14th March when the Senate voted him the imperial honours.[640] This recognition of the Senate's customary but ignored role as imperial legitimators was reinforced by the creation of a senatorial *consilium* of sixteen advisors, 'who because of their age seemed most dignified and temperate in their conduct.'[641] Neither act meant any actual increase in senatorial power, but the reciprocal relationship of respect and consultation that lay at the heart of the original Augustan settlement had been revived.[642]

This new commitment to tradition, transparency and justice was also directed at the urban plebs. Jupiter was restored as the paramount god of the state religion. Elagabal's temple was rededicated to Jupiter Ultor and the statues of evicted gods and goddesses returned to their temples. In the legal arena, Julia Mamaea persuaded Alexander to take up the emperor's customary duty of personally dispensing imperial justice in the courts daily.[643] Many of Elagabalus' corrupt and inexperienced advisors and favourites were replaced with qualified individuals, including the appointment of the jurist Ulpian as Prefect of the Annona, then Praetorian Prefect later that year.[644] Under his watch, a massive number of

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[640] Alexander took care not to mention the Senate explicitly so as not to offend the army. *Feriale* extract taken from Hekster (2008) 127; McHugh (2017) 86.
[641] Hdn. 6.1.2.
[642] In gratitude perhaps for Alexander's favour, the body granted the emperor the permission to present at least four pieces of imperial business per session (*ius primae relationis*), a right only granted to Augustus, Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius, and Pertinax. SHA *Alex. Sev.* 1.3; McHugh (2017) 89.
[643] Hdn. 6.1.6.
[644] Hdn. 6.1.3-4: Herodian claims that 'those who had been advanced to positions of power without justification, or had been promoted for their notoriety in crimes, were deprived of their benefices and all

rescripts were issued, including the one issued on 11 April 223CE that dramatically restricted the number of accusations and prosecutions for treason that may have been a factor in the lynching of Eubulus and Fulvius.[645] Alexander could not repopulate the entire imperial court nor purge all of Elagabalus's administrators – a measure of continuity was present in all early third century reigns despite sharp shifts in regime policy – but he could demonstrate a new *ethos*.

Together, the regime's focus on justice, religion, and traditional concepts and hierarchies was meant, in part, to address the widening social space between competing urban identities. Years of irregular and escalating bursts of contentious activity built up a collective memory of polarisation and conflict, but Alexander's administration attempted to build new solidarities – a *consensus universorum* – grounded in a new identity that reflected the shared roles and benefits accorded to the city's main actors. The role of collective memory was vital, for it 'exerts its influence both from the bottom up, as interpretations of the past affect the identities and understandings of political elites, as well as from the top down, as statements by public figures place certain events into the national consciousness while silencing or forgetting others.'[646] If Rome could regain its sense of community, the regime could generate a strong base of diffuse support, that is, not only a shared understanding that the imperial system was legitimate, but that it could also be trusted to provide equitable outcomes, and that it conformed to ethical principles about what was just.[647] Why the emperor would bother reconstructing a collaborative relationship with a Senate reduced to merely taking orders, or why he would stress the open and transparent nature of imperial justice when he had strong military support had more to do with creating perceptions than any real re-setting of the political environment.

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instructed to return to their previous status and occupation.' Cass. Dio 80.21.2 claims there was one exception, a possible reference to Comazon who was reappointed as *praefectus urbi* in the place of Fulvius. Interestingly, Zoticus the former cook reappears as *nomenclature a censibus*, albeit with less power and profile than he held under Elagabalus. McHugh (2017) 92; Icks (2011) 21-22.

[645] 96 rescripts in total. McHugh (2017) 106, 108. Even Dio admits that Ulpian 'corrected many of the irregularities' introduced by Elagabalus (80.2.2).

[646] Verovšek (2016) 529.

[647] Easton (1975).

Thus, with these initial moves, Alexander proclaimed a new beginning for urban political relations. Unfortunately, this public strategy was not able to repair the relationship between the populace and the Praetorian Guard. They may have been allies on the death of Elagabalus, but this rapprochement was only temporary. According to Dio, sometime in early 223CE:

> a great quarrel [arose] between the populace and the Praetorians, from some small cause, with the result that they fought together for three days and many lost their lives on both sides. The soldiers, on getting the worst of it, directed their efforts to setting fire to buildings; and so the populace, fearing the whole city would be destroyed, reluctantly came to terms with them (80.2.3).

Zonoras' epitome of what may have been a detailed account in Dio's original is unfortunately vague.[648] We have no clue as to what the 'small cause' was or who initiated hostilities, and neither Herodian nor the *Historia Augusta* mention any major conflict between soldiers and civilians. Pope Callixtus I was allegedly martyred during a popular uprising in Rome at around the same time, and the seventh century *Chronicon Paschale* records disturbances occurring in Rome over three successive days and nights in the same year, details that provide some credence to Dio's account.[649] Three days of rioting is an extended period of violent contention, and Dio's description of hostilities mirrors Herodian's account of the close quarters fighting between protestors and Commodus' *equites singulares* in 190CE, and further back, the urban warfare of 69CE, and 42CE. As with the earlier cases, civilians used the city's narrow streets and their own homes to their advantage. By barricading themselves inside their homes and throwing stones and tiles on

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[648] Markov (2016) 58. The lack of clarity may be due to Dio's distance from the city at the time; he was either in Africa where he filled the position of proconsul or his next posting in Pannonia Superior when events took place. At the beginning of Book 80 (80.1.2), Dio expresses some regret that he was unable to provide more detail about Alexander Severus' reign because he spent too little time in Rome during that time. Equally, it is commonly thought that these were the years when the historian was actively working on his *opus*, so it is more likely than not that he was reproducing contemporary information and reports received from the city.
[649] Those who killed Callixtus may have used the rioting to settle their own grievances with the erstwhile pope, which may have culminated with his being thrown off the Aemilian Bridge à la Elagabalus. *Chron. Pasch.* ann. 223; Honoré (2002) 32. For more on Callixtus and the reliability of the sources (including the *Historia Augusta*), see Handl (2014).

tightly packed soldiers unable to manoeuvre effectively, the unarmed were able to gain the upper hand over their well-trained and armed opposition.

The spatial shift of contention from politically charged public spaces to people's neighbourhoods and homes suggests that the soldiers took an offensive stance, pursuing people into their neighbourhoods. What prolonged the conflict was the people's refusal to submit, but there is also an interrelationship between the diffusion of collective violence into Rome's streets the year before, and the fighting between soldier and civilian now. Where the acts of popular justice against Elagabalus were ritualised, and symbolic spaces used as performative locations, now the interaction between the two groups was informal and contested. Civilians were defending their dwellings, families, and free spaces from violent specialists, and the personal risk not just to those directly involved, but also to those in the vicinity of the violence was high. At the same time, the increased scope of potentially contestable locations as a result of the contention of 222CE went hand in hand with the diffusion of contentious performances, from demonstrations to inter-personal violence. The successful deployment of popular justice as a popular claim provided a line in the sand for civilians. Given the Guard's outsized political role, easy capitulation could see their position strengthened at the expense of the populace, who could see their spatial rights to the city reduced as a result. The shift from public to private spaces in this instance was, therefore, reflective of the evolution of urban political relationships more generally. The progressive asymmetry of power relations meant that traditional contentious repertoires were becoming outdated. There were fewer incentives to communicate with the emperor directly or participate in consensus rituals at the spectacles because the regime was closed around powerful courtiers. Likewise, the threat of repression was ever-present and the availability of new allies had shrunk. As conventional means of political participation reduced, and diffusion of contention increased, opportunities to seek redress for grievances declined, pushing contentious behaviour towards the more transgressive and destructive end of the spectrum, and into new spaces.

One of the purposes of the regime's return to traditional values was to recreate a political environment whereby the Senate, people, and soldiers would view themselves as members and beneficiaries of a shared political identity, rather than as opponents. No-one would

realistically expect the Guard to withdraw from the political scene, but Alexander's more conventional approach may have created an expectation that the praetorians would adhere to the old rules of engagement. As we have seen, one of Pertinax's more popular measures was his attempt to reign in the Guard after Commodus' accommodation of their offences. An agreement between the praetorians, regime, and plebs regarding the Guard's role was a key mechanism for producing healthy civil-military relations, and the overweening role of the military as an independent centre of power did not mesh with the new imperial narrative and its message of hope and renewal.[650] As the contentious politics model predicts, no one grievance is enough to spark claim-making, and fundamentally, no 'small cause' would motivate ordinary people to expose their loved ones and possessions to the destructive power of a well-resourced militia unless deep-seated grievances and boundaries were activated. To make a comparison with the modern era, in 2019 alone, multiple instances of contention were motivated by seemingly minor issues: violent protests in Chile by an increase in metro fares; Lebanon a tax on WhatsApp calls; and Hong Kong a proposed extradition bill.[651] A spark requires a precipitating factor certainly, but behind these were a matrix of grievances and anxieties related to issues of democracy, state repression, corruption, economic instability, and injustice. These issues combined with a definitive opening of political opportunity structures propelled 'small causes' into political contention.

In the case of 223CE, the spark may have been competition between soldiers and civilians over scarce resources. When Ulpian received his promotion to the praetorian prefecture in December, Aurelius Epagathus, an imperial freedman who held important administrative roles under Caracalla, Macrinus, and Elagabalus, probably succeeded him as *praefectus annonae*.[652] Dio names Epagathus as a protagonist in the disturbances, claiming Alexander sent him to Egypt (and later had him executed there) in order to prevent further violence if he was punished in Rome.[653] John McHugh proposes that Epagathus deliberately hoarded

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[650] Levy (2017) 193.

[651] McKenzie (2019).

[652] We can surmise this because since Alexander immediately sent Epagathus to Egypt after the riots to take up the prefect's post there: this was the usual progression in the premier equestrian posts: *PIR* E 67. Cass. Dio 78.21.2-3 mentions Epagathus in the same context as Theocritus; despite their lowly origins, both wielded great influence under Caracalla.

[653] Cass. Dio 80.2.4. P. *Oxy.* 2565 records the presence of Epagathus in Egypt in May/June of 224CE. `

the public grain supplies, which drove up prices and triggered the riot.[654] This was the same charge levelled against Cleander in Herodian's narrative, and it appears there were problems with the food supply early in Alexander's reign. Like Augustus, the emperor purchased grain at his own expense for the people, and the Byzantine historian Cedrenus also mentions a famine during Alexander's reign, although no specific time-frame is given. Archaeological evidence that Alexander had *horrea* restored or expanded, and coinage advertising five different *liberalitates* to the people also suggests that the food supply was a priority issue.[655]

Nonetheless, if there were food shortages in early 223CE, as the Cleander riots demonstrated, the *praefectus annonae* could have only manipulated public supplies with the assistance of a variety of people in the industry, and he would have needed to wait until stocks were low before the grain ships had arrived. Since we have no idea exactly when the rioting took place, there is no real way of knowing whether Epagathus had any real part to play in stoking the conflict. Even if the rioting was sparked by grain shortages, the target of the population's wrath was not the emperor or the *praefectus annonae*, but the Guard who had no involvement in the grain market. McHugh suggests that Epagathus created the conflict so that the praetorians could destabilise the government, but this is doubtful. The Guard had already demonstrated its ability to legitimise and de-legitimise imperial regimes. If they wanted to act, especially so soon after a transition, they could undoubtedly do so without the need for a high-risk gamble by one imperial official.

What a potential food crisis could do, however, was reanimate the boundary and social space that separated soldiers and civilians. If, as under Macrinus, the praetorians still received their free grain dole while civilians went hungry, old resentments could quickly ignite. By the 220s, there was a vast social distance between the two groups. Four dimensions of social space outlined by Roberta Senechal de la Roche, relational, cultural, functional interdependence, and inequality, explain the outbreak of extreme and prolonged violence between two groups. Relational distance relates to the degree to which people participate in each other's lives. Cultural distance describes the difference between groups

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[654] McHugh (2017) 110-11.
[655] SHA *Alex*. *Sev*. 21.9; Dodgeon and Lieu (1994) 28.

in the expressive aspects of their social lives. Functional independence is a measure of the extent to which each group cooperates economically and politically. The fourth indicator, inequality, is related to functional independence. The praetorians viewed themselves as a distinct and privileged group, and their insular collective life contributed to both relational, cultural, and spatial distancing from urban inhabitants of the city. Praetorians and civilians were also unequal in terms of power, and status, and because each group occupied a different position in the political and social arena, they also had a sizable degree of independence from each other.[656] Senechal de la Roche proposes that when such social polarisation increases, so do the likelihood and severity of collective violence, and specifically, the likelihood that rioting will be the repertoire of choice.[657] There is nothing in the source material to indicate the factors that made up the social space between soldier and civilian had radically changed after Alexander's accession, and a food crisis would only exacerbate an already present gap. Watching amply paid praetorians receive their *frumentaria* while ordinary people could not afford market prices may have been the straw that broke the camel's back.

This inequality, juxtaposed with the government's professed return to traditional values, may have underlined the injustice of the Guard's outsized share of resources. In an environment where the Senate had reclaimed its former socio-political position, the respect and agency functions of civilian collective identity by extension were also enhanced, motivating inter-group competition for power.[658] Even though the rioting as far as we know was not accompanied by any specific claim or political demand, directly engaging the powerful Guard was the ultimate form of dissent by those who did not have equal access to power. Such violence is, in the view of the geographer Mustafa Dikeç, political not because it involved explicit political claims but because the participants were denied their perceived status as political actors and were suffering political inequality.[659] Such contention in modern contexts usually occurs after events perceived as unjust, which supports the theory that the general behaviour or some unspecified action by at least some praetorians

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[656] Senechal de la Roche (1996) 106, 108, 111.
[657] Senechal de la Roche (1996) 106, 116.
[658] Simon and Klandermans (2001) 322.
[659] Dikeç (2016); Pinto and Ericsson (2019) 16.

propelled members of the populace to mobilise on behalf of previously unarticulated grievances. Conceptions of injustice, then, may have been the frame that spurred contentious behaviour after Elagabalus' death, as any social comparison between soldiers and civilians would have only heightened perceptions that the inequality between the groups was illegitimate. The imperial administration, purged of its corrupt officials, was no longer a target of shared grievances and adversarial attributions. Now, given their relatively disadvantaged social position, the urban plebs had more reason to support a politicised self-identity than members of higher-status groups.[660]

Fundamentally then, the conflict between the two groups was propelled by conceptions of justice and identity. Since the process of politicisation positively feeds back to and strengthens collective identity, the social space and boundaries between the two groups grew wider. Therefore, when the praetorians and civilians reverted from temporary allies back to opponents, participants were more willing to act on their biased perceptions and engage in hostilities to force their opponents to incur a heavy cost.[661] The fact that those fighting were extremely reluctant to make terms with the soldiers demonstrates that whatever the underlying context was, it generated a sharp, emotional, collective response. Bonds of solidarity were flexed and reinforced as part of the contention, not just between family, friends, and neighbours, but between all those fighting the praetorians – a vast umbrella of collective identity that was one outcome of a build-up of latent grievances. The masculine identities of the Guard too, meant that they were less likely to capitulate to civilian aggression. These factors extended an initial confrontation into a street battle that threatened the homes and livelihoods of protesters, who nonetheless kept fighting until the collateral damage became too much to bear.

At the core of the increasingly antagonistic relationship between praetorians and civilians were the power shifts of the previous half-century. Army, Senate, and people were, in theory, supposed to be partners. Together they conferred legitimacy upon an emperor and his regime. However, as the Senate's influence declined and the Guard commandeered the majority of Rome's political space, the constitutional rights of the people were squeezed

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[660] Simon and Klandermans (2001) 326.
[661] Simon and Klandermans (2001) 327.

out. Although the cultural work done by Alexander's regime promised much, it also likely provided the impetus for resistance, as Rome's highly salient and oppositional urban identities posed a particular challenge to conflict management because of their entrenched and politicised positions.[662] The product of the clash between civilian and military identities in particular was by definition, a societal security dilemma: one group's actions, taken to strengthen its own identity, caused a reaction in the other group, resulting in a cycle of reactive measures taken by each side to strengthen and secure its identity, but resulting instead in the insecurity of both.'[663] Subsequent events will demonstrate that security would join issues of identity as a site of political contestation.

(vi)   The death of Ulpian

Amidst all the turmoil, there is no mention of Alexander and what, if any, measures he took to defuse the situation. Dio's assertion that the praetorians and the populace negotiated their own terms suggests that the emperor did not intervene. *Legio II Parthica* had returned to its permanent garrison outside Rome with Elagabalus in 217/218CE and was available to restore order (the original reason why Severus had stationed them at Alba).[664] Alexander also had at his disposal the two thousand strong *equites singulares*, and potentially the six thousand men in the urban cohorts and the *vigiles*, although, given the urban cohort's past interventions on behalf of the people, it could have been risky to use them as a repressive force, and it appears that Alexander did not deploy either. The emperor and his advisors may have been caught off-guard by the scale and geographical spread of the violence, although in reality, Alexander had little control over either group. Coinage issued in 224CE with the legend LIBERALITAS AUGUSTI II advertised a *congiarium*, while another issue from the same year proclaimed FIDES MILITUM; a demonstration of the juggling act that was needed to keep the peace.[665] The Guard and the populace may have agreed on a truce, but others viewed the urban crisis as an opportunity. Dio states that, after the fighting finally

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[662] Kachuyevski and Olesker (2014) 305.
[663] Kachuyevski and Olesker (2014) 306.
[664] *Legio II Parthica* was considered an important force; it was probably under the command of the two praetorian prefects when stationed near Rome, and in the latter years of Elagabalus' reign, the senator Seius Carus was accused of conspiring with some of the legions' troops in a failed bid to topple the emperor. The plot was discovered, and Carus was tried in private by the emperor and executed: Cass. Dio 80.4.6; McHugh (2017) 58.
[665] *Congiaria*: RIC IV 569. *Fides*: RIC 319.

ceased, 'many uprisings were begun by many persons, some of which caused great alarm, but they were all put down.'[666] It was the praetorians who successfully seized the opportunity to make a claim. Alexander's overtures to the Senate and urban plebs theoretically had little impact on their position as political actors (despite perhaps the differing perceptions of the urban plebs), but the appointment of Ulpian as praetorian prefect was a threat both to the unit and courtiers who had prospered under previous emperors. When Ulpian became a prefect in December 223CE, there were already two prefects in place. Ulpian was given a supervisory role over them and civic affairs in general. When the battle raged between the Guard and the urban populace, Ulpian frantically tried to restore order in the city, and his first move once the immediate situation stabilised was to have his two subordinate prefects, Flavianus and Chrestus, executed, either for abetting hostilities or being ineffective in preventing the violence. The praetorians responded by attacking Ulpian during the night, who fled to the imperial palace and sought protection from Alexander and his mother. The soldiers killed him in front of the imperial pair, a tacit reminder of the Guard's dominance.[667]

In the past, the Guard had not been particularly loyal to their commanders. Only the year before they had killed both incumbent prefects. In this instance, Flavianus and Chrestus had the requisite military experience that would have appealed to the unit, and Zosimus describes the prefects as being offended with Ulpian's oversight.[668] Ulpian may have also attempted to impose stricter military discipline upon the Guard, which would have made him extremely unpopular with the rank and file. The jurist's expansive authority, however, threatened the Guard's independent power, and it appears that this was their core grievance. Killing the prefect in front of Alexander was a stunning invasion of the emperor's private space. Only a short period of time had elapsed since the praetorians had executed Elagabalus. When they had intervened earlier, it was an open transaction: the emperor was summoned, then transported to the praetorian *castra*, where the unit could make a collective claim from a position and location of supreme authority. This time, the killing of Ulpian did not even warrant a contentious claim. The soldiers simply decided who would be

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[666] Cass. Dio 80.3.1.
[667] Cass. Dio 80.2.2.
[668] Zos. 1.11.2.

allowed to be a member of the regime, a power they flexed again shortly afterwards. Alexander had promoted Dio to a second consulship with himself as a colleague, but as Dio himself states, '[Alexander] became afraid that they might kill me if they saw me in the insignia of my office, that he bade me spend the period of my consulship in Italy, somewhere outside of Rome.'[669] The emperor's inability to guarantee the safety of his choice for consul was a product of praetorian independence, but also of less visible power structures and relationships. Caracalla was twenty-three (and Geta twenty-two) on his accession; Elagabalus and Alexander were both fourteen. The traditional model whereby an adult emperor employed established social hierarchies to exert personal control over a stable regime had morphed into one where boy-emperors were the representative face of regimes where the military, courtiers, and bureaucrats wielded substantial authority.[670] Behind the scenes power-plays were not contentious politics as such since such claims were not public, but the concentration and redistribution of power within the imperial court affected political opportunity structures. In particular, the inherent instability of court politics made it structurally incompatible with the long-term existence of a stable elite.[671] The imperial court and the spaces in and around the Palatine palace complexes remained significant, albeit shadowy, political spaces, but once again, the praetorian camp remained paramount. Ulpian was not assassinated by a rival whom Alexander could punish, but by the Guard to whom the emperor was in reality, subordinate. Alexander's dependence, in turn, provided political space for other actors to assert independent influence, and by killing Ulpian, the Guard had also demonstrated that its own collective identity and goals were paramount over those of the emperor they had sworn to protect and serve.

The socio-political contests of that year were a reflection of how boundary formation, politicised collective identity, legitimacy claims, and justice framing affected popular mobilisation and repertoires of contention. Just as the Praetorian Guard employed physical intimidation and violence as a contentious claim, and popular justice as a de-legitimising ritual, ordinary people used a similar template as a response and antidote to the injustice of

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[669] Cass. Dio 80.5.1. There were strong links between the Pannonian legions and the Praetorian Guard. de Blois (2007) 500, posits that messages were sent from the Pannonian soldiers to the Guard, who then pressured Alexander to send Dio away.
[670] Kemezis (2016) 370-371.
[671] Wallace-Hadrill (2011) 101.

the military's dominance. As participants drew upon master frames to portray their perceived injustice in ways that fit the tenor of the times, their collective action implicitly legitimated the nature of their claim by aggravating the 'us' versus 'them' divide based on traditional collective identities and well-worn methods of popular agitation and self-help.[672] The Guard's use of popular justice methods in 222CE turned their issue into a matter of public or general interest, which in turn aided the politicisation of civilian identities that were a fundamental driver of the riots of 223CE.[673] However, the politicisation of military and civilian identities split the social environment. The boundary that demarcated potential allies and enemies was now clearly defined, leading to a strategic reformulation of the conflict between actors that resulted in widespread violence and destruction.[674]

The nature of contentious politics in Rome had shifted substantially from the accession of Caracalla to that of Severus Alexander. Praetorian hegemony produced discourses that legitimated popular violence. From relatively passive opposition to Circus demonstrations and finally armed struggle, the intensification of contention in terms of scale and violence demonstrates the efficacy of framing, collective identity and boundary formation on the social and spatial diffusion and performance of contentious politics. The use of direct violence as an escalation of the protest repertoire also reveals the reciprocal adaptation and learning processes that took place between Rome's political actors, and the competitive dynamics that intensified between and within groups as they made strategic choices on how to make claims with each other. This was to be expected as repertoires of collective action often change during protest cycles as the reaction of authorities produces a proportional increase in more radical forms of action. [675]

In the wake of the violence of 223CE, the fifteen-year-old emperor was left to manage a highly complex and volatile situation. His predecessor Septimius Severus was able to constrain contention through the establishment of robust, interlocking legitimacy claims, through adherence to long-held expectations of imperial moral economy, and by a tight

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[672] Oliver and Johnston (2005) 4; Kelly (2013) 418.
[673] Simon and Klandermans (2001) 324-5.
[674] Simon and Klandermans (2001) 327.
[675] della Porta (2013) 81-82.

control of the state's repressive capacity. Since then, the Praetorian Guard had entrenched themselves as an independent political collective, and their relationship with the urban populace had devolved into open conflict. Alexander was effectively caught between the two. In order to constrain contention and close political opportunities for challengers, the regime had to balance the interests of the two groups, no easy feat when they were so diametrically opposed. Yet, the capital remained calm for the remainder of Alexander's rule. Although initial efforts to cultivate a sense of identity through the invocation of political myth and collective memory had been interrupted by the violence of 223CE, as Rome continued to shoulder significant economic and social stress, the regime intensified efforts to link the Alexandrian regime with the 'golden past' of moral economy and Augustan glory as a way of restoring a political equilibrium.

Constraining contention: the urban programme of Alexander Severus

Rome's socio-political environment post-223CE was fraught. Long-term effects of the Antonine Plague, climate change affecting agricultural productivity, and a downturn in casual work as imperial building programmes were pared back heaped significant levels of economic distress upon the city's inhabitants. The Colosseum was unusable because of the conflagration during the reign of Macrinus. Dio notes that the Tiber flooded the Forum the same day as the fire, inundating the streets with such violence that people were swept away.[676] Food shortages, a debased currency, and its inflationary effects added to the privations experienced by the average citizen. As Kevin Butcher points out: 'no modern account of the third century, be it a 'crisis' or a 'transition to late antiquity,' can avoid mention of the notion that there was financial and monetary chaos and economic dislocation in this period.'[677]

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[676] Cass. Dio 79.25.
[677] Caracalla's enormous military expenditure necessitated the introduction in 215CE of the double tariffed 'antoninianus.' This move was so unpopular that Macrinus and Elagabalus whom both faced worsening imperial deficits issued antoniniani only in the first months of their reigns and Alexander Severus discontinued its issue altogether. According to its weight, the (mistakenly called) antoninianus should be regarded as 1.5 denarii. However, the coin was probably accepted as a double piece. Caracalla also reduced the weight of the aureus by 10% in 215CE: Cass. Dio 78.14.4; Butcher (2015) 183, 185; Katsari (2002) 4.

Hardship, the social effects of Caracalla's *Constitutio*, even the visible power of half-Romanised praetorians on the city's streets may have also caused some fear of social slippage among the urban plebs. The *Historia Augusta* recounts an episode of conventional political contention when the populace petitioned Alexander for a reduction of the price in beef and pork.[678] Meat was not a necessity foodstuff and would have been out of the reach of many, but high prices may have meant that those who could typically afford it now found themselves dropping down the rungs of the social ladder. Alexander's response took over a year to produce a reduction in prices, which indicates the protest was more about the social issue of pricing than actual need. Despite these genuine social, political, and economic factors, Alexander was able to keep Rome in a peaceful state for thirteen years; an achievement almost entirely focused around his delivery of traditional social goods. Taking a leaf out of Severus' book, he invested in an extensive building programme including work on the badly damaged Colosseum, a makeover of the ancient Theatre of Marcellus, the completion of the Baths of Caracalla, and the restoration of baths, temples, bridges and aqueducts and public spaces. Alexander was interested in urban reform and improvements, and the provision of clean water and access to bathing facilities appears to have been a focus: along with the Caracallan baths, *balnea Alexandri* were built in parts of the city not serviced by public baths. A new aqueduct was constructed which fed the Nymphaenum (a massive public fountain) as well as a succession of lesser fountains across the city bearing the emperor's name where people could collect their water. The 17m high conical Meta Sudans was also restored.[679] In addition, Alexander provided state-funded education for teachers, rhetoricians, doctors, architects, and other personnel, proof that the emperor understood that providing financial support to those who contributed to the provision of social goods contributed to his public standing.[680]

The regime did not neglect the logistical side of the city's food supply either. Stable pricing and supply of grain in the form of the *frumentationes* and the open market were still

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[678] SHA *Alex. Sev.* 22.7**.**
[679] SHA *Alex. Sev*. 25.3-9. For the archaeological evidence of Alex's building works, see McHugh (2017) 120-123.
[680] Nind Hopkins (1907) 153. Alexander was not the first to do so: Vespasian funded salaries for rhetoricians (Suet. *Vesp*. 18; Zon. 11.17), and by time of Antoninus Pius, teachers and rhetoricians in Asia were publicly funded by the cities in which they taught. Alexander went further by providing decent (one would assume) training.

ongoing concerns for the regime. The stockpiles of grain left by Severus had long since evaporated, and a lack of imperial oversight and endemic corruption by administrators and industry middlemen may have impacted the market in the intervening years. Alexander went back to Severus' template of centralisation and processing efficiency. *Horrea* were erected in each of the city's fourteen *regiones*, and 'very many great engineering works' were initiated in what may have been a continuation of the Severan water mill project.[681] Like Claudius centuries earlier, Alexander also provided incentives for food merchants to bring their goods directly into the city for efficient and timely distribution.[682] Strict controls on *collegia* within the food industry also appear to have been eased. Where a fragment of Marcianus' *Digest* indicates that Severus confirmed the restrictions laid down by the Senate more than two centuries before, Alexander legalised *collegia* linked to the supply of food and essential services to Rome. These groups received special tax exemptions and publicly funded legal counsel presumably when needed.[683] By increasing the capacity of centralised storage and processing infrastructure, Alexander could stabilise grain prices as a higher ratio of flour to raw grain reduced the ability of corrupt officials to stockpile grain and affect prices or supply.[684] Expanded infrastructure also provided greater efficiency and transparency over the entire process from the docks to the city's bakeries that operated under imperial oversight.[685] Furthermore, archaeology suggests that the free oil distributions initiated by Severus were re-introduced, and the *alimenta* programme for orphans, terminated by Commodus in 184CE, resumed.[686] There was another economic benefit at play. Alexander's massive construction programme also provided paid work for the poor. The Baths of Caracalla, for example, employed up to 9,000 workers/day between 211-216CE. The commencement of multiple large scale construction projects allowed the

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[681] SHA *Alex. Sev.* 22.4. See McHugh (2017) 126 for an archaeological analysis of the water mill associated with the Baths of Caracalla that supports Alexander's expansion of this infrastructure.

[682] SHA *Alex. Sev.* 22.1.

[683] Marc. *Dig.* 47.22.1 pr.1; de Ligt (2001) 346-7; Cary and Scullard (1975) 498; Boyd (1905) 80.

[684] Taylor (2010) 211.

[685] Weights and measures of bakeries were closely monitored: a specific *collegia* for those who supervised weights/measures (*mensores machinarii frumenti publici*) appears in the early Severan period, attested to in three inscriptions from Rome: *CIL* 6.85, 9626, 33883 (although only the first can be securely dated to 198CE). See Taylor (2010) 212.

[686] McHugh (2017) 126, 133. Analysis of amphorae shards from Monte Testaccio shows a steady decline from the time of Antoninus Pius until a recovery under Alexander. Shipwrecks mirrors this trend, although, under Alexander, there was a significant increase in shipwrecks with a singular cargo – oil – rather than the mixed cargos usual under previous emperors.

emperor to act as the city's chief patron for those affected by the adverse economic conditions.[687]

Alexander thus constructed a public image not only as the city's patron, but also as a restorer of Roman *mores*, culture, and religion. His programmes and visual imagery harked back to the past and the glories of Augustus, Trajan, and his Antonine predecessors. Coarelli suggests that Alexander was responsible for the construction of the *umbilicus urbis Romae*, a monument that marked the centre of the Empire and from which all distances were measured. If this structure was connected with Augustus' monumental milestone, the *milliarium aureum*, then Alexander was consciously creating connections to Augustus and collective memories of the past, as a continuation of past imperial policies to provide a comprehensive catalogue of social goods that symbolised and reinforced Roman collective identity.[688] By reviving the major tenets of the imperial moral economy, Alexander reinvigorated the social contract between emperor and citizen by re-emphasising the reciprocal nature of the relationship that had become rather one-sided in recent years. Grievances that had festered since the death of Severus were cauterised by this recognition of the urban population's privileges, a return to economic and political stability, and a more just distribution of imperial resources. The moral economy was not just restricted to material aid. Alexander's regime produced the highest amount of rescripts for the third century.[689] A focus on justice and traditional values including open cooperation with the Senate, and a willingness to personally hear petitions also demonstrated the regime's understanding of the social values, norms, and obligations that made up the emotional, intangible side of moral economy.

Collective memory is powerful and persistent, and the visual ideology of Alexander's regime that was explicitly connected to traditional concepts of Roman identity and glory was a valuable political instrument for the emperors, and suggests that Alexander was more

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[687] McHugh (2017) 120.
[688] Coarelli (1987) 433; Rowan (2013) 222. Regarding the *milliarium aureum,* Richardson (1992) 404 suggests that the two structures were connected since it is unlikely that two centres of Rome existed so close to each other at the same time.
[689] See Ando (2012) 195 for table. 453 rescripts under Alexander versus 269 for Gordian III (the next highest amount).

attuned to the issues and mechanisms that facilitated popular collective action of the time than has perhaps been realised. Modern scholarship's accounting of the positive tradition of Alexander's reign preserved in Herodian and the *Historia Augusta* more often than not focuses on the regimes' gloss of tradition, and the restoration of senatorial prestige, even though this did not come with any corresponding renewal of political power.[690] For all of Alexander's vaulted conservative *mores*, it was the effects of his policies rather than the ideologies behind them that had a sizeable impact on popular political contention. The provision of food and clean water, jobs, the application of fair and transparent justice, and the recognition of essential social networks legitimised, to a certain extent, the free spaces and hidden transcripts of urbanites who had borne the social and economic consequences of war, corruption and the militarisation of the Principate.

Of course, Alexander had no real practical way to constrain the praetorian claims and identities that clashed with those of the wider populace (without risking their interference), but he could reconfigure the concept of justice in terms of providing previously withheld recognition to the urban plebs as a political actor. Reminding the city of the glory of their collective past, and explicitly recognising the cultural and practical importance of the moral compact between emperor and citizen was a perceptive way of diffusing some of the tension generated by the politicisation of civilian collective identities. A strong imperial moral economy also had the added effect of creating a base of resistance if the benefits and ideologies associated with the collective identities validated by Alexander's regime became subject to attack by opposing identities and ideologies. Through these measures, Alexander earned the support of the population and the Senate. Stability thus constrained transgressive contention, and claim-making reverted to the conventional practices of consensus rituals. If we take the word of the *Historia Augusta's* author (who claims to quote the *Acta Urbis*), the Senate had already delivered at least six formal and extremely long-winded acclamations upon Alexander's accession in 223CE, reflecting the development of ritualised consensus performances from the beginning of the third century.[691] The

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[690] Positive views on Alexander: Hdn. 6.9.8; Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 24; SHA *Alex. Sev.* 66.1-68.4; Oros. 7.18. Although, as Davenport (2011) 281 argues, the *Historia Augusta's* view of Alexander in particular was 'little more than a barely-disguised panegyric.'

[691] SHA *Alex. Sev.* 6.3-7.6. There is, for example, a considerable development in formality and length from the senatorial acclamations directed at Severus in 205CE: Cass. Dio 77.6.2; Arena (2007) 323. For the different

acclamations of the people, however, were always a more voluntary and spontaneous performance. When Alexander left the city in 231CE to campaign against the Parthians, he was escorted on his *profectio* by a weeping Senate and people who both held the emperor 'in great affection' for his moderate rule.[692] When he returned to celebrate his Persian triumph in 233CE, the crowds carried him along the triumphal route for hours chanting 'secure is Rome, secure is the commonwealth, for secure is Alexander.'[693] The joyous participation and acclamations of the crowds echo the shouts of 193CE: 'With Pertinax in control, we lived secure, we feared no one!'[694] When Alexander left the city shortly after to deal with the German threat, the *Historia Augusta* claims that the people were so unwilling to let him depart that they escorted him for over a hundred miles outside the city.[695]

The polarisation of military and civilian identities between 211-235CE

In the ten years since the death of Severus, political opportunity structures and framing revolved around some intangible but essential issues. The political and practical importance of the military and diminishment of the Senate under Severus intensified under Caracalla, who employed the advantages of might to frame imperial policy and close his regime around key insiders. Caracalla's contempt for the Senate and heavy reliance on the military and court insiders in part paved the way for Rome's first non-senatorial emperor, Macrinus, who fell victim to the power struggle between the army, equestrian bureaucracy, and imperial *familia*.[696] Elagabalus' lifestyle and public reluctance to meet the demands of the praetorians led to his downfall. His death, meanwhile, provided an opportunity for the populace to mobilise against regime members and soldiers who used their power with impunity.

In the void left after Severus' charismatic reign, new themes emerged. New and extant collective identities became mobilising structures for collective action. Popular identities

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interpretations on the accuracy of the *Historia Augusta*'s acclamations in the *Life of Alexander*, see Bertrand-Dagenbach (1990) 92ff.

[692] Hdn. 6.4.2.

[693] SHA *Alex. Sev.* 57.5. For the senatorial acclamations on his return: SHA *Alex. Sev.* 56.9-10.

[694] Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 155.6.

[695] SHA *Alex. Sev.* 59.1.

[696] Scott (2008) iii.

became politicised due to power inequalities and perceptions of growing injustice. Military identities, meanwhile, politicised around the Guard's position as regime legitimators and moral arbiters. These processes together caused the boundaries between the groups to harden, creating social space between them that led to further polarisation and violence. From a bottom-up perspective, the extension of collective action frames and the politicisation of collective identities was a primary driver of popular contention during this period. The military may have seized the power to legitimate an emperor and his regime to the detriment of the Senate and Rome's urban population, but those political rights were remembered. Latent grievances became salient, creating political opportunities for collective claim-making.

The adoption of more violent forms of contention by sectors of the urban population in 222-223CE indicates that an element of radicalisation had taken place in terms of collective claim-making performances. The outcome of the competition between praetorians and civilians for political space was the adoption of more disruptive and violent forms of popular contention. Negative contention predominated until the ability of Alexander to address the obligations of the imperial moral economy reversed some of the shift away from conventional modes of collective expression. Even though he could not resolve the fundamental grievances held by the *populus* against the Praetorian Guard, the emperor was able to demonstrate that he understood how crucial perceptions of justice were, in social terms at least, to the urban plebs as a collective political actor. Accordingly, Alexander was the first emperor since Marcus Aurelius, who managed to craft a long-lasting and authentic sense of goodwill with Rome's political groups. In terms of the wider contentious cycle initiated after the death of Marcus Aurelius, the period between Caracalla's accession in 218CE and Alexander's Parthian campaign hosted a diffusion of collective action from more mobilised to less mobilised sectors. The rapid pace of innovative contentious performances during the crisis of 193CE and the growing significance of justice collective action frames continued to have long-lasting effects on urban claim-making performances.[697]

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[697] Tarrow (1998) 142.

Chapter 4: The beginning of crisis? Framing and identity processes between 235-238CE

As David Potter recognised in *The Roman Empire at Bay*, the events of 238CE were among the most remarkable in the entire history of Rome. A local revolt in Africa encouraged a senatorial rebellion initially supported by the urban populace, who then forced the accession of their own candidate as Caesar, before besieging the Praetorian camp for days on end. The retaliation of the Guard left much of the city in ruins, and the two senatorial emperors dead in the street. [698] Most of the momentous events of the year took place between March and August in what was an extraordinarily compressed sequence of escalating contention. As far as we know, what the unravelled chronology tells us is that the seizing of a political opportunity by a small group of men in Africa with no army and few tangible resources mobilised geographically and socially distinct groups into taking direct action against the imperial regime and each other.

It seems rather improbable that independent, city-based political actors would not only leap into action to expand their rights and claims based on the news of a small uprising, but also use the opportunity to engage in inter-factional warfare as the most qualified soldier ever to assume the imperial mantle marched his army on Rome. How and why the events of 238CE unfolded are complex, and were a culmination of the trends outlined so far in this study. Collective action framing, legitimacy claims, and shifts in opportunity structures all played vital roles in opening political space for new and independent centres of power. Continued social polarisation, the hardening of the oppositional boundaries that separated Rome's political actors, and the steady diffusion and incorporation of innovative contentious performances all created a perfect storm of entrenched grievances and opportunity.

Perhaps most crucially, the later years of Alexander's reign introduced a new factor: the burgeoning influence and identities of provincial soldiers in terms of legitimacy claims and regime type. From 230CE, the Roman Empire had to deal with simultaneous incursions along many frontiers on an almost unprecedented scale. The need to campaign in Persia,

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[698] Potter (2004) 170.

Mesopotamia, Syria, Germany, Dacia, and Sarmatia drew Alexander's attention away from Rome, and it is here that the positive accounts of Alexander's reign betray, in Clifford Ando's words, 'the yawning chasm that had opened up between the notional location of sovereign authority in a duly appointed ruler and the license of the soldiery – a chasm that an emperor still on the threshold of puberty was hardly fit to bridge.'[699] The socio-political implications of such a rift could be managed in times of relative peace or even in the face of a single threat perhaps, but despite Alexander's able urban leadership, exogenous factors during the later part of his reign provided clear political opportunities for challengers.

From centre to periphery: military identity and political opportunity

The beginning of Alexander's troubles can be traced back to the campaign against the Parthians in 232CE. In the same year that Alexander celebrated his *decennalia*, the founder of what would become the Sassanian Empire, the Persian *shahanshar* Ardashir I, shifted his expansionist focus to the west. He attacked Roman possessions in Mesopotamia, the fortified desert stronghold of Hatra and the Armenian states, considered necessary buffers between the two realms. A resurgent Parthia was a serious threat. Alexander first employed diplomatic measures but was reluctantly forced to mount a full-scale campaign in 232CE.[700] The initiation of hostilities reinforced the continuing importance of the military, for the security of the Empire could only be preserved by armies, and as commander-in-chief, the emperor was expected to campaign with his men. Military qualities had always been an essential aspect of imperial representation, and Severus, Caracalla, and Macrinus all ensured that the relationship between the emperor and his troops was advertised widely: by the third century, over a fifth of all coin types featured militaristic themes. Some featured military victories or the emperor as commander-in-chief, *commilito* (or both). Others referenced the military directly, even specific units, which suggests that some coinage explicitly targeted soldiers, although the message that the emperor was a strong

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[699] Ando (2012) 70-71.
[700] Hdn. 6.2.3-5, 6.3.1. Preparations had been underway since 230CE: road repairs were undertaken in Cilicia and Cappadocia in 230-231CE, and the coinage of 230CE shows a preponderance of military themes, including *adlocutio Augusti*: BMC VI. 75; Whittaker (1970) 96-7, n.2.

military leader was a universal one that had appealed to many, disparate audiences over a long period.[701]

Interestingly, where Caracalla was most often depicted with a short beard, soldier's haircut and a frowning visage, much of the surviving imperial portraiture of Alexander depicts him as boyish and not particularly martial in repose.[702] Such a youthful appearance made sense if Alexander, as has been suggested, was deliberately styled like the youthful conqueror of the East, Alexander the Great.[703] By the opening of hostilities with Parthia though, Alexander was around twenty-five years old and was no longer the young boy who had ascended the throne. He had not, however, been able to establish a comprehensive military reputation like either Severus or Caracalla in preceding years, and his boyish persona could have been interpreted by soldiers as one reflecting inexperience, and perhaps a little too close to the effeminate Elagabalus. Unfortunately, Alexander's decision-making during the Parthian campaign did little to convince soldiers that he was a conquering general rather than a cultivated youth. At the same time, the army had been fractious in recent years. Several mutinies by Syrian and Egyptian troops who were looking to replace the emperor had to be put down.[704] Dio, who retired to finish his *opus* in 230CE, warned that Rome's armies were initially 'in such a state that some of the troops are actually joining him [Ardashir] and others are refusing to defend themselves.'[705] While pay had significantly improved from the beginning of the third century (thanks to Severus and Caracalla's pay rises), military working conditions had deteriorated. From 230CE on, long marches,

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[701] Manders (2012) 64. Kemmers has shown that some third century coinage displays geographically differentiated images of military themes, thus targeting specific audiences. The image of an emperor in a cuirass for example that had a long history in imperial coinage now became a dominant image. Kemmers (2006) 248-256. Also see Hekster (2008) 59.

[702] For Caracalla, see Kleiner (1992) 361–76. Alexander: the young emperor statue in the Capitoline Museum; Vatican Chiaramonti Museum, inv. 1481; Zanker (2016) 91-93). Many of Elagabalus' statues complete with sideburns and facial hair were refashioned in Alexander's likeness, and some of Alexander's statues gained slight facial hair/moustache as he aged: See Varner (2004) 190-191.

[703] Alexander was an unusual throne name. Cass. Dio 80.17.2-18.3, claims that just before Alexander's adoption by Elagabalus in 221CE, a *daimon* claiming to be Alexander appeared in Moesia and Thrace: Müller (2019) argues that the procession of the *daimon* was a staged event meant to confer Alexandrian prestige upon the young soon-to-be-emperor, and certainly, at least initially, an association between Alexander and his Macedonian predecessor was a feature of the emperor's public image.

[704] Hdn. 6.4.7; Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 24.2. Whittaker notes that this may be a misplaced retelling of the aforementioned Mesopotamian mutiny, but acknowledges that Herodian's account is in keeping with Dio's claim that there were 'many uprisings' (80.3.1): Whittaker (1970) 107, n.3.

[705] Cass. Dio 80.4.1.

unhealthy conditions, and logistical issues made the lot of the common soldier a misery.[706] Military discipline was also a problem, particularly amongst praetorians. Ulpian had been butchered in front of Alexander in 223CE, and Dio experienced praetorian intransigence first-hand, complaining of their wantonness, licence, and lack of discipline. While governing Pannonia Superior around 226-228CE, the historian claims the praetorians stationed there even threatened him personally. The Greek indicates that the soldiers compared Dio's strict discipline with that of Ulpian, but the prefect was long dead by this time. Tony Honoré reinterprets the text as a warning that Dio might suffer the same fate as the prefect if he tried to impose harsher discipline.[707]

Perhaps with these issues in mind, Alexander felt the need to provide the military with additional benefits. For instance, he confirmed that soldiers could name anyone as heirs in their will, a right that civilians did not have. He also allowed soldiers to free their slaves in their wills, and safeguarded the rights of soldiers to their property when they were on campaign, including the protection of property acquired in or because of military service (the *castrense peculium*) from claimants, including family members.[708] However, given that the military's awareness of their political power had been substantially underscored by their involvement in the deposition of Macrinus and Elagabalus, it was more critical than ever that an emperor not only provided status and benefits, but also embodied the values and skills valued by the military collective. Such a sense of shared identity would be significant in terms of the contentious politics performed in Rome, for if military competence became the key criteria for determining an imperial candidate, the different expectations and values attached to urban civilian identities meant that those who associated strongly with this group could potentially consider themselves to be competition against representatives of the army, and by extension, the regime.

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[706] de Blois (2018) 177.
[707] Cass. Dio 80.4.2; Honoré (2002) 33; Millar (1964) 23; Markov (2016) 59.
[708] Campbell (1984) 221, 224, 234, 239.

(i)   Military failure and the rise of Illyrian identity

Alexander's Parthian campaign produced mixed results, with some tactical victories for the Romans, some defeats and roughly equal losses on both sides. Herodian, however, saw the campaign as a strategic defeat and blamed Alexander.[709] Alexander may have celebrated with a triumph, but the fact that he did not take the title of *persicus* or *parthicus maximus* suggests that a Roman victory was not clear cut. It seems that while the campaign did preserve the past borders of the Roman empire, and halted Ardashir's immediate plans for expansion into the west, an absence of any real decisive victory had the troops questioning the emperor's leadership qualities.[710] Furthermore, Alexander's leadership did not endear him to his troops. His inability to stick to the plan made the army 'absolutely furious,' and his decision to withdraw to Antioch for the winter caused large numbers of casualties, which eroded his reputation among the soldiers.[711] To make matters worse, shortly after the withdrawal, the emperor received word that German tribes had crossed the Danube and Rhine and were overrunning garrisons and villages. As with Persian aggression, a German incursion was a real problem for Rome. The Rhine-Danube was the empire's longest border. If it fell, Illyria and Italy would be in imminent danger. Alexander arrived in Germany in late autumn 234CE, but winter meant no immediate progress would be made.

The movement of large numbers of 'barbarians' across Rome's borders was the result of a complex array of demographic factors – the same factors that affected the composition of the Roman army. As de Blois notes, in the hinterlands of the Danube border, plague, forced recruitment, deportations and warfare had reduced the numbers of productive people such as farmers in already thinly-populated areas.[712] Meanwhile, manpower shortages from the army's traditional recruiting grounds meant that more and more soldiers were recruited from these very areas in Illyria and the surrounding Danubian regions. By the third century, at least a third of Roman forces and their command positions were filled by Illyrians,

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[709] Hdn. 6.5.10, 6.6.1, 6.6.3.

[710] SHA *Alex. Sev.* 55.1 actually labels Herodian's version as contrary to what was contained in the state records; Eutr. 8.23 also claims that Alexander triumphed over the Persians. The early books of Ammianus Marcellinus do not survive, but he does provide a list of successful Roman commanders of the east in his preamble to his account of Julian's invasion of Persia in 363CE, and there is no mention of Alexander, so his campaign cannot be said to have been considered an outstanding success: Pearson (2017) 67, 243.

[711] Hdn. 6.6.1, 6.6.3-4: Herodian notes that Alexander gave the army a generous *donativum* once back at Antioch to try and restore his popularity.

[712] de Blois (2007) 504.

including Pannonians, Dalmatians, Moesians, and Thracians.[713] It was these same ethnic groups who dominated the Praetorian Guard after Severus' reorganisation of the unit, as well as the *equites singulares*. The changing composition of the Roman army meant that identities based around ethnic bonds became more important. Fellow countrymen served together for long periods in the same unit, and ethnic cooperatives became formalised in a similar way to *collegia*, employing formal decision-making mechanisms, common funds, and internal structures and hierarchies. The strong collective bonds and the numerical visibility of the Danubian recruits introduced what would later be termed *Illyriciani* identity, a collective that would prove to be hugely influential in the following decades.[714] While these troops may have viewed themselves as Roman, they were ethnically and linguistically distinct from Italian soldiers; there is evidence that many of these local troops did not understand Latin.[715] Furthermore, their entrenched position on the empire's borders meant that these units could form their own, distinctive frontier identity separate from those posted elsewhere in the empire.[716]

Such structural change transformed these provincial collectives, tightly bound by their own ethnic identities, into new political actors. As they gained influence within the legions in which they served, they gained opportunities to make alliances and contribute as power-brokers, and even as participants in the legitimisation of an emperor.[717] Herodian relates that Illyrian soldiers had forced Alexander to break off the Persian campaign in 233CE because their province was being overrun by the Germans crossing the border.[718] Such an action suggests that as a collective, Illyrian soldiers had enough power to influence the emperor's military plans. In terms of foreign policy, the switch from Persia to Germany was significant: border areas were under threat, but Rome had a long history of political rivalry with the Persians. Alexander's foray into Mesopotamia was essentially a prestige campaign

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[713] Bruun (2007) 203-4; Lo Cascio (1991) esp. 710-716. Lee (2007) 84-5 proposes that the non-Roman component of the (Eastern) Roman army, at least in positions of command held at 1/3 or less during the fourth and fifth centuries.

[714] For the purposes of clarity, I am identifying those ethnic groups based in the Pannonian province as Illyrian given the use of this appellation in modern scholarship. Dzino and Kunić 2012 (106); Speidel (2016) 339-341.

[715] Cass. Dio 72.5 shows that Marcus Aurelius' praetorian prefect did not understand the difference between good Latin and Greek.

[716] Bileta (2016) 28.

[717] Dzino and Kunić (2012) 108.

[718] Hdn. 6.7.2-5; SHA *Alex. Sev.* 63.5. Speidel (2016) 354.

linking his regime with collective memory and honeyed ideals of Roman expansionism; Danube-Rhine policy, however, was one about maintenance and almost always undertaken as a response to border violations by 'barbarians.' That Illyrian soldiers could dictate policy that affected the well-being of their families over the potential glory of Roman victory over Ardashir attests to the growing influence of the Empire's peripheries at the expense of the centre.

While the emperor's decision to protect the Rhine-Danube frontier may have been viewed positively by the Illyrian contingents, the army still had to endure a harsh German winter. Harassed by raiding parties, and with firewood and food supplies running low, Alexander contacted the German tribal leaders and offered enormous sums of gold – the same strategy employed by Commodus with the Marcomanni and the Quadi in 180CE. For the Illyrian contingents whose morale was already low after suffering high casualties on their way back to Antioch, and whose homes and families were under attack by the German incursions, Alexander's attempt to buy terms rather than risk battle incurred great resentment.[719] Emperors were meant to dominate (and punish) non-Romans, and Alexander's barbarian bribe was considered antithetical to military values. On a more fundamental level, the Illyrian soldiers wanted to punish the tribesmen who had despoiled their homes, not reward them, and the privileging of barbarian demands over the welfare of the soldier's families and possessions personalised their grievances. Now citizens, auxiliary soldiers had long inhabited an ambiguous, second-class place in the Roman army, and Alexander's treaty did little to disabuse provincial soldiers of this notion. The army was the basis of Severan success, and each emperor's militaristic identity was an instrumental part of maintaining legitimacy with the troops. With the strong sense of identity forged in the reality of warfare, Alexander's Illyrian collectives decided to select an emperor who, in their eyes, would be a more effective commander. It was around this time that, in one of the auxiliary camps along the Rhine, a soldier allegedly placed a purple cloak around the garrison's commander, Gaius Julius Verus Maximinus Thrax, as onlookers acclaimed him *imperator*. Maximinus was perhaps the most exceptional soldier of his time, a celebrity among the troops for his enormous stature, physical prowess, and illustrious military

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[719] Hdn. 6.7.9. For similar criticism of Commodus, see 1.6.9. Antioch: Hdn. 6.6.3.

career.[720] His posthumous nickname 'Thrax' meant Thracian, an Illyrian people long recognised for producing fierce, skilled soldiers.[721] Most recently, Maximinus had commanded legions in Mesopotamia during the Persian campaign where Alexander put him in charge of training recruits for the German expedition. He was, like Caracalla, also very popular with the troops who considered him a fellow soldier (συστρατιώτης) and campmate (σύσκηνος).[722]

Although Maximinus' low social status and origins would horrify Rome's elites, his ethnicity was crucial for his elevation, as it was a cooperative of Thracian, Pannonian, and Illyrian soldiers who catapulted him onto Rome's main political stage.[723] The Upper Moesian *Legio III (Flavia S(everiana) A(lexandriana),* for example, participated in the German campaign and was under Maximinus' command in the days before the coup. The majority of the legion's soldiers hailed from Moesia Superior, Thrace, and Illyria. Likewise, the legions *X Gemina, XIIII Gemina, I and II Adiutrix* also stationed in Germany were overwhelmingly composed of Pannonians, Illyrians, and Thracians.[724] Their shared backgrounds meant that when the Illyrians moved to change their commander-in-chief, their Thracian and Pannonian brethren followed. Their mobilisation smoothed the way for Maximinus, whose next step was to quickly march on Alexander's camp at Mogontiacum, knowing that his rebel group of Thracians, Pannonians and Illyrians would meet their counterparts in Alexander's bodyguard of praetorians and *equites singulares*. Indeed, neither unit strongly defended Alexander, and the young emperor was butchered in his tent along with his mother.[725]

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[720] Hdn. 6.8.2; SHA *Max.* 2.6-3.6.

[721] For descriptions of the Thracians, Pannonians, and Illyrians as ferocious and warlike, see Arr. *Anab.* 2.7.5; Veg. 1.28; Pl. *Lg.* 637d; Arist. *Pol.* 1324b; Livy 36.17.4; Tac. *Ann.* 4.46; Amm. Marc. 26.7.5.

[722] Hdn. 6.8.2-4: he was appointed prefect of the recruits (*praefectus tironibus*). However, as as Michael Speidel has now observed, the office of *praefectus tironibus* may be based on a modern fabrication of an office which is in fact otherwise unattested: Speidel (2016) 347-48.

[723] The emperor is introduced as Maximinus Thrax for the first time in the fourth century (Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 25.1). This is now a generally accepted name for the emperor, even though it only appears once in the ancient texts. Both Herodian (6.8.1) and the *Historia Augusta* (*Max.* 1.5) state that his birth-place was Thrace. Although Maximinus initially refused the cloak and was persuaded to accept under 'duress' (which was likely a mere show of reluctance), Herodian was not so naïve to believe that the coup was anything other than well-planned (6.8.3, 8.6.1).

[724] Speidel (2016) 352, 355.

[725] Hdn. 6.8.7. SHA *Alex. Sev.* 59.4-9 claims the murder took place in a village called Silicia (Britain or Gaul), an almost certainly incorrect proposition given the pressing military issues in Germany at that time.

Maximinus' startling elevation by a small group of provincial soldiers was a sharp break from previous practice. Armies had acclaimed their commanders many times, and the principal of the 'best man' was a long-accepted criterion for picking an imperial successor, but in this case, the troops' choice was reflective of their lived experience, collective identities and conceptions of masculinity, all developed far from Rome. The new emperor's martial prowess and imposing physicality was a positive advertisement for Thracian might.[726] Herodian, who may have seen Maximinus in the flesh, claimed that the emperor compared favourably to the best-trained Greek athlete or barbarian warrior, an image corroborated in his coinage and statuary.[727] We possess little, if any, evidence of Thracian conceptions of masculinity independent of the Roman lens, but we can infer that the hypermasculinity of Maximinus may have been a tangible representation of the identity of his troops: Herodian claims that the Pannonian recruits praised the masculinity of the emperor.[728] Moreover, as the polar opposite of the well-born, mollycoddled urbanite Alexander, Maximinus and his strong-man, masculine persona were a strategy for creating not just legitimacy, but a scenario of power for the political actors he now directly represented. As Syme put it, Maximinus was 'a symptom of social transformation, a manifestation of the potency now gathering among the Danubian military.'[729]

The cultural component of political opportunity is evident here. When the Praetorian Guard mobilised against Elagabalus according to their own set of collective values, they already had well-established access and importance as political actors. The Illyrian legions were almost entirely new actors to the imperial stage, and their contentious claim against Alexander's regime introduced new factors to both the discursive and institutional aspects of the Roman political environment. The rebels who placed Maximinus on the throne opened up new access to the political system, which provided public visibility and political legitimacy for their claims and identities. Indeed, the localised support for Maximinus may

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[726] McLaughlin (2015) 113.
[727] Hdn. 7.1.12; SHA *Max.* 6.8. For example, the eight-foot high statue of the emperor currently at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Based on the descriptions and material evidence, Harold Klawans, a professor of neurology, has proposed a diagnosis of acromegaly, a hormonal condition that causes heavy muscular and skeletal development that can result in giantism: Pearson (2017) ix-xx.
[728] Hdn. 6.8.3.
[729] Syme (1971a) 190.

have perhaps been less about pursuing a redistribution of political power than seeking to change dominant normative and cultural codes by gaining recognition for new identities.[730]

Maximinus as the 'barbarian Other:' the mobilising effects of reactive nationalism

Maximinus was not the first non-senator or non-Italian to ascend the throne. The difference with Maximinus was that he was low-born, perhaps not even a citizen at birth, and new rather than established political actors supported his elevation. In terms of the urban political environment, the imposition of 'provincial' identities and values clashed with the city's expectations of who an emperor should be, and whose interests he was meant to represent. The army had, of course, acclaimed multiple candidates before, but all had at least some links with the city's political networks, and all had attempted to portray themselves as a member, however artificial, of an ancient patrimony. In the eyes of Rome's civilian population, Maximinus came to represent something far more dangerous than a military monarch: he was framed as the Other, a 'barbarian' who had no pre-set obligations to the city or its cultural institutions. He was not a Severan, nor wealthy, nor a member of any connected family or political network, and was acclaimed solely to fulfill the responsibilities of a field *imperator*. If the Praetorian Guard had become more detached from their fellow city-dwellers in recent years because of their own ethnic and political collective identity, a development that widened the social space between civilians and soldiers and gave rise to violent conflict, the new emperor was by association an outsized personification of that discord. For those who held such views, rule by a common soldier did not bode well.

What the Praetorian Guard felt about a collective of non-elite soldiers independently acclaiming their own candidate is not discussed by our sources. On the one hand, the unit had been intimately involved in the majority of regime transitions over the past few decades, and the ability of a few provincial troops to hijack their expected place as legitimators may have rankled. On the other hand, Maximinus embodied the brute

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[730] Polleta and Jasper (2001) 286.

masculinities that Elagabalus (and to a certain extent Alexander) lacked. If Elagabalus'
effeminacy reflected badly upon the Guard's identity, then the elevation of a soldier
renowned for his physical strength and bravery could have been viewed by the unit as a
positive step; after all, Caracalla was extremely popular with the troops in part because of
his carefully constructed strongman persona. To a certain extent though, Caracalla's claims
of comradeship were play-acting – Maximinus was the real deal. And, since the Praetorian
Guard had a sizeable Illyrian contingent, a sense of ethnic solidarity may have made the
actions of the provincial troops more palatable. The elite unit had spent the majority of
Alexander's reign based in Rome, where they were viewed as outsiders by many civilians.
Now, the emperor was an outsider himself, and a dedicated military man, attributes likely to
assure praetorians that the new regime would safeguard their social and political positions.
Indeed, any hopes in this direction would be confirmed by Maximinus' initial policy
decisions.

Outside the military, resistance was muted. Alexander's death was mourned, but Maximinus
was still voted all the regular imperial honours by the Senate within a month of his
acclamation.[731] As with earlier regime transitions, the body had little choice. Aurelius Victor
asserts that they confirmed Maximinus' accession if only because 'they considered it
dangerous to resist him, as he was armed, while they were without arms.'[732] However,
without any pre-existing connections with the usual power players, Maximinus could either
choose to provide social goods in order to build consensus with the city's political actors or
rely on the specific support of his troops. The emperor chose the latter. He immediately
disposed of Alexander's friends, advisers, and others in senior administration, many of
whom had powerful allies back in Rome.[733] When Maximinus sent a delegation to the
Senate demanding confirmation of his offices, it validated fears that the new military regime
would not view governance as a respectful partnership, as under Alexander. In fact, while
the Senate may have been relegated to a relatively minor role in the transitional process

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[731] *CIL* 6.2001: Maximinus was recognised by the Senate by March 25th at the latest. Haegemans (2010) 81;
Ando (2012) 103.
[732] Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 25.2; Haegemans (2010) 81.
[733] Hdn. 7.1.3. Some of Alexander's images and inscriptions were also destroyed, but it does not appear that
there was any formal *abolition.* Erasures: *CIL* 3.3327, 6.2001; P *Oxy*. 45.3244; P *Ryl*. 2.297; Haegemans (2010)
82.

and politics in general, the order's collective identity was threatened by the new soldier-emperor in a myriad of ways.

First, the fear of physical repression was a threat many members could not easily brush aside. Memories of the purges ordered by Commodus, Severus, Caracalla, and Elagabalus created the defensive notion that the Senate was a moral community under threat, a concept that would strike up emotional solidarity among the elite. [734] Recent history counselled that the chances that Maximinus' regime would have a detrimental impact on both individual senators and the collective were high. Second, Roman national identity was based around the very virtues that so-called barbarians lacked. Political elites occupied the top echelons of Rome's social and economic ladders, and through the articulation and performance of imperial ideologies, and by agreements and partnerships with other political actors, they were vital contributors to the formation of national identities. Senatorial identity was thus closely intertwined with state identity, and the accession of a man who embodied the very opposite of 'Roman' identity broke the Senate's link with their own glorious past. Finally, the Senate might consider that the markers of 'eliteness' – birth, connexions, landed wealth – would mean far less to a self-made Thracian soldier than previous emperors. Maximinus was an equestrian (like Macrinus), but it was made evident either by the man himself, his opponents or both, that his self-identity was that of a soldier and foreigner. The Senate's social prestige was therefore as vulnerable as their political and individual rights. Together, this matrix of threats meant that elite resistance was inevitable, and it came in the form of a campaign of whispers and rumours representing Maximinus as a dangerous barbarian, a strategy aimed at undermining imperial authority among Rome's urban populace.

As John Evans argues, 'the seed of Othering does not grow without the tender nurture of the political elites,' and the creation of barbarian-emperor frame was a premeditated political tool designed to identify the nation, justify action on behalf of the nation, and to

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[734] Honari (2018) 956. Commodus, Severus and Caracalla's purges have already been noted. Dio tells us that Elagabalus executed senators at will and often without a trial. He records an instance where the emperor wrote a dismissive letter to the body stating that he would not bother to provide proof of two senator's alleged plots, as the men were already dead (80.5.2).

influence political opportunity structures favourably for claim-making.[735] The empire's Illyrian soldiers had long been renowned for their physical prowess and courage, and though provincial troops had long protected Rome's borders, the civilian population continued to view them collectively through the smoked glass of Graeco-Roman prejudice.[736] Herodian has Macrinus deliver a speech to his soldiers concerning their Parthian opposition, noting their lack of *disciplina*:

> Therefore let us take up our arms and our battle stations in the customary Roman good order. In the fighting, the *undisciplined mob of barbarians,* assembled only for temporary duty, may prove its own worst enemy. Our battle tactics and our *stern discipline*, together with our combat experience, will ensure our safety and their destruction. Therefore, with hopes high, contest the issue as it *is fitting and traditional* for Romans to do. (4.14.7, emphasis added).

Barbarians were thus ill-disciplined and uncivilised, and unable to embody the qualities that made Rome great, and Thracians in particular were marked as war-mad, cruel and savage.[737] Unsurprisingly then, given his background and occupation, Maximinus was quickly dubbed as a Thracian barbarian by the civilian population. Herodian describes the emperor as the son of *mixobarbaroi*. The *Historia Augusta* dubs him a *semibarbarus*; terms that had been used for hundreds of years to denote racial and cultural inferiority.[738] Although Roman attitudes towards *externae gentes* were not as fixed as Greek attitudes, preconceptions based on the imagined immutability of character as determined by geographical origins are evident in the historiographical record. It was, at any rate, considered that foreigners were meant to submit to Rome's masculine *imperium*, not the other way around – the very

[735] Evans 8.
[736] Bileta (2016) 26.
[737] *E.g*. Pompon. 2.16; Strabo 7.5.12; Tac. *Ann*. 4.46; Hor. *Carm*. 2.16.5; Ov. *Tr*. 5.7.10-20, 41-59 (on the Getae, a Thracian sub-group). Of course, just as elite Romans could characterise Thracians as stereotypical foreign savages, the stereotyped people themselves could manipulate the same imagery for their own advantage. When Alexander made terms with the German elite, the Illyrian soldiers bought into Roman stereotypes regarding barbarians.
[738] Hdn. 6.8.1; SHA *Max*. 1.5-7; Moralee (2008) 58, 60-61: in the seventh century CE, for example, the historian Theophylact Simocatta (*Historiae Dialogus* 4) twice refers to Phocas, another usurper of questionable origins, as a 'mixed-barbarian tyrant' (*mixobarbaros tyrannos*), and in both cases calls him a centaur, the savage race of hybrids from the mythological past. For Herodian, the term *mixobarbaros* thus meant mongrel.

reason Alexander's German policy was so ill-received.[739] For Herodian in particular, Maximinus' barbarian roots defined his character and approach to power. Scholarship has understandably questioned the veracity of Herodian's portrayal, but it is significant that, despite the exaggeration of the emperor's ethnicity in the source material, such stories were widely circulated at the time. Herodian claims that 'everyone' knew and spread the story about Maximinus' early years as a Thracian shepherd, and as a consequence of his barbarian birth, the emperor had inherited the brutal disposition of his countrymen and would make his imperial position secure by acts of cruelty.[740] The new emperor was also allegedly so unsophisticated that he could not understand menacing Greek verses recited by an actor during a play, and was easily appeased with a crude lie by his entourage.[741] If we accept the *Historia Augusta's* slightly breathless account, as rumours quickly spread regarding the emperor's barbarian origins, crowds of senators, women, and children packed Rome's temples to pray for redemption, terrified that they would be crucified, beaten with clubs and subjected to a harsh militaristic regime.[742] Physical punishment and crucifixion were of course reserved for non-Romans, and this story perhaps reflects latent anxieties Romans had that the oppressed would employ the same treatment on them, given the chance.

The quick reduction of Maximinus to a negative, barbarian stereotype shows this was a deliberate, public exercise in Othering, a concept that stressed the differences and boundaries between 'us' and 'them' through the establishment and maintenance of social distance between groups.[743] Making Maximinus the 'barbarian' Other served three main purposes. It made the new emperor a scapegoat for Rome's problems both past and present. It affirmed the legitimacy and superiority of Roman collective identity.[744] Most crucially though, it served as a delegitimising factor. So it was with the birther conspiracies spread about Barack Obama during his initial bid for the American presidency in 2008,

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[739] Isaac (2004) 15-38.
[740] Hdn. 7.1.1-2. Herodian adds somewhat conversely that this was a calculated policy by Maximinus as he expected that he would be held in contempt by both the Senate and the populace for his lowly origins, thus deciding that aggression rather than conciliation would secure his authority.
[741] SHA *Max*. 9.5.
[742] SHA *Max.* 8.6-7.
[743] See, for instance, Spivak (1985); Hartog (1988).
[744] Evans 3.

rumours that the candidate was either a secret Muslim or born outside America worked to shape popular views about his regime and its policies, and also to delegitimise and identify the president as a moral threat to the country.[745] The Othering of Maximinus worked similarly. As Rome was meant to be civilized and moderate, Maximinus was portrayed as the opposite, inciting wide-spread fear. The use of rumour set the agenda, not just what to think about, but *how* to think about it. Communities employ collective memories and identities in the shaping of their beliefs, and rumours based on prejudices or stereotypes are usually accepted even if false since rejection would challenge these long-standing views.[746] Thus, even if the stories about the new emperor were deliberately circulated or encouraged, they confirmed already-held preconceptions, creating and shaping the conditions for collective action.[747]

For the few praetorians left in Rome – the majority had left to campaign with Alexander and remained with Maximinus in Germany – the Othering of the emperor may have put them in a difficult position. As a 'barbarian,' Maximinus was placed outside Rome's traditional power structures, and the Guard was meant to be an integral part of those structures. However, their close connections to the emperor both politically and in ethnic terms made them the Other as well, and given that the urban populace had viewed them as stereotypical outsiders for many years, the whispering campaign further isolated the unit from the rest of the city, rendering the few soldiers present vulnerable.

The threat posed by an 'outsider' on the throne energised collective identities that had previously been politicised in the face of other perceived threats.[748] Construction of collective action frames rested upon this agenda-setting, and any actions undertaken by Maximinus' regime would be refracted through this lens. By this point, the justice master frame was well articulated as a foundation for popular collective action, and extant barbarian stereotypes amplified this frame, since the 'natural' social order was reversed by

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[745] See Tope *et al* (2017).
[746] Coast and Fox (2015) 222-24.
[747] Chen, Lu, and Suen (2016) 89.
[748] For example, Potter (2004) 167 has dismissed tales of Maximinus' background as a shepherd as 'wild slanders.' For general discussions of Maximinus' moral depiction in Herodian, see Burian (1988); Opelt (1998) 2943-45; Haegemans (2010) 6-9.

'barbarian' rule. Expectations that Maximinus' regime would be savage and unjust received a measure of confirmation by the administration's use of informants, corrupt trials and confiscations. Governors and commanders were summoned to the emperor's side, and tortured, insulted, exiled or executed in a reversal of social order and justice. Herodian's tone in relating these events is unusually bitter, suggesting that someone he knew was caught in the net. He is quick to highlight the wrongness of an emperor attacking his subjects instead of the real enemy, asking his readers; 'what profit was there in killing barbarians when greater slaughter occurred in Rome and the provinces? Or in carrying off booty captured from the enemy when [Maximinus] robbed his fellow countrymen of all their property?'[749] Even the death of the emperor's wife, Caecilia Paulina (a member of an influential senatorial family) before his accession gave rise to rumours that Maximinus had killed her; a confirmation perhaps of fears that elite heritage counted for nothing in the new administration.[750] In reality, most of these deeds were no more heinous than those of other infamous emperors, but where they were viewed as tyrannical and unjust, the Otherness of Maximinus coloured his actions as far more transgressive and threatening to cultural norms and Roman identity.

What aroused the strongest reaction amongst the urban population, was despite the fact that there was no civil war, nor any enemy under arms anywhere (Maximinus had achieved Rome's first definitive victory against a foreign enemy in forty years subduing German forces in the spring of 235CE), the city appeared to be a city under siege.[751] Herodian's description suggests that the praetorians who remained in the city, mostly older veterans, were more visible than usual. Extra soldiers may have been sent back to Rome to contain possible resistance, but given that Maximinus was still on campaign, it seems unlikely.[752] The appointment of Publius Aelius Vitalianus as Praetorian Prefect may be the reason for the tangible shift in administrative practice. A Maximinus loyalist, Vitalianus was the commander of the forces in Rome and was feared by the populace. If word on the streets posed a threat to his emperor, it is conceivable that the prefect would station his soldiers in

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[749] Hdn. 7.3.1-4. SHA *Max.* 10.6 claims there were 4000 victims of Maximinus' 'justice.'
[750] Zonar. 12.16; Haegemans (2010) 86.
[751] Hdn. 7.3.6.
[752] See Hdn. 7.11.2.

and around popular meeting places in order to quell subversive *circuli* in the same manner that Severus had his troops occupy the city's porticoes and temples in 193CE.[753] Any conspicuous positioning of praetorians as a potential repressive force, a mere two years since the explosion of violence between civilians and the Guard, would have only confirmed the militaristic and foreign nature of the new regime, and the role of the praetorians themselves as 'barbarian' interlopers. Their visibility suggests that any despite perceptions that the Guard may have had regarding their potential vulnerability during the emperor's absence from Rome, it did not compel them to keep a lower profile. On the contrary, Vitalianus' aggressive stance likely confirmed to the soldiers who remained in Rome that they were vital members of a strong and cohesive regime.

The praetorian prefect also received more expansive judicial powers at this time, so Vitalianus may not only have been in charge of surveillance and repression, but also the use of informants, confiscations and sham trials during this time. Not only did Vitalianus inspire fear, he also acted 'very harshly and cruelly' (τραχύτατα καὶ ὠμότατα); the exact language Herodian uses to introduce Maximinus at the opening of Book 7. His representative in Carthage, Capelianus, also employed the same transgressive and unjust methods that would be used in Rome in the emperor's name.[754] To be sure, Herodian shapes his narrative in order to present Maximinus as a barbarian and thus a corrupting force, but we should also read the real-time framing processes within his stylistic choices. A ruthless regime is bound to be unpopular, but since Maximinus had already been parsed as a non-Roman 'barbarian,' the deeds of his officials would be interpreted in the same way, reinforcing a sense that the regime was subverting important cultural norms.

Two strands of injustice collide here. The Othering of Maximinus was intended to highlight the difference between the legitimate rule of an 'authentic' Roman emperor, and the illegitimate subversion of imperial authority by a 'barbarian' soldier from the periphery of

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[753] During Maximinus' absence from the city, the praetorian prefect was given more legislative power: Cod. *Just.* 1.26.2; Whittaker (1970) 199, n.1.

[754] Hdn. 7.9.10: He sacked temples, and robbed money from private and public sources alike. Andrews (2019) 170-172; Haegemans (2010) 124-25. See Hdn. 7.6.4-5; Opelt (1998) 2944-45 for comparisons between Maximinus and Vitalianus.

the empire.[755] Rome had been 'invaded' by a foreign regime, and perceptions that the regime was acting solely for the benefit of his soldiers were not helped by the disparity between military and urban benefits. The Chronograph of 354CE records that Maximinus gave out just one *congiarium* of 150 *denarii* per head during his three-year reign, a stark contrast to the vast amount of money expended on the troops.[756] Balancing the books had been a problem for decades, and military expenditure was estimated to have been between 286-370 million *denarii* per year under Alexander, excluding donatives, pensions, resources, and food for troops. Marcus Aurelius, Pertinax and Alexander resorted to selling off imperial possessions to make up the shortfall, but Maximinus went a step further:

> After [the emperor] had impoverished most of the distinguished men and confiscated their estates, which he considered small and insignificant and not sufficient for his purposes, he turned to the public treasuries; all the funds which had been collected for the citizens' welfare or for gifts, all the funds being held in reserve for shows or festivals, he transferred to his own personal fortune. The offerings which belonged to the temples, the statues of the gods, the tokens of honour of the heroes, the decorations on public buildings, the adornments of the city, in short, any material suitable for making coins, he handed over to the mints (Hdn. 7.3.5).

Maximinus' plundering of temple resources elicited a collective, and mostly non-elite response. This is made explicit by Herodian who uses terminology derived from δῆμος no fewer than six times in his brief account of events.[757] Fundamentally, the appropriation of public money for the shows and presumably the funds for the grain dole was a clear breach of the moral contract between the emperor and urban plebs, although the breach of sacred space was particularly transgressive.[758] Religious activity was a fundamental way for ordinary people to frame, channel, and organise their social relations, and was a powerful framework for imagining community.[759] The statues and dedications left by citizens in the

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[755] Moralee (2008) 55.

[756] Mommsen (1892) 143-148. See also SHA *Max*. 8.2.

[757] τὰ δημόσια: money left for public gifts; νομὰς τῶν δημοτῶν: decorations on public buildings; εἴ τις ἦν κόσμος δημοσίου ἔργου, τοὺς δήμους: the people (all 7.3.5); a popular grief: πένθος τε δημόσιον; and resistance from some of the people: τινας τῶν δημοτῶν (7.3.6). Andrews (2019) 166-7.

[758] Politian translates ἀθροιζόμενα as *ad annonam*. Whittaker (1970) 173, n.3.

[759] Brubacker (2012) 6.

temples were given in good faith and meant to be permanent, and their seizure crossed a moral line, and may have affected longer-term social and spatial practices. For instance, Herodian's claim that Maximinus' agents robbed the gods of their honours likely included those of the imperial cult, that is, he not only took funds but removed the means by which people could worship the *divi*. The last emperor to receive his own state temple was Marcus Aurelius, and from the death of Commodus, there were few temples constructed to Roma or deified emperors. As Hekster argues, even if Maximinus did not explicitly curtail worship of imperial *divi* with his temple confiscations, his actions nonetheless reduced their status in comparison to other gods. The *Historia Augusta* describes the emperor Tacitus later building a temple to deified emperors, an act that makes sense only if the original temples in which these 'good' *divi* were worshipped had been closed at some earlier point.[760]

Maximinus may have desperately needed money, but the plunder of the temples of the *divi* was an enormous mistake. Caracalla's *antoninianus* may have been unpopular but removing goods from the temples was an assault on the imperial cult. State ritual had many purposes: it was the site of political allegiance, and thus part of the public transcript, but it was also part of a common cultural construct that formed part of the performative, reciprocal moral contract between emperor and subject. Worship of the *divi* ensured the *pax deorum*, and was a focus for many on the lower rungs of the social ladder whose participation in the rituals and offices of the imperial cult provided recognition and status.[761] Collective memory, spatial routines, and Roman collective identity were, in one blow, attacked by the emperor himself. The state and its religion were interrelated models of authority, and temples were monumental symbols of Roman collective identity: as Roger Friedland puts it, 'religion partakes of the symbolic order of the nation-state.'[762] If the initial rumour campaign was based around elite fears that Maximinus would not embrace traditional social values, the temple raids confirmed his 'barbarian' persona to every social sub-group in Rome.

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[760] Hekster (2008) 67-68; Gradel (2002) 363.
[761] Magyar (2009) 385, 389; Gradel (2002) 228–231.
[762] Friedland (2001) 125.

The reduction of the imperial cult and the blatant disregard for Rome's religious community had a polarising effect that amplified the 'us' versus 'them' frame that posited Maximinus as non-Roman. Of course, this was not the first time an imperial regime had raided city temples. Caracalla instructed his praetorians to take their donative, and on his entry into the city in 193CE, Severus allowed his soldiers to occupy the temples and seize goods they did not pay for.[763] Interestingly, Dio employed ethnic tropes to describe Caracalla, claiming that he 'belonged to three races and… combined in himself all their vices; the fickleness, cowardice, and recklessness of Gaul were his, the harshness and cruelty of Africa, and the craftiness of Syria, whence he was sprung on his mother's side.'[764] For the general population though, Caracalla was as 'Roman' as his father in dynastic and cultural terms. Also, Caracalla and Severus's soldiers took money and goods—we do not hear of any religious offerings or items being plundered, so while their actions were an invasion of sacred space, they were not so much a direct attack on the core values that made up 'Romanness' for urban dwellers, regardless of social or economic status.[765] The raids did nothing to improve relations between civilians and soldiers either, and their participation only made the boundary between the two highly polarised communities more explicit.

The state and its 'injured gods' had to be protected from a barbarian interloper, and mobilisation and a collective willingness to use violence occurred as a result.[766] The opposition was such that the families of the soldiers who followed the emperor's orders upbraided their relatives and other locals.[767] Herodian, meanwhile, describes the rage of the populace:

> Some citizens, with angry shaking of fists, set guards around the temples, preferring to fall before the altars than to stand by and *see their country ravaged* (πεσεῖν ἤ σκῦλα τῶν πατρίδων ἰδειν)[768]

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[763] SHA *Sev*. 7.1-3.
[764] Cass. Dio 78.6.1.
[765] Tarrow (1998) 110; Snow and Bedford (1992) 136.
[766] Hdn. 7.4.1: 'People began praying and calling upon the injured gods.'
[767] Hdn. 7.3.6. Herodian employs οἱ στρατιῶται to describe the soldiers; this usually means the praetorians in his narrative when speaking of urban forces, but he is very brief here. *Legio II Parthica* was with Maximinus, so the troops involved had to be the remaining praetorians and perhaps some of the urban cohorts.
[768] Hdn. 7.3.6, emphasis added.

This is nationalistic language. Populist politicians and provocateurs today employ the same coded words of invasion, conquest, sacrifice, and defeat at the hands of the Other as ways to define self-identity or nationhood. While modern nationalism is more often than not constructed around questions of ethnicity, Roman self-identity was more fluid. Just as the collective practices, rituals, and symbols of nationhood, such as the imperial cult produced a measure of obligation towards the state, it could also mobilise resistance to any changes in these areas. As a 'non-Roman,' the actions of Maximinus were interpreted as multiple threats to Roman self-identity that in turn triggered a nationalistic response, for conceptions of nationhood and religion coalesce to differing degrees. Geneviève Zubrzycki argues that 'nationalism has roots not in religious decline . . . but rather in moments of religious fervour and renewal.'[769] In other words, the defence of Rome's temples reinforced the centrality of religion and the imperial cult to collective identity. The fusion of religious and national identities and goals had a powerful effect in terms of political contention, in that it privileged the urban populace as political actors, and fostered links between previously unconnected groups. Identities that were politicised during the contention of 222-223CE now had another issue around which mobilisation and social identification could take place, and it was one that included soldiers as co-antagonists.[770]

At the same time, a nascent sense of nationalism had non-religious roots as well. The shift in state authority from the cooperative, collective model espoused by Alexander to a military-focused and repressive regime saw power shift from the centre of the empire to its peripheries. The specific support and collective identities of a select group of provincial soldiers were now more influential than the identities and acceptance of urban Rome. Through the emperor's dismissive approach to the city's symbols of identity, memory, and belonging, individuals were able to locate and contextualise their personal experiences within the broader community, and the savage and violent imagery of the regime cued a vigilante response as an appropriate defence of Roman identity.[771] In short, the collective guarding of Rome's temples was a contentious performance of nationhood and an action directly undertaken to prevent Rome and its cultural values being 'ravaged' by an outsider.

[769] Zubrzycki (2006) 19.
[770] See Grzymala-Busse (2019).
[771] Githens-Mazer (2008) 44; Tarrow (1998) 2, 93.

What I am arguing here is that this enactment of nationalism was a political rather than demographic claim, as the physical defence of sacred space by ordinary people emphasised the performative aspect of Roman self-identity and facilitated the construction of solidarities between disparate groups. [772] The Othering of Maximinus enabled an extremely strong construction of Roman self-identity among urban residents, more so than past emotional responses to perceived injustice or grievances. Certainly, there was an element of conformation bias at play. The regime's apparent contempt for cultural norms and moral economy confirmed pre-existing beliefs about barbarian behaviour, and if the city was under military control as Herodian claims, the contentious action around the city's temples was not just a defence of sacred space but urban free space as well.

This awakened sense of collectiveness in the face of a common enemy was a by-product both of military dominance and previous imperial policy. Caracalla had already demonstrated that a regime was willing to trample the rights of its subjects in order to preserve its repressive capacity. In fact, many of Maximinus' moves were identical to that of his predecessor. The dismissal or execution of Alexander's household was a re-enactment of Caracalla's purge after the murder of Geta. Both men also surrounded themselves with soldiers to the exclusion of more traditional advisors. However, where a crowd had passively stood by as Caracalla's praetorians raided the temples in 211CE, a force mobilised to take direct action twenty years later. Why this happened comes down to conceptions of identity. The circulation of rumours concerning Maximinus flourished because they reaffirmed dominant and established values of 'Roman' identity at the same time they excluded the 'outsider' emperor. The framing of Maximinus was successful because those who accepted the polarisation and politicisation of civilian collective identity already understood the clear dichotomies between 'us' and 'them.' Thus, as the defensive performance of these identities in previous years led to resistance and contention, when the populace believed their position was under threat from Maximinus, the stereotypic evaluation of the emperor as the 'barbarian,' only intensified extant prejudices, and generated a nationalistic response.[773] Subsequent events in Rome will show that these nascent nationalist identities and conceptions of the Other would have a significant impact

[772] Brubaker (2010).
[773] Giry (2016) 2-3.

on how the city would respond to a new round of claim-making from a 'real' Roman challenger.

From resistance to revolution: the coup of Gordian I

By 238CE, the cycle of contentious politics was reaching its zenith. Collective violence had escalated in recent years and, in particular, the urban populace was becoming socialised to the notion of risky, interpersonal conflict. Physical repertoires such as rioting, and the occupation or protection of symbolic spaces, were replacing more passive forms of contention. Physical resistance bred political resistance, and, while the collective defence of Rome's temples may not have prevented Maximinus from appropriating resources, it was illustrative of the rebellious mood of the city.[774] Mobilisation strengthened collective identity among claimants, and anchored in the shared sense of 'one-ness' was a corresponding sense of collective agency. The arrival of news in early 238CE of a rebellion in Carthage offered a political opportunity for the expression of such agency. Maximinus' African officials had been using confiscations and sham trials to extort money from the local wealthy classes. In response, a group of young aristocrats, probably members of the local *collegia iuvenum*, revolted.[775] After killing the hated procurator and his officials, the rebels hailed the province's proconsul M. Antonius Gordianus Sempronianus as their Augustus.[776]

Gordian was a senior senator of consular status at the end of a long and distinguished career.[777] He was a well-known figure in Rome, renowned for his long-term generosity in staging gladiatorial shows, spectacular hunts, and for distributing horses to the circus

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[774] Hdn. 7.4.1: 'For these reasons, and justifiably, the people were aroused to hatred and thoughts of revolt.'
[775] In early 238CE tensions in Carthage were running high because it was time to arrange collection of the annual oil levy. An increase in the demand for shipments to the army would have been much resented as it was a tax-in-kind. Both the procurator and the provincial governor were present in the city to ensure compliance. There was no love lost between the two and the atmosphere of discord was probably exacerbated by the additional friction between government agents and the city merchants, landed aristocracy, and ordinary people: Pearson (2017) 123.
[776] Hdn. 7.4.2-7.5.7.
[777] According to the *Historia Augusta* (*Gord*. 4.1) Gordian held the consulship twice, although according to his coins, he was consul only once. Herodian tells us that he held many provincial commands, served in the highest public offices, and proved his ability by 'important achievements' (7.5.2). Inscriptional evidence suggests that he served as governor of Britannia Inferior in 216CE. After that, there is evidence that places him as governor, and then suffect consul, of Achaia. For Gordian's consulship, see Syme (1971) 167-168; Pearson (2017) 125-6.

factions without bias. The African rebels may have picked a suitably reluctant Gordian because he was their senior provincial administrator, but his impeccably Roman credentials had broad appeal to those who viewed Maximinus as an interloper. As an aristocrat with family connections to Trajan and Antoninus Pius, Gordian was also linked to illustrious Republican names. He traced his descent from the Gracchi, and was acclaimed in Africa as 'a new Scipio,' with some comparing him to Cato, Mucius Scaevola, Rutilius Rufus, and Laelius Sapiens; all distinguished consuls from the 2nd BCE.[778] Even Gordian's height was considered 'characteristically Roman,' and appreciation of the traditional civic obligation of providing lavish spectacles for the city was a stark contrast to Maximinus' neglect of the shows.[779] It is no accident either that Gordian took *Romanus* as one of his imperial names.[780] If Maximinus was framed as foreign, Gordian by contrast was conspicuously armed with impeccable 'Roman' traits and values; an indication of just how effective the Othering of the current emperor had been. In order for the rebellion to succeed, Gordian had to win Rome, and presenting himself as the antithesis to Maximinus was a clever way to capitalise on discontent in the capital. Indeed, Herodian claims that those who implored Gordian to act did so because they thought that the Senate and Roman people would be glad to accept a traditional aristocrat as emperor, especially one who had risen to high office as if by a regular *cursus*.[781]

Gordian's initial strategy targeted the entire populace of Rome, power-brokers and plebs alike. He sent a group of centurions and soldiers to the city who were entrusted with three tasks: distribute letters to the leading men of the city, assassinate Maximinus' hated but powerful praetorian prefect Vitalianus, and distribute Gordian's message to the people, in which he promised redress for recent injustices and a return to traditional governance.[782] This was a shrewd approach. In his letters to influential senators, Gordian informed them of his unanimous support in Africa. This is the only time where Herodian uses the exact

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[778] SHA *Gord.* 2.2, 5.5-7. Q. Mucius Scaevola: consul 95BCE; P. Rutilius Rufus: consul 105BCE; C. Laelius Sapiens: consul 140BCE. The author states that the Scipio acclamation was recorded by Junius Cordus (*Gord.* 5.6)
[779] SHA *Gord.* 3.5-8, 4.5, 6.1.
[780] Gordian I and II were officially known as M Antoninus Gordianus Sempronianus Romanus Africanus Pius Felix Augustus.
[781] Hdn. 7.5.2.
[782] Whittaker (1970) 192, n.1. Urgent news could travel directly between Carthage and Rome in two-three days during the summer sailing season (Plin. *HN* 19.1), but the season had ended, meaning a more indirect route of between seven-ten days was more likely.

translation of the Latin *consensus* in his narrative (συμπνοία), shaping Gordian's local support as a sound legitimacy claim.[783] Removing Vitalianus, meanwhile, would eliminate a major obstacle. Herodian claims that previously, no-one would openly rebel for fear of the prefect. Not only would his murder loosen Maximinus' control over the city, but it would also symbolically strike a blow against the regime.[784] Gordian also promised the praetorians 'more money than anyone had given them before,' and pledged gifts and 'moderation in all things' to the plebs, in a pragmatic attempt to regain the political capital squandered by Maximinus.

All three parts of the plan were to be enacted on the same day, and Herodian's account of what transpired is so detailed and exact that he must have been a witness to some of the drama.[785] Vitalianus was successfully stabbed before dawn during his *salutatio matutina*, after which the assassins ran down the Via Sacra, distributing Gordian's letters to the people and delivering the prepared directives to key politicians.[786] As people gathered in the porticoes and spaces where Gordian's declaration was posted, rumours quickly spread that Maximinus was dead, a reasonable supposition given Vitalianus' murder, and that a challenger's manifesto was displayed in public. This was essentially an alternative public transcript directing the urban populace to support a new regime, and its aims and source were as 'Roman' as Maximinus was 'barbarian.' That rumours quickly circulated and were believed by many demonstrates that Gordian's approach was in tune with the transcript that painted Maximinus as a foreign savage.

As with the circulation of the earlier rumours regarding Maximinus, this new information generated a sharp emotional response. A recent psychological study has found that anger exacerbates existing biases and causes people to be more open to information that bolsters one's current views.[787] Even if the Gordians had deliberately spread the news that the emperor had been killed, attempts to control or manipulate opinion would have been

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[783] Whittaker (1970) 193, n.2.
[784] Hdn. 7.6.4-5.
[785] Pearson (2017) 131; Whittaker (1970) 195 n.2. SHA *Gord.* 10.5 claims that Vitalianus was killed on the order of the Senate but this does not match Herodian's account, and it is unlikely that they would have proactively had Vitalianus killed before ascertaining the accuracy of the information, or levels of support for the rebellion.
[786] Hdn. 7.6.9.
[787] Suhay and Erisen (2018)

useless because a planted rumour can only spread under the same conditions in which it would have developed spontaneously.[788] Any news, official or otherwise, would be distorted, exaggerated, and simplified in accordance with people's pre-existing beliefs and prejudices. Existing anger directed towards the construct of the barbarian emperor fuelled the circulation of rumours, almost as if people were willing the information to be true. As a validation of the hidden transcripts that maintained Maximinus' role as the barbarian enemy of Rome and its national identity, the rumours of his death were enough to immediately weaken the administration's hold on the city. Herodian asserts that 'when these reports became known, the people milled about as if possessed' (ὁ δῆμος ὥσπερ ἐνθουσιῶν διέθει πανταχοῦ).[789]

It is telling that Herodian employs the same terminology here that he used to describe the people's emotive response to both the accession and murder of Pertinax.[790] Such an emotional response explains why the first actions of the crowd were not to acclaim Gordian but to attack the regime. In Herodian's words, the 'hatred which fear had hitherto suppressed now poured forth without hindrance, freely and fearlessly.'[791] Crowds went through the city destroying the emblems of Maximinus' power, including statues and the paintings of his battle victories displayed in front of the Curia. In what was now a well-entrenched contentious repertoire, popular justice was meted out to those who were viewed as the instruments of Maximinus' savagery. Informers, officials, judges and those who had brought undue lawsuits were killed, dragged around the city and thrown into the sewers.[792] The enactment of this repertoire, as with earlier examples, reflected the gradual social and political change of the past fifty years. As the people's involvement in the political process became more and more peripheral as occasions for consensus rituals were reduced and the emperor assumed greater individual power, the ability to punish the regime, its representatives and profiteers was one of the last remaining weapons that the populace

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[788] Shibutani (1966) 199.
[789] Hdn. 7.7.1.
[790] Accession: πᾶς ὁ δῆμος ἐνθουσιῶντι ἐοικὼς ἐξεβακχεύετο διέθεόν τε (Hdn. 2.2.3); murder: διέθεόν τε ἐνθουσιῶσιν (2.6.1).
[791] Hdn. 7.7.2.
[792] Hdn. 7.7.2-3. Location of the painting: 7.2.8; SHA Gord. 13.6-8; see also Max. 15.1. Herodian explicitly calls the crowd a lower-class mob twice (ὄχλοι κοῦφοι: 7.7.1; ὑπὸ τοῦ ὄχλου: 7.7.3), but I agree with Whittaker in not reading too much into this regarding social composition – he views Herodian's outlook as a 'middle-class' one: Whittaker (1970) 199, n.2.

could use to exact retribution. The performance of popular justice was, of course, an act of social dialogue with the regime. Since such violence needed opportunity, it is no surprise that the crowds who mobilised on the rumours of Maximinus' death would use the political space available to make their collective voice heard.

(i)   Elite political opportunities: a senatorial revolution

It was not only the people who seized the political opportunity presented by Gordian's rebellion. The rumours and stereotypical framing of Maximinus, and the subsequent resistance to his regime symbolically reaffirmed the dominant values of the populace that in turn strengthened social conformism.[793] Support for Gordian was an endorsement of traditional order, which would provide an opportunity for the Senate. The political elites had initiated the campaign of Othering Maximinus, and now the sheer scale of the rioting forced the Senate to meet before they could ascertain the accuracy of the reports of the emperor's death. During the meeting, they proclaimed Gordian and his son and passed a decree deposing Maximinus and declaring him and his son as public enemies. Orders were sent to the provincial governors requesting support, and a council of twenty senators (*xxviri reipublicae curandae*) was created to look after affairs in the Gordians' name.[794] These were startling acts. The Senate had in the past acquiesced to regime change, but it had never deposed a legitimate emperor in this way; the only partial precedent being the deposition of Nero in 68CE. In that instance, as with Julianus, the Praetorian Guard had already abandoned the emperor, providing the Senate with the security to add their condemnation. This time, Maximinus had the support and physical possession of the praetorians and a sizeable portion of the army. Instead of joining the side that had the repressive capacity, the Senate was challenging it. Its proactive decree, then, was an innovative assertion of sovereign power.

With the emperor and his troops absent from the city, the Senate had the advantage of numbers. Provincial soldiers may have established a visible power base amongst the fighting

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[793] Giry (2016) 4.
[794] *CIL* 14.3902: *XX viri ex senatus consulto rei publica*; SHA *Max*. 32.3, *Gord*. 10.1.This may have happened later, but it likely occurred at the same time or very soon after the initial Senate meeting given how quickly decrees and orders from the new regime were issued. SHA *Max*. 16.1-7 details the by now ritualised acclamations (positive for the Gordians, negative for Maximinus) that followed the passing of the decree.

men of the military, but they had yet to establish a support base in Rome.[795] There was a sizeable African faction within the body that would have supported the accession of the two Gordians, and far fewer who could be relied upon to support the authority of Maximinus. In his prosopographical study of the Senate during Maximinus' reign, Karlheinz Dietz estimates that only 2% of senators were from the Danubian provinces, and only 12% from non-Italian Western regions. Italians still held the majority of the senatorial order, and most of these men had been elected to the consulship and were members of official priesthoods. Many senators, then, participated in, and identified with, the spatial routines and cultural norms that crowds had earlier mobilised to defend. It certainly appears that the Senate viewed the crowds outside as allies. The nationalistic fervour that resulted from the temple raids would have been a welcome demonstration of popular resistance, and the frenzied destruction of imperial symbols outside the Curia showed that the death or deposition of Maximinus was a cause for celebration.

Not only did the Senate seize the opportunity offered by the rioting to make a bold new claim of their own, but they also used the newly energised collective identity of an assertive populace to confer legitimacy. The senatorial issue of orders to provincial governors and armies, for example, based its validity on the traditional authority of the people. According to Herodian, these letters urged the provinces to remain loyal to Rome, 'where the power and authority *from the beginning had been in the hands of the people.*'[796] The orders acknowledged the real power of a politicised populace, but the references to tradition and the past were perhaps more closely tied to the 'us' and 'them' dichotomy created around the public imagery of Gordian and Maximinus. Gordian represented the stylised components of collective memory, the 'good old days' when emperors cultivated a personal relationship with the city and its population and embodied expected civic virtues. Maximinus, on the other hand, represented a break with tradition and the past. The Senate exploited the nationalism that had gripped the city, making the people a ready ally, as well as presenting the rebellion as a just one, based on ancient traditions and rights.

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[795] Dietz (1980) 314-341.
[796] Hdn. 7.7.5, emphasis added.

The acceptance of both groups, Senate and plebs, diffused a now shared claim across space and social sectors in an upward scale shift. Scale shift was achieved by invoking the plebs and their separate interests, and by introducing a new site of contention, the Curia, as a contentious space, thus opening up new potential alliances and different institutional settings for contention. The inclusion of the Curia (and its occupants) meant that any proceeding claim-making would have a higher chance of success. It also created opportunities for new co-ordination at a different level that had the potential to topple the entire regime.[797] At the same time, a senatorial meeting that was independent from the emperor, was, in a small sense, indicative of a spatial shift in power. The praetorian *castra,* and to a slightly lesser extent, the imperial palace, had been the primary locations of power. The Curia was the traditional locus of authority, and the meeting was a reminder of the true meaning of SPQR and its association with *libertas.*[798]

Undoubtedly, the assembled crowds recognised the significance of the Senate's action. As covered in Chapter Two, scale shift can push contention either towards more transgressive or more contained forms of collective behaviour. As the involvement of the Senate widened the scope of contention in terms of political actors and spaces involved in claim-making, it also widened the scope of the protesters, who in this case, used more transgressive forms of action. The *Historia Augusta* cites Junius Cordus in claiming that although the senatorial decree was initially meant to be secret, news swiftly travelled to the crowds outside the Curia, who immediately turned from smashing statues to executing popular justice against the symbols and hated representatives of Maximinus' regime. The rioters thus perceived the Senate's offered alliance as an opportunity, and collective behaviour shifted from symbolic damage to physical violence as a result. However, before the city could receive aid from the provinces, the rebellion in Carthage was suppressed and the two Gordians were killed by Capelianus, the governor of Numidia. This information arrived at about the same time as news that Maximinus had mobilised his army and was preparing to march on Rome.[799] A mere twenty-one days had elapsed since the accession of the Gordians and their

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[797] Tarrow (1998) 205.
[798] In the sense that *libertas* under the imperial system was not a license to do whatever one wanted, but rather was reflective of accepted legal, social and political constraints.
[799] Hdn. 7.10.1; SHA *Gord.* 15.1-16.1.

demise, and the Senate quickly assembled for a second emergency meeting. To underline the seriousness of the situation, they met in the inner sanctum of the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus. The choice of this temple rather than the Curia, was a symbolic and deliberate one. The only previous meeting there in imperial times took place on the assassination of Caligula in 41CE when the Senate discussed a return to a republican government.[800] The Senate did meet at the *Area Capitolina,* the open space in front of and around the temple, on the first day of each consular year. The location, therefore, signalled senatorial independence, and the beginning of a new regime, but it is just as likely the venue was chosen as the traditional location for war preparations since everybody expected Maximinus to fight.[801] As the opening session of a 'revived' Senate that intended to go to war with the deposed emperor, its members needed Jupiter's blessing for what would lie ahead.[802] Besides, Maximinus' pillaging of the city's temples (and the people's defence of them) had made them contentious spaces. The Senate's meeting in Rome's principal temple was a reassertion of Roman sovereignty over its invaded sacred spaces, another implicit reminder of Maximinus' status as an outsider.

During this extraordinary meeting, the Senate went further than merely issuing a declaration of war. They elected two co-emperors from amongst the *xxviri*; Marcus Clodius Pupienus Maximus, a former urban prefect and military commander, and two-time consul and experienced administrator Decimus Caelius Calvinus Balbinus. The decision was an expedient one. The new government would need a military man in the field as well as someone who could keep the cogs of government turning during a civil war. It was constitutionally innovative, yet the idea of an aristocratic partnership harked back to the Republican method of electing two senatorial colleagues as co-consuls who could act as checks upon each other, a theory strengthened by the Senate's declaration that the men would also share the office of *pontifex maximus*. To some extent, the new structure may

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[800] Suet. *Calig*. 60.

[801] Weigel (1986) 333, 335. Security was also easier to manage at the Temple than elsewhere: Herodian tells us that the meeting was held behind closed doors, which probably meant the usual scribes, civil servants and slaves were not admitted (7.10.3).

[802] Hdn. 7.10.3. In their study of seating in the Roman Senate, Lily Ross Taylor and Russell T. Scott suggest that the Capitoline temple 'was used primarily for meetings concerned with religion;' a central component to both opening sessions and declarations of war. Taylor and Scott (1969) esp. 559-561, 564.

have been a compromise.[803] The future was uncertain, and the city was highly agitated. At a time when Roman collective identities were reinforced through claim-making performances that appealed to old-style values, a less autocratic and seemingly traditional system could have been more readily accepted by the crowds outside than the arbitrary election of a well-connected senator. Doubtless, the use of a *senatus consultum* to bestow the imperial honours on Balbinus and Pupienus indicates that the Senate wanted to frame its assumption of power as within the bounds of precedent.[804] *Senatus consulta* had a long history. In the Republican era, they were enacted by the consent of the Senate; they were not officially law but carried the *auctoritas* of the body. Under imperial law, *senatus consulta* were passed investing the emperor with his imperial powers. They were instruments of the emperors' will, and from the reign of Hadrian came to be considered direct law.[805] Although an emperor derived his general *imperium* from the acceptance of the troops, and the *senatus consultum* that invested each emperor with his imperial powers was merely a formal sign-off to a *de facto* situation, the Senate's vote was still symbolically important, or emperors would not still have bothered to ask for their conferral of honours. With the assumption of sovereignty, senatorial decrees would now be the legal voice of the collective rather than the individual, and since the two emperors were, just as Republican consuls, members of the same institution, they relied on the body to legitimise their rule in the absence of the military's acclamation.

Accordingly, the need for the Senate and the two co-emperors to establish strong legitimacy claims was paramount, given the impending invasion of Maximinus and his troops. The well-established dynastic and personalism claims that had sustained previous autocrats were redundant at this point. Instead, as their use of 'proper' process shows, the Senate was aiming to establish foundational myth, ideology and procedural-based claims modelled on the practices of bygone days. As part of the fabric of Roman identity, the Senate was a venerable, albeit faded, authority, and its role as a political actor went back to the earliest days of the Republic. The outward form of the regime reflected the past, one that seemed

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[803] This is Lo Cascio's take: (2008) 157.
[804] Hdn. 7.10.5: διὰ λόγματος.
[805] No inscriptions detailing a *senatus consultum* survive however; the only law on an emperor's investiture that survives is the *lex de imperio Vespasiani*: *CIL* 4.930+31207=ILS24.

more glorious in collective memory than present lived experience. In the case of Maximinus, the replacement of his legitimacy claims with ones constructed on tradition and precedent was not just a rejection of the process that had allowed provincial troops to appoint an 'unfit' emperor. It provided yet another contrast with the Otherness of a 'barbarian' regime. The best antidote for the 'tyranny' of Maximinus and his disregard for cultural norms was a return to the 'good old days' when Roman aristocrats set the socio-political agenda.

The establishment of new legitimacy claims and the Senate's acknowledgement of the mood (and power) of the urban plebs aside, the election of Pupienus and Balbinus was a bold attempt to radically re-shape urban power dynamics. Herodian states that the election of two men was meant to divide the imperial authority 'so that the power might not be in one man's hands and thus plunge them again into autocracy.'[806] Their stricture of collegiality allowed the Senate to act as the coordinating power and authority for both military and civil affairs as they threw out the established imperial model, a crucial part of the new structure since it brought the military back under senatorial command. By doing so in a legal rather than *ad hoc* way, the order was attempting to effect a political revolution. In Trotskyist theory, a political revolution is a process by which the government, or form of government is changed, but where usual social relations are left predominantly intact.[807] The Senate could attempt a political revolution because the rumours of Maximinus' death had created a revolutionary situation, as the long-term shift of power from civilians to the military combined with the recent increase of popular discontent made it more likely for challengers to emerge and assume that the population will likely support their claims. A revolutionary moment arrives when an alternative body or group is perceived more favourably than the original government.[808] In this case, a revolutionary situation was created by the external pressures of the frontier campaigns that caused Maximinus to make excessive demands upon Rome. The confiscation of social goods and breaches of legal process by an outsider were perceived as attacks on urban collective identities. Perceptions of injustice crystallised into widespread resistance. This resistance, in turn, offered an

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[806] Hdn. 7.10.2. Note the parallel between Herodian's comment and Livy's description of the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of the Senate: Livy 2.8-11. Pearson (2017) 146.

[807] By comparison, a social revolution is one where old property relations are overturned. For what is still the best discussion of a political revolution, see Trotsky (2004).

[808] See Tilly (1993); Skocpol (1979) 3-42.

opportunity for the adoption of a new system of government that was innovative in approach but venerable in appearance. Furthermore, the situation that developed was directly connected to the character of the third-century imperial regime. The greater a regime's capacity and inclusive democracy, the more difficult it is for revolutionary challengers to form, earn support from other quarters or commit to changing the *status quo*. Constant war reduced the regime's capacity; in fact, repeated uprisings and incursions proved that the administration no longer commanded full control over the entire empire. With a drop in capacity, the conditions that would typically constrain such challenges were absent, allowing a revolutionary situation to occur, a conclusion supported by research on later European revolutionary periods.[809]

Such events were not just a reaction to the threat posed by Maximinus, but the result of the widening separation between the Senate and emperor over the preceding decades. Theda Skocpol once argued that one of the most dangerous times for a regime was when the government and elite were separated from one another.[810] The measure of respect and inclusion proffered by Alexander had been swiftly snatched away by Maximinus, and every senator understood how a triumphant march on Rome would further erode their position; Severus had amply demonstrated that in 193CE. The Senate's attempt to reconfigure imperial governance was less about personal safety and more about reinserting themselves as regime members. Long-standing grievances concerning military supremacy could also be addressed with such a bold move. Ando astutely notes that Severus' effective dismissal of the discursive and institutional structures by which traditional power relations had been channelled, controlled and disguised left no alternative methods within the existing framework for the construction of a social consensus.[811] The only option was for consensus to be constructed outside this model. One other consequence of the upward scale shift that accompanied the constitutional reform of early 238CE was that it drastically changed political opportunity structures. Popular collective action and framing provided an initial opportunity to challenge the regime. Now that the Senate had altered governmental structure, the long-standing dimensions of the political environment that had previously

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[809] Tilly (2006) 161.
[810] Skocpol (1979).
[811] Ando (2012) 46, 224.

constrained contentious politics also shifted. When the power of the regime visibly diminished in Rome in the wake of the Gordian's initial revolt, groups that had previously complied with unfavourable demands acquired the opportunity to organize more open and widespread resistance to existing regimes.[812]

(ii)   When a legitimacy claim is contested: the accession of Gordian III

Legitimacy confers authority, but it is also intrinsically related to changing political conditions and subjective perceptions as to which, if any, legitimacy claims should be accepted. Pupienus, Balbinus, and the Senate would have been confident that the regime change would be welcomed by most in the city, given the unpopularity of Maximinus. Herodian tells us that under Alexander, 'the fact that the character of the imperial government was changed from an arrogant autocracy to a form of aristocracy pleased the people, the army, and especially the senators.'[813] However, the unusual nature of the political landscape meant that the rules of the game were now unknown, and thus a degree of choice for contenders. The populace, thanks to the Senate's original support, felt a collective sense of symbolic efficacy, and with it, the understanding that they could exact some change within the political arena. Such cognitive liberation opened further opportunities for popular mobilisation.[814] The feelings of hope that propelled the Senate to assume a leadership role, and effect political change also informed the non-elite that they too, could have a hand in re-configuring their own levels of participation, and what the people were not happy with was an exclusively senatorial coup. James Scott states that, 'when the revolution becomes the State, it becomes my enemy again. That is why it matters greatly which methods are used in order to achieve power.'[815] Pupienus and Balbinus were elected in secret, with no consultation with the people; their participation or even approval seemingly unnecessary. Yet, since the Senate couched their legitimacy claims in the procedures and myths of Rome's collective past, the people's role in that past could not be written out. There had been no privileged sphere in which only the Senate had authority,

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[812] Tilly (2006) 173.
[813] Hdn. 6.1.2.
[814] See McAdam (1982).
[815] Ferron, Oger, and Scott (2018).

and its power relative to that of the people was contestable just as it was during the Republic.[816]

Although the election of Pupienus and Balbinus ostensibly took place during a closed session, news leaked out in real time, and a vast crowd armed with stones and clubs occupied the Via Sacra near the Capitol. They had two main grievances. They were unhappy with the Senate's unilateral action, and they were especially unhappy with the election of Pupienus, who had earned widespread enmity due to his harshness while urban prefect. Threats to kill both emperors were issued along with demands that another candidate be chosen from the Gordian family. In this case, the only available family member was Gordian I's thirteen year-old grandson.[817] The menacing reaction of the plebs exposed the vast divide between elite and non-elite. Senators had high confidence in Pupienus' skill-set, in particular, his ability to control the city, but their preference for him demonstrated a fundamental misunderstanding of what the people wanted in a ruler, especially after the repressive actions of recent emperors.[818] Aside from being leaked almost immediately (thus demonstrating the far from united position of senators), the secret vote made a mockery of the Senate's claim to restore traditional practices.

The crowd's demands also demonstrate that the Senate's legitimacy claims had not been wholly accepted. On the contrary, the public clamour for a Gordian was a call to retain a dynastic claim, probably centred around hopes that the imperial end of the moral economy would begin to function normally with a Gordian, a true 'Roman,' on the throne.[819] On the surface, the clamour for a boy too young to be an effective leader in his own right or have the ability to check the machinations of his colleagues may seem like an odd choice. Rome had recently experienced a 'bad' boy-emperor in Elagabalus and a 'good' one with Alexander, and with both examples, the quality of the emperor's advisors was crucial, an

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[816] Steel (2015) 2-3.
[817] Hdn. 7.10.5-6; SHA *Gord.* 22.2.
[818] Herodian does note in a slightly earlier passage (7.10.4) that Pupienus enjoyed a good reputation for his understanding nature, his intelligence, and his moderate way of life, and he uses ὄχλος to describe both the people who admired these qualities, and those who hated his harshness as urban prefect. It may be that he was considered an upright and proper Roman, but also stern and unyielding – traits that may have been more acceptable at another moment in time.
[819] Haunss (2007) 166-7.

unknown at this stage. Although Gordian I (and his son Gordian II) had only reigned for a matter of weeks, the significance of dynastic ties with the broader populace should not be underestimated, for Gordian III represented the manifesto of his grandfather, which had been aimed at addressing the cultural anxieties of the urban plebs who were fearful and angered by a 'barbarian' regime. At a time when some may have viewed the rise of the military and Caracalla's universal suffrage as examples of the Other receiving 'their' benefits (the rallying cry of populist politicians today), a Gordian III may have invoked hope that the 'old ways' when traditional rights were respected would return.[820] The *Historia Augusta* comments that the people loved Gordian III because his relatives had taken up arms on behalf of the Senate and Roman people and had both perished, the one by a soldier's death, the other through a soldier's despair: 'so powerful among the Romans is the memory of noble deeds.'[821] A combination of old fashioned Roman masculinity and a dynastic claim was an effective way to invoke collective memory and thus instant legitimacy. Severus' fictitious descent from the Antonines worked for him, likewise for Elagabalus. The dynastic bonds that tied Gordian III to his popular grandfather represented the consensus of the people who acclaimed Gordian I weeks earlier and therefore imbued the crowd's demands with a sense of legitimacy. In contrast, the Senate predicated their claim around the dubious concept of senatorial authority, a claim that had far less potency than it did on the death of Caligula over two hundred years earlier. There just was not enough diffuse support for the Senate as a body given their greatly diminished role as a political actor.

Thus, the same collective action frame that rendered Maximinus' regime as unjust was also applied to the pre-emptive and secretive vote in the Temple of Jupiter. Rioting was employed as a delegitimating strategy to force the Senate to allow popular participation in the transitional process, and the calls for Gordian III were a way in which the people could insert themselves into the process initiated by the Senate, check its new-found authority, and have their legitimacy claims met. Initially, the Senate was unwilling to concede to the rioter's demands. Pupienus and Balbinus tried to force an exit from the temple with an

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[820] One of Augustus' injunctions before he died was that the state should not enrol large numbers as citizens, so that there would be a marked difference between themselves and the subject nations: Cass. Dio 56.33.3.
[821] SHA *Gord*. 22.6, *Max. et Balb*. 9.5

armed guard but were beaten back by the crowd, Balbinus suffering blows in the process.[822] With their exit blocked, the senators finally summoned Gordian I's grandson and acknowledged him as Caesar, a move that placated the hostile crowd, which allowed the imperial party to proceed to the palace.[823] In terms of claim-making performances, the riot had been proven over recent years as a successful form of popular action, and this occasion was no different, since the threats of the hostile crowd pressured the Senate to modify their political revolution. The people ensured their candidate joined Pupienus and Babinus by taking advantage of the shift in political opportunity structures created by the upwards scale shift of the initial rebellion, a shift that constrained both the form and the content of available legitimation statements. In the most recent examples of popular contentious claims, it was either the emperor or Praetorian Guard who were the primary addressees. Now it was Rome's political class who were the object of collective claim-making, a change in claimant-object pairing that in turn affected the choice of performances and repertoires that would be deployed.[824] Past popular claims against the Senate were performances designed to pressurise a small group with threats of violence by a much larger group, and the relatively recent besieging of the praetorian camp in 193 and 223CE had demonstrated the success of such tactics. The Capitol riot was, therefore, an example of an ancient repertoire that was in some sense, reawakened by the innovative tactics of more contemporary protesters.[825]

The revolutionary situation of 238CE was unusual for Rome, but the broad processes underpinning it are comparable to many of the revolutionary situations that developed in Europe between 16th-20th centuries CE. One recurrent factor of the more modern era was how the pressures of war caused rulers to issue excessive demands upon their subjects, subsequently generating widespread resistance. Moreover, when regimes made demands that threatened collective identities or violated rights attached to those identities, those who cleaved to such identities often formed alliances as part of their resistance.[826] In

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[822] Hdn. 7.10.7; SHA *Max. et Balb.* 9.3.
[823] Hdn. 7.10.7-9.
[824] Haunss (2007) 170.
[825] During the Late Republican turmoil, groups attached to populist politicians regularly threatened Senate meetings. For example, in 57BCE, a severe famine mobilised a crowd to threaten the Senate with murder by 'with their own hands, and later to burn them alive, temples and all: Cass. Dio 39.9.2. During the early imperial period, a '*concursus plebis*' threatened the Senate with stones and fire as they debated the fate of Pedanius Secundus' slaves: Tac. *Ann.* 14.42-45.
[826] Tilly (2006) 172.

another persistent process, when the power of rulers visibly diminished in the presence of strong competitors, groups of ordinary people who had previously complied with regime demands acquired the opportunity to mobilise more open resistance to existing or new demands.[827] Both scenarios are directly applicable here. The mobilising effect of collective identity is evident in the organised resistance to Maximinus. We can view the resistance to the Senate as a seizing of opportunity, not just because Maximinus and most of his troops were absent from Rome, but because the senatorial takeover of the Principate weakened the authority of the office. The Senate had no troops. Aid would take weeks if not months to arrive from the provinces, and a strong challenger still remained. For the people, this was their opportunity to extract concessions before the new regime had a chance to establish a commanding position. Hence, the events of 238CE, though Roman in context, nonetheless adhered to a revolutionary situation template. A revolutionary situation is one thing, but a revolutionary outcome is another. For that to happen, the new regime needed to not only have control of state apparatus, including possession of its armed forces, it also needed to neutralise troops loyal to the old regime, either by agreement or force.[828] What occurred next forced the issue of where the Praetorian Guard would fit into the new political model.

The civil war of 238CE

> *Nasāʾih minna lil-yunāniyīn: Tubtak fi iydak, kimamtak ʿala wishak, khamirtak fi gibak wa illi yiʾulak al-maglis al-ʿaskari hayehmi al-thawra, qattaʿu.*

> Advice from us to the Greeks: keep your stone in your hand, your scarf on your face and yeast in your pocket and kill anyone who tells you that the military will protect the revolution – Egyptian activist during Greek anti-austerity protests, 12 Feb. 2012.[829]

Almost overnight, urban political actors had initiated the most substantial rearrangement of the political environment since the Augustan revolution. Popular protest frames produced new possibilities for ordinary people to reimagine the contours of contentious Roman

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[827] Tilly (2006) 172.
[828] Tilly (2006) 161.
[829] Ketchley (2014) 12.

politics. A sense of collective efficacy and identity had been stimulated among the population, and they were unwilling to give up their newly won gains. While our sources do not explicitly detail the social composition of the rioters, we have a few clues. Herodian describes those who defended the temples from Maximinus' agents as the 'lower classes' (δημοτῶν). This was the same group explicitly afforded protection from soldiers in Pertinax's decree of 193CE.[830] Likewise, in the wake of the popular justice meted out to members of Maximinus' administration, Herodian referenced this group's proclivities for direct action. He notes; 'every lower-class mob (ὄχλοι κοῦφοι) is quick to revolt,' adding that the Roman people (δῆμος) comprised 'a vast, heterogeneous conglomeration of human beings.'[831] Herodian's comments suggest that the participants were not one particular sub-group but a representative mix of the city's non-elite population. Given that the anti-Maximinus and anti-Senate riots were a direct response to rumour rather than tangible evidence, neighbourhood social networks and structures like *circuli* were the most likely sources for information and subsequent mobilisation. As discussed in Chapter One, the enduring centrality of *collegia* and other localised social networks and associated spaces as structures that facilitated both identity formation and mobilisation for contentious purposes allows us to infer that these sub-groups likely played substantial roles during episodes of collective action. At the same time, those who involved themselves in the violence at the Capitol were undoubtedly those whose collective identities had been politicised by their previous interactions with the regime and its local repressive capacity.

Simon and Klandermans argue that politicised collective identity unfolds through a sequence of three antecedent stages: an awareness of shared grievances, adversarial attributions, and involvement of society at large.[832] The attention of the lower classes (who had little institutional access to political power) to the emergency senatorial meeting demonstrates that mobilisation was no knee-jerk reaction to elite activity. It was because those who had contended against Maximinus, by dint of their mobilisation, considered themselves to have a vested interest in any decisions the Senate would make. The reactive and potentially violent nature of those who would bear the brunt of adverse political

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[830] Hdn. 2.4.1: δημότας.
[831] Hdn. 7.7.1.
[832] Simon and Klandermans (2001) 319.

conditions is unsurprising, since the process of politicisation turned ordinary people who shared an identity from 'a group of itself' into 'a group of and for itself' in the political arena.[833] This realisation of a communal strength had ramifications for Rome's other political actors, as the claims of the people, if realised, would affect the interests of other claimants.

How the Praetorian Guard had reacted to events up to this point is unclear. The chronology of the events of 238CE is hazy, as the progression of events in each source is unable to be accurately reconciled with the others. Karen Haegemans' timeline has the initial uprising in Africa taking place sometime in late March, with the news reaching Rome at the beginning of April. The Gordians' deaths occurred in late April, which means the election of Pupienus and Balbinus and the accompanying riots would have taken place by mid-May.[834] The compressed sequence of events along with a lack of official information from imperial headquarters would have left the unit feeling somewhat isolated. The last contentious encounter between the Guard and civilians had occurred twelve years earlier, and only a rump of older praetorians remained in the capital. Nevertheless, their presence was a reminder of a military autocracy that was at that moment assembling to retake Rome. As an institution that had been intimately involved in the accessions of Maximinus, Alexander, Elagabalus, and Macrinus, this was the first imperial transition without their direct involvement since Caracalla and Geta. As Herodian expresses on the accession of Pertinax, '[the praetorians] were used to being the servile instruments of an autocracy, and they were practised in the arts of rapine and violence.'[835] A threatened political actor was dangerous and the Guard remembered their treatment at the hands of Severus.

Given their former influence and Maximinus' popularity with the military, senators and civilians alike would have been anxious about where the Guard's loyalties lay. Where there was uncertainty and fear that the new distribution of power would hold, political actors had to rely on their own constructions of reality. Groups of people made a habit of regularly

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[833] Simon and Klandermans (2001) 323.
[834] Haegemans (2010) 27.
[835] Hdn. 2.2.5.

going to the Senate house to find out what was being planned and discussed.[836] Men took to illegally arming themselves for protection, sometimes unconcealed, while on the street. Everyone expected a civil war, and many remained wary of the praetorians who remained in the city. The soldiers themselves were just as eager as the rest of the city for news on the expected war, and some had even taken to waiting in civilian dress with the crowds outside the Curia looking for information.

The Senate as a whole had worked together to replace Maximinus, but the pro-Gordian faction needed to retain popular support to counteract the power of Pupienus and Balbinus. Two senators, Lucius Domitius Gallicanus Papinianus, and Publius Messius Augustinus Maecianus seem to have viewed the praetorian presence as an opportunity for political gain. Maecenas' background is unknown, but Gallicanus was of Carthaginian descent and therefore almost certainly a partisan of the Gordians. Both decided to exploit the latent tensions between the people and a Guard temporarily rendered weak. According to Herodian, when two or three praetorians looking for information trespassed into the senatorial chamber, Gallicanus and Maecenas attacked and killed them.[837] As the rest of the praetorians fled, Gallicanus stepped outside displaying his blood-stained dagger, and in a shamelessly populist appeal, urged the crowd there to pursue and kill the 'enemies of the Senate and the Roman people.'[838] Gallicanus' manufactured outrage aimed to co-opt the support of the people by identifying a common enemy. The Guard was the last remaining representative of Maximinus' power left in the city and the populace had independent and unresolved grievances with the unit.

Predictably, the assembled crowd was 'perfectly, easily persuaded' by Gallicanus' speech. They reacted immediately, hurling stones as they pursued the fleeing soldiers back to their barracks, killing some before they could reach the safety of their camp.[839] What happened next was a significant escalation in the conflict between soldiers and civilians. Gallicanus

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[836] Hdn. 7.11.1.
[837] Hdn. 7.11.2-3; SHA *Max*. 20.6, *Gord*. 22.7-8; Haegemans (2010) 180-181. Aurelius Victor in his account of events, calls Gallicanus, Domitius (*Caes*. 26.5). An inscription honouring a Domitius Gallicanus has been found at Vina, close to Carthage (ILAfr322).
[838] Hdn. 7.11.5.
[839] Hdn. 7.11.6.

assumed leadership over the agitated mob, persuading them to break into the public arsenals for arms, while he opened the gladiatorial schools as an added resource.[840] Public armouries were mostly attached to the gladiatorial schools, but dedicatory weapons were also deposited in temples and displayed in public *horti,* shops, porticos, and public administrative buildings.[841] The same spaces that groups had used to discuss current events, pray, and defend from the depredations of the emperor's soldiers were all adorned with weaponry that advertised Rome's martial glory. As the city's temples were representative of collective identity and had become sites of contention in their own right, it is plausible that the crowds appropriated such symbols of the Roman sovereignty alongside the more practical weapons found in the gladiatorial schools as a way of reinforcing the legitimacy of their collective action. Cicero describes an occasion in 100BCE when Gaius Marius had arms distributed to the people from the sacred buildings and public armouries (*ex aede Sancus armamentariisque publicis arma*).[842] On that occasion, the people were ordered to take arms to defend the state from the public enemy Lucius Appuleius Saturninus and his armed supporters. The symbolic importance of using public arms to defeat a public enemy was not lost on Cicero, and this may have been a factor in Gallicanus' calculations, given the emotive and populist appeal of his earlier speech to the crowd.

If this supposition is correct, the use of civic resources indicates a wide spatial diffusion of contention. Collective action began outside the Curia, close to the city's major temples, while most of the larger gladiatorial schools were located near the Colosseum, close to the praetorian camp. We can presume that groups peeled off near their neighbourhoods and shops to gather additional weapons before re-joining the throng; Herodian claims that any tool the crowd could find was turned into a weapon.[843] In short, what began as a localised incident in the Forum quickly became a city-wide affair, drawing in additional participants

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[840] Hdn. 7.11.7-8. We don't have a precise figure for the number of gladiators who were likely in the city at the time. Tacitus notes that Otho transferred 2000 into his army (*Hist.* 2.11); at various festivals, 1,200, 1,600, even 10,000 could appear. Based on these numbers, it is plausible that around 1,000 armed gladiators could have joined the siege: Whittaker (1970) 237, n.3.

[841] *E.g.* Plin. *HN* 35.4. See Randle (2015) 28-46 for a discussion on the public display of weapons in Roman civic spaces. Example of an armoury in a gladiatorial *ludus: CIL* 6.10164=*ILS* 5153 (run by a freedman). There was also an armoury connected with the Colosseum, associated in the *Regionary Catalogues* in Regio II with the Spoliarium and Samiarium.

[842] Cic. *Rab. Post.* 7.20.

[843] Hdn. 7.11.8.

and generating rumour. The inclusion of multiple contentious sites also amplified the role of emotional dynamics. Temples, public spaces, workplaces, and homes were all social sites, and the latter two examples were primary locations for the airing of hidden transcripts. Those who responded to Gallicanus' call to arms bore long-standing grievances against the Guard in terms of their behaviour, grievances that were usually aired within the city's free spaces. The fact that many protestors raided their homes and workshops for weapons shows that their public claim-making was closely tied to these spaces and the transcripts and emotions generated there. Many also distrusted the powerful, and Gallicanus' speech directed popular anger away from the Senate and towards the praetorians.

When people are induced to feel angry, they perceive less risk in collective action. Veena Das articulates how mutual feelings of fear and hate prolonged the fighting:

> the movement of images between emergent discourses of militancy and the diffused understandings of events in rumours circulated during crises…Such movements create the conditions under which social groups become pitted against each other in fear and mutual hatred, constructing images of self and other from which the subjectivity of experience has been evacuated. In this social production and circulation of hate, the images of perpetrator and victim are frequently reversed, depending upon the perspective from which the memories of traumatic events and of everyday violence are seen and re-lived. These images…suggest, that we need to bear in mind that in the phenomenology of panic, aggressors can experience themselves as if they were victims.[844]

Herodian uses the same verb ἐνθουσιάω ('possessed') to describe the behaviour of the crowd collecting arms as he did to describe the demeanour of the crowds pulling Maximinus' statues down.[845] This suggests that Herodian intended the reader to understand the symbolic relationship between the two events, moreover, if he was in Rome at the time, his narrative reveals his appreciation of the role emotions played in the formation of a collective solidarity and sense of purpose for participants. Emotions, especially anger are

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[844] Das (1998) 109.
[845] Hdn. 7.11.8.

inextricably intertwined with identity, and the emotional dynamics generated in the process of collecting arms, and movement through Rome's public and private spaces contributed to the mobilisation of large numbers of people for violent action.[846]

Communal conflict caused by symbolic provocations predicated on a sense of moral outrage has had a long history in diverse cultures, but the framing of discontent into the vocabulary of moral outrage was a relatively new claim-making method by elite Roman actors.[847] In a series of small group experiments in the 1990s, the prominent American sociologist William Gamson demonstrated that when people witness a transgressive act by an authority figure, they tend to have strong emotions of suspicion and anger, while blame waits to be allocated through cognitive processes. Gallicanus managed to shift emotions from dread and suspicion to outrage and anger by implying that the praetorians were traitors to a new regime that the people had a direct hand in shaping. Of course, Gallicanus was only able to channel these emotions because they already existed. The Guard had, through their close association with the emperor and his urban policies, been Othered along with Maximinus, and the long antagonistic relationship between soldiers and civilians provided context for their recent actions. As representatives of Maximinus' power, and simply as members of the military, they were doubly condemned.

With the attribution of blame by a collective action entrepreneur, those feelings of outrage channelled potential participants towards collective action against their targets via injustice framing.[848] Through his performance as a tyrant-slayer and defender of the people, Gallicanus successfully brokered a new alliance between two weakly connected groups. Power does not necessarily depend on the intrinsic characteristics of political actors but on network location and social structure. The Senate was, for the time being, both politically and socially powerful, and Gallicanus' leadership deactivated the boundary between elite and non-elite, decreasing the salience of the 'us' versus 'them' distinction separating the two groups, and re-energising the boundary between praetorians and non-praetorians.[849]

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[846] Yang (2000) 593.
[847] Blom and Jaoul (2008) 3.
[848] Gamson (1992); Blom and Jaoul (2008) 8.
[849] Tilly and Castañeda (2007).

We can also speculate that this shared sense of anger and injustice joined with feelings of optimism that the opportunity afforded by the new regime, large numbers, and resources provided via scale shift and elite brokerage would result in victory. The main fighting component of the praetorians, the *equites singulares,* and *Legio II Parthica* were absent from Rome, which lessened the fear of wide-scale repression, and the crowd's success in forcing the Senate to acclaim Gordian III was tangible evidence of the people' ability to affect change.

Gallicanus may have provided the torch, but popular feelings of resentment and hostility towards the Guard had long smouldered. Those factors drove the plebs to besiege the praetorian camp throughout the day, despite the protection that the high *castra* walls and training provided the soldiers. As dusk was falling, the exhausted populace decided to withdraw, but the praetorians, who resented not just the attack but the arrogance in the way they people turned their backs on the camp and confidently retreated, poured out of the camp and counterattacked, killing the gladiatorial squad and many of the besiegers.[850] The men who defended the camp were older soldiers who would have remembered the siege of 223CE. All would have been cognisant of the political standing they held as a collective. It was one thing for the Senate to appropriate power; it was another to let the people treat them as enemies and outsiders. The pleb's attack was a direct threat to the praetorian's sense of collective identity and version of justice in the same way that Pertinax and Macrinus' respective reforms were, not to mention Elagabalus' effeminate behaviour.

Herodian's narrative encapsulates the now vast social distance between the two sides, commenting that the people were infuriated by the Guard's refusal to surrender to a numerically superior force. The Guard, on the other hand, was enraged that had to endure barbaric indignities at the hands of Romans (ὑπὸ Ῥωμαίων ὡς ὑπὸ βαρβάρων).[851] The soldier's sense of outrage seems slightly ironic considering the people viewed the Guard as members of a barbarian regime, and less Roman than themselves. The Guard likely felt that the hostility directed towards them was unjust; Herodian blames the violence on the paranoia of senators rather than the soldiers who waited for news unarmed and in civilian

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[850] Hdn. 7.11.9.
[851] Hdn. 7.12.3.

dress.[852] In reality, given the close relationship between the Guard and Maximinus and the populace's attitude towards them, while the political situation was still undecided, the praetorians took care not to exacerbate tensions after the senatorial takeover. Collectively the Guard had little choice but to defend themselves, for their own military identity as Rome's premier military unit meant that they could not back down in the face of the aggression of amateurs. At the same time, although there were some links between praetorians and civilians (family members who berated soldiers who raided the temples for instance), the social and spatial distance between the two groups, and the politicisation of collective identities meant that the Guard had become stigmatised. For civilians, being a praetorian was a spoilt identity, while soldiers had long treated the urban populace with aggression and contempt. Both sides were now so polarised that the urban prefect and one of the praetorian commanders were killed trying to control the violence, proving that at this point, identity outweighed the usual chains of command and authority on either side.[853]

Interestingly, after the three days of fighting in 223CE, the populace and praetorians made reluctant terms with each other, in part because of the damage caused. Rationality won the day when the initial emotions propelling the violence had been exhausted. This time, the fight-back from the Guard enraged the Senate and people, spurring a more concerted and organised plan of attack. Undoubtedly, both groups understood that a praetorian stand threatened their political revolution, especially since Maximinus was at that moment marching towards Rome. The situation needed to be dealt with immediately, so the Senate selected commanders and recruited volunteers from all over Italy, including youth groups.[854] Herodian does not elaborate on the specifics (he describes the groups as ἤ νεολαία), but the formal recruitment of extant social networks was an intelligent idea. The Gordian rebellion was assisted in no small way by local youth-associations (*iuventutes*), who were almost certainly one of the first mobilisers of the initial revolt at Carthage.[855] Rome was host to various *sodales*, *iuvenes*, *iuventutes* and *collegia iuvenum*, including an

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[852] Hdn. 7.11.4.

[853] Hdn. 7.7.4 and SHA *Gord*. 13.9 place the death of the urban prefect Sabinus three weeks earlier during the initial violence. Pearson thinks this is an error: Aurelius Victor (*Caes.* 26) says Sabinus died in a riot instigated by a 'Domitius'. If this man is Domitius Gallicanus, the riot is probably the one described here. There could have been two Sabinuses, but unlikely. See Whittaker (1970) 201-3, n.3, 236 n.1; Pearson (2017) 254 n.10.

[854] Hdn. 7.12.1.

[855] Hdn. 7.4.3.

equestrian bodyguard of youths whom Balbinus and Pupienus used as bodyguards during the Capitol riot.[856] Youth organisations were a place for young men to learn and perform Roman conceptions of hegemonic masculinity, and their recruitment allowed male citizens to embrace the nationalistic fervour created by the barbarian framing of Maximinus. A wide array of modern case studies have shown that there is a distinct link between nationalism and aggression, primarily because it is a powerful, primordial basis of cultural and political identity. Likewise, the concept of loyalty to the state reinforces solidarity and represents one of the strongest factors behind collective mobilisation. [857] Although the deployment of *collegia iuvenum* may have been used as a way for the Senate to redirect control back to their own social class, the ability to use nationalist framing to deploy energised youth networks meant the emotions generated by the conflict with the praetorians could be channelled back into an effective defence of Rome.[858]

Herodian states that these youth-groups were called up and equipped with whatever weapons could be found or cobbled together. Most then went on campaign with Pupienus to fight Maximinus, while a contingent stayed behind to guard the city and aid those still fighting the Guard. With a boost in numbers, the people made frequent assaults on the praetorian *castra* over several days. The prolonged violence eventually forced Balbinus to issue an edict begging the people to call a truce and promising amnesty for the soldiers. Unsurprisingly, neither side gave way. When the attacks on the walls made no headway, the generals in charge of the civilian assault decided to block off the water supply to the camp, at which point the soldiers counterattacked once more, pursuing the attackers into 'all parts of the city.'[859] In an almost exact parallel of the street fighting that broke out during the riots of 190CE and 223CE, people retreated from the well-armed soldiers, locked themselves in their shops and homes and threw broken pots, stones and tiles upon the soldiers below. To stem their heavy losses, the praetorians set fire to houses that had wooden balconies just as they did in 223CE, this time sparking a colossal inferno that claimed the lives of those

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[856] These equestrian bodyguards were perhaps the same young men who had previously acted as court pages (νεανίσκοι): see Hdn. 7.10.7; Suet. *Galba* 10; Whittaker (1970) 231, n. 1, 241, n.2.
[857] Greenfeld and Chirot (1994) 123, 79.
[858] Although such *collegia* were socially mixed, they included a high percentage of young men from an upper-class background: de Ligt (2001) 355.
[859] Hdn. 7.12.1-4; SHA *Max. et Balb*. 10.5.

unable to escape. Herodian claims that the area destroyed by the fire was greater in extent than the largest intact city in the empire, suggesting that at least 100,000 people were made homeless, the worst conflagration since the Great Fire of 64CE.[860] In 223CE, the praetorians' arson quickly put an end to the violence. Why the conflagration was so devastating this time is unclear. It may have been accidental. However, given that both sides had ignored the instructions of their officials and continued to attack each other, it is probable that the enormity of the fire was down to a communal intransigence generated not just by the immediate conflict, but by decades of contentious interaction. The aggrieved praetorians may have simply wanted to burn the homes of every resistant civilian they could find. Equally, the people may have continued to attack even as soldiers were setting fire to their homes: the civilian population had already fought for days despite suffering heavy losses. Success in battle demands that participants choose to fight as a collective. Each individual decision to fight depends on whether they believe their friends and family will do the same. Thus, it is likely that the collective identity of the civilian participants was so cohesive that surrender was not considered as an option.[861]

The political assertion of popular communal identities spawned the most severe episode of urban warfare to date between competing political actors, yet the violence committed by the urban population went beyond mere opportunism. In previous circumstances, the Praetorian Guard was empowered by the incumbent regime to monitor, contain, and on occasion repress collective claim-making. Not only that, they also used coercive means as legitimators and de-legitimators of imperial regimes. Although the political situation was far from settled, Maximinus had lost his direct authority over the city, and by extension, the Guard, meaning that the confrontation took its shape from the character of the power struggles that lay at the heart of past instances of violent and non-violent action between soldiers and civilians in the city.[862] The creation of a nationalist urban identity in response to rumours and the actions of Maximinus was the basis for the plebs' strong sense of solidarity. Redefining the people as the nation's defenders symbolically elevated them to the position of an elite; it was the Guard and Maximinus' barbarian army who were the undesirables, the savage and uncivilised. This symbolic shift both reflected and reinforced a

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[860] Hdn. 7.12.7.
[861] Lehmann and Zhukov (2017) 1.
[862] Tilly (2000a) 9.

significant change of attitude, as many members of the non-elite and elite willingly identified with each other against a common enemy.[863]

Earlier, the actions of the Senate had threatened the crucial connecting structures between these two groups who were ostensibly on opposite sides of a boundary. The actions of Gallicanus and others in the pro-Gordian faction, though, reshaped those structures by providing some semblance of an alliance by creating a common threat. Finally, the active mobilising agency of emotion and collective identity decreased the capacity of authorities to police existing boundaries, and contain individual aggression that facilitated cross-boundary opportunities, including retaliation for earlier slights and injustices.[864] Social polarisation between soldiers and civilians meant that collective violence was always going to be the most likely form of claim-making between the two groups. As this chapter's opening quote from modern-day protesters in Egypt shows, distrust and hatred for a regime's instrument of repression had the ability, once political opportunity structures shifted to facilitate collective claim-making, to mobilise large numbers of ordinary people to engage in risky collective violence against a dangerous and much better-resourced opponent. A new social order was sought, a new structural reality where neither the Guard nor a barbarian emperor would be in charge.

(i)   Revolution or *status quo*? The execution of Balbinus and Pupienus

The aftermath of the civil war of 238CE was remarkably similar to that of 223CE: a stalemate. Unlike the former event, this outbreak of collective violence ended with the destruction of large sections of the city. At a time when the empire's financial situation was already dire, and an invasion loomed, the social and economic ramifications were serious. The new regime already had trouble paying for the war against Maximinus as well as the customary largesse, although they did manage to bestow a *congiarium* of 250 *denarii,* more than Maximinus' earlier offering of 150 *denarii*.[865] Pupienus and Balbinus were, however, forced to re-issue the unpopular *antoninianus* in order to contain rampant inflation, a move

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[863] Greenfeld and Chirot (1994) 80.
[864] Tilly (2000a) 9.
[865] This *congiarium* was immortalised in coinage minted that year displaying the three emperors seated on thrones accompanied by a soldier and the personification of *liberalitas,* while a citizen mounts the dais to receive the largesse: Drinkwater (2005) 33.

that both Maximinus and Alexander were able to avoid.[866] Fortunately, the new administration began to rule the city sensibly and efficiently. Herodian asserts that both emperors enjoyed a deluge of popularity as 'patriotic and admirable rulers.'[867] The *Historia Augusta* adds that Pupienus and Balbinus were able, in a short amount of time, to institute law, personally dispense justice and plan new military campaigns against the Parthians and Germans: output that could justify a political revolution.[868]

The arrival of May brought news that the soldiers of *Legio II Parthica* had executed Maximinus. Trapped in a demoralising siege of Aquileia, the emperor was subsequently blockaded by senatorial forces. With no real communication reaching imperial headquarters, Pupienus' forces circulated rumours that Rome and all of Italy were armed and united in opposition. For *Legio II Parthica,* whose families were based in Rome and who were themselves mostly Italian by birth, the dire siege conditions combined with news that the Senate had declared Maximinus an enemy of the state was motivation enough for them to move against the emperor despite his protection of the military's primacy.[869] For Rome, Maximinus' death heralded the largest outpouring of positive contention since the accession of Pertinax. Pupienus ordered the heads of Maximinus and his son be sent to Rome post haste. A separate messenger was sent ahead and arrived first whilst games were on, allowing Balbinus and Gordian to theatrically inform the audience of the former emperor's death.[870] The next day, the main delegation arrived, displaying the heads of Maximinus and his son upon a spear. In Herodian's words, Rome took on the appearance of a festival, as the city responded with the same type of emotional outpouring that accompanied the death of Vitalianus and the siege of the praetorian camp:

> No words can describe the rejoicing in the city on that day.
> Men of all ages rushed headlong to the altars and temples; no one remained at
> home, but, like men possessed (ὥσπερ ἐνθουσιῶντες), the people congratulated

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[866] The *antoninianus* would soon drive the single *denarius* out of circulation: the last *denarii* were minted in 240CE.
[867] Hdn. 8.8.1.
[868] SHA *Max. et Balb*. 13.4.
[869] Hdn. 8.5.5-6; Pearson (2017) 168.
[870] SHA *Max.* 25.3.

each other and poured into the Circus Maximus as if a public assembly were being held there. Balbinus sacrificed a hecatomb, and all the magistrates and the entire Senate shouted with joy, each feeling that he had escaped an axe suspended over his head (8.6.7-8).

A two-step mobilisation process is apparent here. When rumours circulated regarding Maximinus' death earlier in the year, the news was eagerly seized upon and crowds quickly congregated and celebrated. This time, however, there was a space of a day between the first reports of the emperor's death and actual confirmation. Until definitive evidence arrived in the form of the severed heads of Maximinus and his son, the city deferred its celebrations, proof that the hopes and fears of the city hung on the emperor's complete defeat. Herodian's use of ἐνθουσιάω once again to describe the emotional response of the crowd links their visible solidarity and purpose to the other significant contentious events of his narrative: Pertinax's accession and murder, the rioting that broke out on news of Maximinus' alleged death, and the people's collecting of arms before besieging the praetorian camp. Each instance was a momentous performance in terms of crowd size, impact, and the use of innovative and transgressive behaviour. Herodian's use of the word 'possessed' then, may tell us more about the evolution of collective action, and how the multiplicities of space in terms of scale, networks, mobility and positionality affected third century contentious politics than an initial reading may suggest.

Unquestionably, the rush to the altars and temples in thanksgiving reflected the people's investment in the power struggle. The assassination of the emperor by the army would not normally be good news for Rome: in previous instances, such events usually left a power vacuum that provided an opportunity for soldiers to appropriate more power. However, this time, the civil war was over before it reached Rome, and a new government was already in place. Thanksgiving and mourning rituals had always been incorporated into the spatial landscape of contention, but as spaces recently used for frantic supplication, and collectively defended from the depredations of the regime, it is no surprise that temples were the first place that people congregated together in celebration. Maximinus had invaded sacred space, and with his death, the people reclaimed these spaces as a restoration of just and natural order.

Just as the temples were a medium and outcome of social and political action, so too the Circus Maximus. Of course, the sheer size of the crowds made it a suitable choice in terms of logistics. Herodian's phrasing that the rush of people into the Circus was like a public assembly (ὥσπερ ἐκκλησιάζοντες) is interesting, however. The atmosphere was certainly festival-like, but here Herodian shapes the flow of people as purposeful and almost formal; the space and its audience imbued with political power. In many ways, the choice of the Circus for celebratory location was the culmination of decades of political contention there. It symbolised popular resistance and sovereignty, and its scale, connections with popular culture, and spatial arrangement all validated the role of the plebs as a political actor. Ammianus Marcellinus' comment that the Circus was the 'plebs' temple, home, meeting-place and source of hope' seems almost tailor-made for this occasion.[871]

Celebrations still mingled with the last of the city's anti-barbarian fervour. The *Historia Augusta*, which claims to use the eyewitness account of an Aelius Sabinus, describes a crowd throwing the corpses of Maximinus and his son into 'running water,' and burning their heads on the Campus Martius.[872] Burning the heads of the deceased emperor and his son was a powerful statement by the populace. Usually, emperors would be cremated on the Campus on a funeral pyre (*ustrinum*), as a ritualised cremation was an essential part of the *apotheosis* and divinisation processes.[873] The subsequent deification of the deceased was also considered an act of *pietas* that reconciled the new emperor with the gods. Maximinus did not treat Alexander well in this regard and in return the crowds treated him like a criminal, not just denying him the respect afforded to their *pater patriae*, but by separately disposing of his head and body.[874] Displaying the heads of political enemies and executed *noxii* was a well-worn tradition, and the parading of the emperor's head through

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[871] Amm. Marc. 28.4.29: *templum et habitaculum et contio et cupidorum spes omnis*.
[872] SHA *Max.* 31.5-32.1**.** The author adds the rather gory details from Aelius that the head of the son's face, although 'black, and dirty, shrunken, and running with putrid gore, seemed still the shadow, as it were, of a beautiful face.' We have no details on who Aelius Sabinus was, unfortunately.
[873] Imperial pyres could be temporary structures designed to burn away, or more permanent features. The *ustrinum domus Augustae,* for example, located on the Campus near Augustus' mausoleum, was an enclosure made of travertine with a metal grating. There may have also been an Antonine pyre located near the Campus: Davies (2004) 10.
[874] Maximinus used the title *pater patriae* on both his coins and inscriptions from the beginning of his reign: BMCRE VI, 222-44; RIC IV.2, 138-9, 142-4, 150-1.

the city allowed it to be viewed and abused by onlookers.[875] For instance, after defeating Clodius Albinus in 197CE, Severus ordered 'all but the head to be cast away, but sent the head to Rome to be exposed on a pole.'[876] The display and subsequent burning of Maximinus' head went beyond advertising a victory over an enemy of the state however. Distancing the head from the corpse meant the emperor would be denied peace in the afterlife. As with Elagabalus, the disposal of Maximinus's body into running water, presumably either the Tiber or a nearby sewer, was not just a denial of burial, but it also purified the city from the contaminating effect of the 'barbarian' emperor, and was a ritual restoration of order and thus an emphatic rejection of his regime.[877] Maximinus may have been defeated, but a regime framed as non-Roman, cruel, and transgressive was such an injustice and threat to collective identity that it needed expiation. Burning the head of the emperor was retribution against an outsider and a public display of solidarity founded in the emotional and nationalistic collective response to his regime. This group-based revenge, then, was a collective claim against the burgeoning power of new political actors as much as regime policy and methods. It was a demonstration of the 'us' versus 'them' boundary, and the people had firmly located Maximinus in the latter.

Why the crowds pulled themselves away from their celebrations to administer popular justice to two putrefying corpses had something to do with opportunity: the Senate and people were, at that point, nominally in control since the death of Maximinus was a political blow to the Praetorian Guard. Certainly, on this occasion, the crowd was able to control all aspects of the ritual. As we have seen, when contention is a deliberate act of conflict, those who engage in such action are likely to try and manipulate, defend or subvert places which contain symbolic meanings for them or those they are contending against. For example, Dio's description of Augustus' funeral where the emperor was transported on a bier through the Campus Martius and his body consumed on a funeral pyre with all of Rome in attendance, was the proper use of space and ritual.[878] Maximinus, on the other hand, received the subverted version. He too, was burnt with the city in attendance, but the

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[875] Also see Livy 2.19.1; App. *BC* 1.71, 1.94, 3.26, 4.20; Suet. *Iul*. 85, *Aug*. 13; Tac. *Ann*. 14.57, 59; Cass. Dio 60.16.1. See Kyle (1998) 220.
[876] Cass. Dio 75.7.3.
[877] Kyle (1998) 221, 227.
[878] Cass. Dio 56.42.2.

method and aim was far different; there would be no *apotheosis* for the deceased emperor. And where the Circus had been a site of recent conflict and violence, it was reclaimed as a site for popular festivities. Both locations were utilised as free space, as it was the people who had control over the space and the contentious politics performed there.

While Rome was celebrating, the praetorian contingent who had campaigned with Maximinus made their way back to the city where the reformed collective almost immediately started discussing their options. Unsurprisingly, they were unhappy with the late emperor's demise, in particular, the 'Pannonians and barbarian Thracians' (ὁι Παίονες καὶ βάρβαροι Θρᾳκες), who made up a significant component of the praetorian ranks.[879] Herodian lists three main issues that formed the nucleus of the praetorians' grievances: popular support for the regime, the elite background of the emperors, and the fact that it was the Senate who had chosen the emperors in the first place. As the historian summarises; 'the majority [of the praetorians] were resentful and privately angry that their own choice of emperor had been destroyed, while the senatorial choices were in power.'[880] All three grievances were interconnected. Fundamentally, the problem was the new constitutional shape of the imperial regime, and its cooperation with the popular uprising against the praetorians. The unit was despised by the population, and under Maximinus its power was derived directly from the emperor, that is, outside the usual power structures in which they usually operated. Where the Guard would fit in this new polity was an unknown, and there were hints that the new environment would not be as conducive to the military as it was under Maximinus. First, while the traditional *adlocutio* and promise of a *donativum* were delivered to the troops by Pupienus, instead of delivering reassurances, the emperor gave a speech reiterating senatorial authority and the importance of the *sacramentum*, the oath the Guard made to protect the interests of the Senate and people of Rome.[881] Second, the ritualised order whereby the emperor would be acclaimed first by the praetorians followed by an official investiture by the Senate, then popular acclamations, had also been

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[879] Hdn. 8.6.1.
[880] Hdn. 8.8.1, 8.7.3; SHA *Max. et Balb*. 13.2-3. Herodian says the soldiers disapproved of the noble birth of the emperors; although Balbinus was a patrician, Pupienus was more likely a *novus homo* who had received patrician status during his lifetime. It is more likely that the soldiers were unhappy that the emperors were chosen from within Rome's traditional elites, rather than nit-picking on birth as such. See Whittaker (1970) 301, n.2 for details on the lineage of Pupienus, Balbinus (and) Gordian III.
[881] Hdn. 8.7.4-6. Still, Pupienus was astute enough to distribute a *generous donativum*.

altered. Instead of being the first group to have the opportunity to offer their acclamations, they were now the last. Finally, the arrival of a new German bodyguard for the co-emperors posed a real threat. German tribes had sent representatives to accompany Pupienus on his way back to Rome in appreciation of his able governance of the province years earlier. The new bodyguard was distinct, both ethnically and spatially from the praetorians, and the soldiers took the presence of an independent military force as a hostile gesture.[882]

These developments raised questions as to what role the Guard would play in the new political environment. If the Senate could legitimise an emperor without the explicit approval of the military, and if a regime could rely on another, separate elite force as their repressive (and defensive) capacity, it was unclear how the Praetorian Guard could retain their independence or power as the dominant political actor in the city, especially since both factors were interlinked. Certainly, at least some praetorians viewed the changes as a zero-sum equation: Herodian notes that the soldiers explicitly recognised the parallel between their current circumstances and 193CE when Severus cashiered and replaced the entire Guard.[883] Aside from the threat posed to the praetorian collective, the Illyrian troops who had stood behind their Thracian emperor were threatened by a new urban consensus that would marginalise their own newly politicised identity and relegate them once again to the empire's periphery. Many of these troops had marched with Maximinus against the new regime and watched as *Legio II Parthica* mutinied and killed their commander, just as they themselves had killed Alexander. The return of these contingents to Rome after Pupienus' victory may have bolstered the collective identity and solidarity of a Guard that may have acquiesced to the new regime given that their former commander was dead and his forces defeated. At the same time, the Guard had gradually expanded its role as a political actor. They did not just see themselves as the repressive capacity of a regime. They also viewed themselves as playing a crucial role in setting and maintaining suitable imperial policy (and behaviour), and perhaps saw themselves as the most qualified to decide who was fit to be emperor in a military monarchy. The fact that their issues with Pupienus and Balbinus were not restricted to their potential policies or perceived lack of benefits, but their background and sources of support show that for the praetorian collective, any emperor who was not

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[882] The Germans had quarters outside the city: SHA *Max.* et *Balb*. 14.8; Hdn. 8.6.6.
[883] Hdn. 8.8.2.

beholden to the unit, their identity or guidelines was unacceptable. It was these considerations that prompted the Guard to launch a counter-revolution.

Irrespective of the immediate situation, the Guard still remained in a strong position despite their relative social isolation from the rest of the city. As noted earlier in the chapter, in order for a revolutionary situation to become a revolutionary outcome, a regime needs to neutralise troops loyal to the old regime, either through negotiation or by force.[884] Yet Pupienus and Balbinus neither attempted to negotiate favourable terms nor did they have the capacity at that time to subdue the Guard by other means. Instead, with the civil war out of the way, a rivalry sprang up between the co-emperors. The German bodyguard had been able to thwart some potential opportunities, but two emperors at variance provided an opening.[885] As with the assassination of Commodus, the relaxed festival atmosphere of the Capitoline Games was used as a cover for a *coup d'état*. Whilst the streets were empty, praetorians entered the imperial palace and attacked the two emperors, whose recent antagonism meant that Balbinus refused to send the German contingent to his colleague, assuming it was a ploy to snatch sole power. While they were still arguing via messenger, the praetorians seized both men and hauled them from the palace, dragged them through the city towards their camp, subjecting them to degradation, insults, and mutilation, before eventually killing both men in the street to avoid a confrontation with the advancing German corps.[886]

This was a public performance of traditional military justice and a reconfirmation of the Guard's power. Soldiers had previously attacked emperors in private settings, but as with the assassination of Commodus, they were not acts of political contention *per se* but internal coups. Although the praetorians administered public justice to Elagabalus' body, he was executed within the confines of the praetorian camp in what was a semi-public act of military justice for a soldier audience. It is possible that Pupienus and Balbinus were supposed to meet a similarly ignominious end inside the praetorian *castra*, but the threat of

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[884] Tilly (2006) 161.
[885] SHA *Max. et Balb.* 13.5-14.2; Hdn. 8.8.4.
[886] Hdn. 8.8.6; SHA *Max. et Balb.* 14.5-6. Aur. Vict. *Caes*. 27.6 and Eutr. 9.2, however, state that Pupienus and Balbinus were killed in the palace.

the German bodyguard required improvisation. Then again, the mutilation and execution of both men in the street echoed the death of Vitellius 170 years earlier, and the public degradation of Cilo and others under Caracalla. As with the execution of Vitellius, the emperors were dragged into public space and tortured so their agony and degradation would be both witnessed and prolonged. Certainly, as with more intricate popular justice rituals, the praetorian's goal was to implicitly legitimate the nature of their claim by framing the episode as an act of justice whilst simultaneously subjecting their victims to public infamy. Performing the executions in public demonstrated that the praetorians had nothing to hide; those who witnessed the violence could either object or essentially become complicit. The sheer brutality shown by violent specialists to acknowledged emperors would dissuade any individual response by members of the crowd, and given the cohesion and skill demonstrated by the Guard during the siege, we could assume that many ordinary people decided that the risks associated with dissention were simply not worth it.

A political revolution had been stopped in its tracks. The praetorian's public claim against Pupienus and Balbinus was a delegitimating device, not just against Balbinus and Pupienus but the new regime they represented. In 68CE, the Senate declared Galba emperor whenteh Guard agreed to abandon Nero in return for a donative but when this was not paid, the praetorians declared for Otho and Galba was murdered. What happened in 238CE bore some similarities. The Senate had reassumed, and indeed stretched its long-dormant powers, but the Guard quickly reclaimed its position as legitimators and delegitimators based around diagnostic framing that attributed responsibility to the co-emperors who became the focus for their collective claim. This attribution took the form of a public statement of legitimation that involved the construction of an injustice action frame separate from the framing that had mobilised the wider public. Pupienus and Balbinus may not have done anything concrete to warrant a tyrant's death, but to the soldiers, they were symbols of a senatorial tyranny that threatened their identity and political position. In this way, their act was no different than the popular justice meted out to the 'bad' emperors of the past.

The strength of military identities was a crucial factor in driving praetorian violence in 238CE. To be sure, the senatorial political revolution and the body's alliance with a population that had been long hostile towards the force were substantial threats to the Guard's dominant position, but at the same time, their firmly held identity shaped their reaction to the threats posed by a mobilised city. A collective praetorian identity was reinforced by their profession, privilege, and close spatial and social proximity to each other. In many respects, their lived experience mirrored that of their antagonists who also lived and worked together in close conditions, and like their opposition, a distinct identity allowed the Guard to project power and provided them with the ability to demand rights in the name of the group. It did, however, make it difficult for them to incorporate new identities or adapt to a changing political climate. Fixed identities not only prevent adaptation and reinterpretation, they also do not fit lived experience very well.[887] *Legio II Parthica* turned against Maximinus because their families in Rome were threatened by unfolding events, an acknowledgement that a soldier's identity could clash with his other identities. Thracian, Pannonian, Illyrian and other 'barbarian' ethnicities within the unit added complexity: their families were part of Rome's melting pot, but as soldiers, they were collectives within a collective. Identity was thus both complicated and fluid, but, given the threats emanating from multiple political actors, praetorians had little choice but remain united.

Those who may have felt slightly cynical about their identity or viewed themselves as more than mere soldiers would have had to acquiesce with the opinion of those who strongly believed in the Guard as a powerful political actor. Susan Hekman warns that identity formation leads to the creation of a new political truth that becomes fixed. She adds that an identity that has been 'constructed as a site of resistance is reified and fixed, stripped of ambiguity, fluidity and individuality.'[888] The component of a collective identity that lends itself to action becomes more important when what the group stands for is self-relevant, and their security and prosperity are viewed as under threat. So, those who may not have ordinarily cleaved to the image of the omnipotent praetorian strongly identified with those

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[887] Jasper and McGarry (2015) 4.
[888] Hekman (2000) 297; Jasper and McGarry (2015) 4.

who could remove or buffer the threat.[889] The unit had already demonstrated that its constructions of hypermasculinity shaped its views on what was deemed acceptable behaviour by an emperor. Ethnic identities compelled members to support an outsider as emperor. Now the political and social history of the Guard dictated a collective, violent response to the dual threat of a hostile populace and Senate, just as they acted together in war against a common enemy. The civil war of 238CE, therefore, brought into stark focus the conflict between military and civilian collective identities as each group sought their own version of justice.

(ii)   The renegotiation of regime power dynamics

After the public execution of Pupienus and Balbinus, the Guard's acclamation of Gordian III was a move that, in theory, all the city's political actors could compromise on. Framing their deed as one that recognised popular will, the praetorians announced that they had always supported Gordian III and had only executed men whom the people did not choose.[890] In any case, the Guard's initial physical possession of Gordian stymied any possible opposition: if the crowds attacked, the soldiers could kill the boy. With no other obvious imperial candidate, the *status quo* was better than any other alternative. Additionally, a major portion of Rome lay in ashes, and many had been killed, wounded, or ruined. Neither civilians nor soldiers could risk another outbreak of violence. There also had to be some agreement brokered with the Senate, given that Gordian was only thirteen and needed a team of advisors to help him govern. The *Historia Augusta* is extremely muddled, but it does state that peace was confirmed between the populace and the soldiers when Gordian was given a consulship.[891] As Paul Pearson opines, a peace conference may have been held, 'and it seems reasonable to suppose that high on the agenda would have been [a] repeal of the constitutional innovations of the rogue Senate of early 238, especially to emphasise that there should be just one emperor and the Senate did not have the power to appoint and depose emperors.'[892] The former emperors were not given *divi* status, which suggests there

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[889] Hogg and Adelman (2003).
[890] Hdn. 8.8.7.
[891] SHA *Gord*. 23.1.
[892] Pearson (2017) 220.

was an informal agreement made that the senatorial regime was to be henceforth considered as illegitimate.[893]

The Senate had no choice but to bow to military pressure. In return, Gordian III 'restored' the body's rights and privileges, although this would have been a symbolic gesture designed to defuse tensions. His new administration was comprised mainly of men who had participated in the rebellion (but also some of Maximinus' former supporters), providing a sense of continuity. These senators and equestrians aimed to re-establish the monarchy as it had existed under Alexander. To that end, they sought to rectify some of the justice and legitimacy issues that had plagued Maximinus' reign. Lavish spectacles resumed, the Senate passed legislation to suppress informers and defend the freedom of individuals and communities, and efforts were made to reduce the tax burden.[894] Thus, as under Alexander and Severus, the fulfilment of certain value expectations provided legitimacy and relative stability despite the military rejection of an amplified popular or senatorial sovereignty. Realistically though, Gordian, like Alexander, could do little to control the military. Gordian's response to a petition from the inhabitants of a small town in Egypt who complained of the depredations of soldiers is markedly different from the unequivocal condemnation of the same activities by the prefect of Egypt in the edict issued in the mid-second century. In the latter case, Gordian declined to intervene, and merely referred the matter back to the governor.[895]

In terms of the urban political environment, other developments constrained opportunities for contention. The rise of the praetorian prefect C. Furius Sabinius Aquila Timesitheus checked any unresolved aspects of the power struggle between the Senate and the Guard. Timesitheus' talent and almost singular power provided the regime of the teenaged Gordian

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[893] There are a few examples of *damnatio memoriae* carried out against Pupienus and Balbinus, but it does not appear to have been a systematic revision. For instance, Pupienus and Balbinus' names were removed from some milestones in Cappadocia, and the victory inscription at Aquileia as well. Likewise, the honourary titles *Pupiena* and *Balbina* that had been included in the title of *Legio I Adiutrix* were erased from a milestone found in Odiavum in Pannonia Superior: Haegemans (2010) 232. Balbinus' sarcophagus was not intentionally mutilated, an indication that the erasures were not official policy as such: Varner (2004) 204. We can speculate too that if Maximinus' regime was rehabilitated, officially at least, his statue may have been returned (if it had been taken down) to its place in the horse guard barracks: it was still there at the time of Milvian Bridge. See Pearson (2017) 220.
[894] Drinkwater (2005) 33-34; SHA *Gord*. 23.3.
[895] For the mid-second century edict, see Pg. 98. Gordian: *CIL* 3.12336.

with solid foundations, modelled not on the policies of Maximinus, but Alexander.[896] The closed nature of the imperial regime swung political opportunity away from the people, and other independent centres of power as the connection between the regime and its repressive capacity was re-established. As with the close partnership of Severus and his prefect Plautianus, the Gordian-Timesitheus regime was able to stabilise the political environment through renewed regime capacity and competent urban administration. In terms of the Guard, incursions from the Goths, and rumblings from Africa, Germany, and Parthia forced Gordian to campaign with his praetorians, reducing the city-based contingent once again to a rump of older soldiers, whom it appears did nothing overt to antagonise the population. As such, although Herodian's account ends with Gordian's sole accession, Rome seems to have been relatively peaceful during his six-year reign. The emperor, and by default his administration, was popular with Senate, soldiers, and the populace.[897]

The simplest and most probable reason why contention quietened down, however, is simply exhaustion. We can view the events of 238CE as its own, smaller cycle of contention within the larger contentious cycle of the late second and early third centuries. Initial mobilisation occurred when the populace defended the temples from Maximinus. Increased information flows between social networks heightened political awareness. Politicised collective identities facilitated the effectiveness of rumour and subsequent mobilisation around the tenets of popular justice. Contention escalated as the people challenged the Senate, and new centres of power, albeit temporary, developed, convincing challengers that they were helping to advance the collapse of injustices, producing what was an unlikely alliance between elite and non-elite.[898] Consequently, the massive personal and economic costs of the praetorian-civilian battle and the instalment of a new regime led to weariness and disillusionment. The participation of the lower classes in the contention of 238CE is referenced time and time again by Herodian, and it was those people who would have suffered the after-effects the most. To continue collective action at a time when sourcing food, shelter, and job opportunities were more pressing issues would have been counter-productive and too risky for many ordinary people. Meanwhile, the smooth transfer of sole

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[896] Drinkwater (2005) 34; Potter (2004) xxx.
[897] See SHA *Gord*. 31.4-7.
[898] Tarrow (1998) 144-146.

power to Gordian III and the return of political stability reduced opportunities for contention. The salvaging of some sense of senatorial participation renewed elite cohesion, whilst the deceleration of the pace of political change, a dwindling of available allies, and the closing of the regime around Timesitheus and other insiders proved a threat to any would-be challenger.

The acceleration of contentious politics during 238CE reflected the rapidly changing political opportunity structures of that year. In such a time of uncertainty, recurrent innovation and frequent misapprehension among parties to contention occurred, especially in the case of popular challenges to power-holders. Each new round of claim-making threatened the interests of other political actors who seized their own opportunities, culminating in an attempted political revolution. Competing and increasingly politicised collective identities of Rome's political actors played crucial roles in the intensification of contentious politics. The accession of Maximinus was a triumph of provincial, military identities, but these clashed with urban identities and conceptions of behavioural norms. The constructed contrast between soldier and civilian, 'barbarian' and Roman led to an outpouring of hidden transcripts and violent contention once an opportunity opened for resistance. In the space between opposing identities where only one group could emerge victorious, each claimant-object pairing, emperor-people, Senate-people, and people-praetorians, turned violent.

Chapter 5: What to make of it all? The contentious cycle of 180-238CE

The riot as a contentious repertoire

The events of 238CE demonstrate that urban claim-making shifted substantially during the fifty-year period between the reign of Commodus and the sole accession of Gordian III, from mostly contained contention to entirely transgressive forms of collective action. As collective violence emerged from, and bore the stamp of, broader patterns of contentious politics, the contentious cycle of the late second and early third centuries was the crucible in which such violence was tempered into a more permanent component of urban Roman repertoires.[899] A confluence of endogenous and exogenous factors contributed to these developments. As the socio-political environment changed in response to regime type, political actors bargained over access and rights. Repertoires shifted towards the more violent end of the spectrum as negotiation processes became increasingly contentious. Identities became more fixed and polarised, and the emergence of new claimant-object pairs introduced innovation and the adaptation of previously stable repertoires. On the popular side of contentious politics, it was the riot that became the predominant form of claim-making. It is important to note that rioting was an ancient and persistent form of Roman collective action. They were, however, fairly infrequent despite the lurid emphasis that our sources often put on such encounters.[900] For example, there were only four recorded riots in Rome between 70-221CE, but at least seven in the sixteen years between 222-238CE. [901]

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[899] Tarrow (1993) 286.
[900] Tilly (2006) 121.
[901] See Appendix. The only recorded riot between 70-221CE that falls outside the parameters of this study is the food riot that occurred sometime during Antoninus Pius' reign (Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 152.9).

Fig 3: Non-violent vs. violent contentious performances between 180-238CE
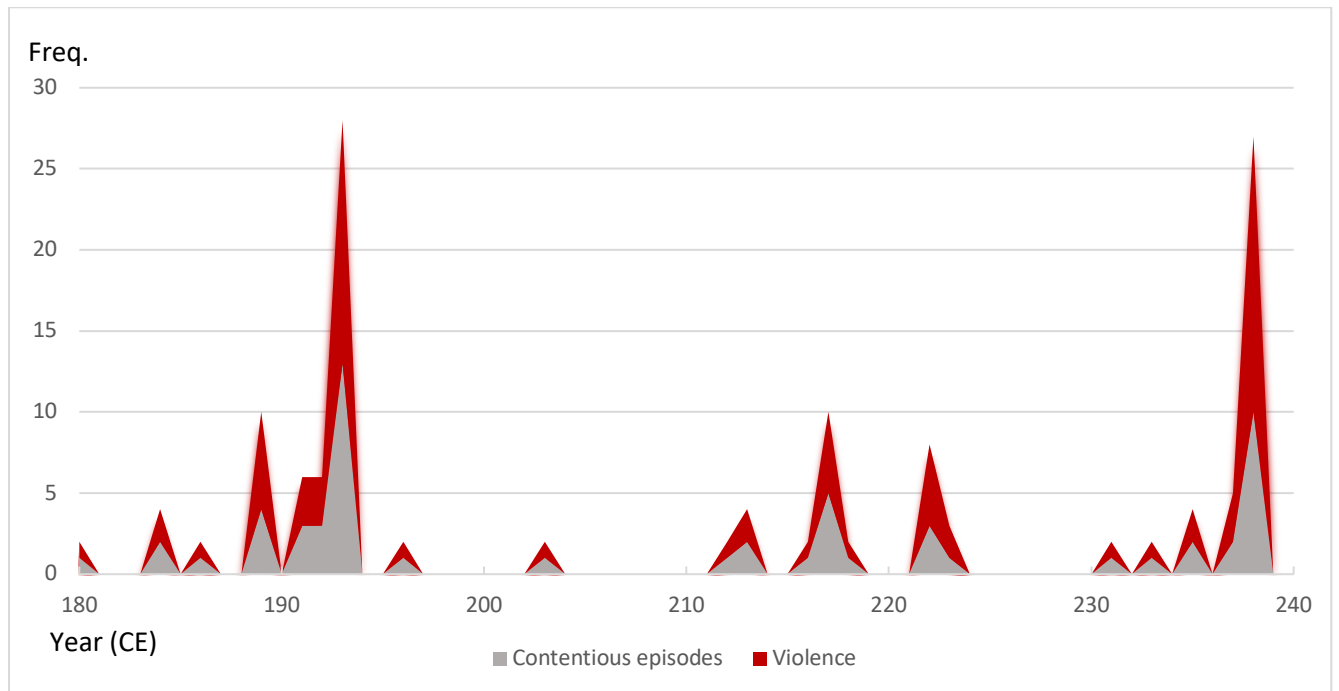
The increase in rioting can be attributed to the cycle of contention initiated by a shift in political opportunity structures, and increased social pressures during the reign of Commodus. A slowly unfolding spiral of contention ensued as each round of claim-making threatened the interests of some actors and provided new opportunities for others.[902] A rise in contention was, therefore, to be expected, especially as political opportunities rapidly changed after the death of Alexander.

Why rioting became the most dominant form of popular collective action is not necessarily explained by the cyclical nature of contention, but rather by three related processes: the declining frequency of imperial consensus rituals, the autocratic, closed and militaristic nature of early third century regimes, and changes in claimant-object pairs. Years before the current hegemony of rational-choice thought in political science, Tilly put it simply: 'When faced with resistance, what did rulers do? They bargained…out a set of understandings concerning possible and effective means of making collective claims within the regime.'[903]

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[902] Tilly (2006) 111.
[903] Tilly (1990) 101-102; Tilly (2006) 213.

Formerly, consensus rituals at the spectacles and imperial ceremonies were the performative aspects of a relationship that tolerated and privileged contained, non-violent contention over transgressive behaviour. However, the closing of imperial regimes, constant war, and the need for emperors to closely monitor the military and its interests meant that opportunities for urban consensus rituals declined from the beginning of the third century onwards. Indeed, growing beliefs that the early third century emperors were underperforming as leaders of Rome's urban population were in part due to this inability to participate in the face-to-face communication that had long been the performative heart of the moral economy. For instance, Caracalla, like many emperors before him, was passionately devoted to his circus faction, but he did not encourage free communication with its audiences, and appointed freedmen to run his games instead of presiding over the festivities himself. Macrinus never attended the games during his brief tenure, and although Elagabalus built theatres and circuses, he appears to have little interest in the ritualistic aspects of the games.[904] The *Historia Augusta* posits an almost certainly apocryphal story of Elagabalus letting snakes loose as people assembled for the games before dawn, causing injury and panic.[905] Even if the story is false, it reflects perceptions that early third century emperors were unable or unwilling to devote enough time to their expected public responsibilities. Even Alexander, aside from his *profectio* and triumph ceremonies, provided few opportunities for the public to express their mandated consensus to him in person.

Without the emperor's frequent attendance, imperial regimes had few ways to defuse tension or detect criticism. Accordingly, the spectacle repertoire was loosened from its moorings as a site of consensus. These locations had functioned as free spaces intermittently over the early imperial period, but the public transcript predominated. Spatial and social control however, can only be sustained by continuous reinforcement, maintenance, and adjustment. When the ritual performance of consensus – the public transcript – faltered, hidden transcripts took their place. It could be argued that the emperors of the time did not have to be as invested in the ritualised performance of consensus at the games as they once were since they received practical legitimation from the army, but without the active participation of the emperor in regular consensus rituals,

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[904] Caracalla: Cass. Dio 78.10.1. Elagabalus: Hdn. 5.6.6.
[905] SHA *Elag*. 23.2.

Rome's spectacle spaces operated more as free political spaces than they did as sites of imperial power. These spaces associated with hidden transcripts (the Circus, streets, and other free spaces) became the dominant locations of contentious discourse for ordinary people. Thus, rather than affirming acceptance and legitimation, third century circus chants became an outlet for grievances instead. Of all the incidents of verbal contention at the spectacles recorded between the reigns of Severus and Elagabalus, virtually all were negative.[906] The Circus Maximus had become symbolic geography, a space whose scale dramatised the demands made there, and as a consequence transformed the site's political significance.

As symbolic geography and as an intriguing microcosm of Roman contentious politics, the Circus embodied multiple spatialities: scale, place, networks, mobility and socio-spatial positionality. Where scale is primarily a measure of capacity, we can also conceptualise it as a relational, power-laden and contested construction that political actors could strategically engage with, to either legitimise or challenge existing power relations.[907] Creating a sense of place requires assigning meaning, symbolism and power to space, that in turn provides cues that signal appropriate and inappropriate behaviours.[908] As social constructs, places are dynamic, fluid, and internally diverse with permeable and contestable boundaries even when they express a collective cultural image.[909] They are also dependent and reflective of the identities and memories of those who attach their own cultural input upon that location. *Collegia*, neighbourhood groups, friends, families, and racing fans were all networks that helped developed shared identities, and linked the private and public, hidden and public transcripts. Finally, unequal power relations were part and parcel of socio-spatial positionality, and we should view Roman positionality as a relational concept, through the connections and interactions people have those in different social positions.[910] Where other places and time-spaces in Rome reproduced existing positionalities, the scale, sense of place, and availability of social networks at the Circus allowed the relational aspects of

[906] When news of Caracalla's murder became known in Rome, crowds shouted their support for their new emperor Macrinus, one of the few instances during this time period where the performance of the traditional positive acclamatory repertoire at the shows is recorded: Hdn. 5.2.3.
[907] Leitner, Sheppard, and Sziarto (2008) 159.
[908] della Porta, Fabbri, and Piazza (2016) 28.
[909] Agnew (2002) 22; Gieryn (2000) 465.
[910] Leitner, Sheppard, and Sziarto (2008) 163.

positionality to function there, and its physical lay-out combined with free or cheap entrance and frequent race-days provided ample mobility. Together, these elements had an enormous impact on how contentious politics was performed on a mass scale in Rome, since successful political contention needs participants to simultaneously draw on the multiplicities of space, strengthening feelings of solidarity and identity, while also increasing the ease with which claim-makers could communicate, organise, act, and evade repression.[911]

The socially embedded networks that generated resistance and subversion were relatively opaque to authorities and indispensable to sustained collective action. Over time, the modes of collective action attached to hidden transcripts become part of popular culture, and, as Scott explains, the urban riot becomes something 'like a scenario, albeit a dangerous one, enacted by a large repertory company whose members know the basic plot and can step into the available roles. Anonymous mass action of this kind is thus entirely dependent on the existence of a social site for the hidden transcript, a site where social links and traditions can grow with a degree of autonomy from dominant elites. In its absence, nothing of the kind would be possible.'[912] A side effect of the symbolic and practical importance of the Circus as a contentious space meant that performances mostly consisted of mass crowds, a scale that lent itself well to demonstrations and riots, and understandably, such forms of collective action became an established and successful way of demanding justice from those with greater power, access, and resources.

Dwindling opportunities for consensus rituals also coincided with a growing imbalance in the imperial moral economy. Emperors had to find the right balance between extracting resources from the population and giving back enough in terms of expected social goods. Tangible, cooperative, and just outcomes were still expected, especially because of the collective burden imposed by administrations dealing with the economic impacts of war, inflation, corruption, and natural disaster. Even as opportunities to acclaim the emperor in person at Rome dwindled, the sheer number of requests by individuals and cities including the recording of city acclamations verbatim on inscriptions and coinage shows that the

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[911] Tilly (2000) 144.
[912] Scott (1992) 151-2.

emperor was still considered to be the ultimate font of justice throughout the Empire.[913] Consequently, how the regime cleaved to entrenched expectations of justice and the complex conceptions that made up Roman collective identities influenced urban hidden transcripts, and thus the potential for mobilisation and resistance.

Secondly, the long-term effects of military autocracy are apparent in the unfolding events of 238CE. Severus' decision to promote the army at the expense of the Senate set a pattern. Dio blamed the emperor for 'making the city turbulent through the presence of so many troops and for burdening the State by his excessive expenditures of money, and most of all, for placing his hope of safety in the strength of his army rather than in the goodwill (*eunoia*) of his associates.'[914] The emperor's preference for a closed regime of loyal supporters, and the continued promotion of equestrian administrative posts alienated and divided the Roman elite. This process had its origins in Commodus' closed regime and policy of senatorial repression, but Severus entrenched these divisions, and the army's ability to dominate Roman politics created insecurity and fear. Given the state of the urban political environment at the time of Gordian III's accession, Marcus Aurelius' maxim that subjects bound to their emperor through *eunoia* would not rebel unless driven to by 'violent, arrogant treatment' seems startlingly insightful.[915] The supremacy of the military affected which claimant-object pairs and repertoires would also dominate contentious urban politics. When the public transcript held sway, the performative aspects of the emperor-people relationship occupied centre stage. However, as the Praetorian Guard assumed greater powers, their relationship with the people became just as important, if not more so, than the usual regime-subject pair that formed the basis of almost all previous contention in the city. When emperor-subject claim-making made up most contention, prevailing contentious performances were inextricably bound to the expectations and obligations inherent in the imperial moral economy. Soldiers, on the other hand, had no set obligations towards the population, and standard verbal performances could not and did not work against an object that regularly transgressed the boundaries of acceptable urban behaviour. The hardening of boundaries and social space caused polarisation between the two groups, and as civilian

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[913] Roueché (1984) 185-6; Hekster (2008) 62.
[914] Cass. Dio 75.2.3. See also the Maecenas speech that references these very concerns: 52.19.1-3, 52.33.3.
[915] Hdn. 1.4.4-5.

and military identities became increasingly more politicised, the people made more frequent claims against the troops as a political actor.

Furthermore, the political environment had become more violent and more contentious because of the military's takeover as primary legitimators and de-legitimators. From a functional perspective, repertoires of contention correspond to the overall political and institutional circumstances.[916] Since the assassination of Commodus, only Severus had died a natural death. From that point, each transition was a violent one, almost always aided by the praetorians or the broader army. Limited opportunities to directly influence the formal political sphere through traditional consensus rituals meant that individuals and communities were pushed more towards direct action. As repertoires and collective action frames can be interpreted as consolidated legitimating and de-legitimating strategies, their change over time reflects changes in the objects of legitimacy, as well as changes in the patterns of legitimation.[917] The increase of riots can be linked to the military's violent legitimation methods, and the shift towards the Guard as a primary legitimator, drawing popular action away from an emperor to his protectors instead. To put it another way, the intensity of collective violence was dependent on the relationship between the Guard as violent specialists, the regime and its subjects.[918]

Competition for scarce resources and regime tolerance of the unjust and violent behaviour of well-equipped soldiers elicited a corresponding response from those victimised. Maximinus was the third emperor in less than forty years to double the pay of praetorians, and as he debased the coinage and had his agents ruthlessly enforce tax collections and confiscations, soldiers became the obvious target for claims against the regime and its policies. Thus, in the long-term, popular violent collective action was predicated on the way the Roman political system apportioned power and responded to grievances. One additional factor was also in play during 238CE: a civil war scenario raised the stakes as to who would win or lose from the new power structure. Violence rose accordingly, but the conflict that broke out between soldiers and civilians in 238CE was on a much larger scale in terms of

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[916] Haunss (2007) 163.
[917] Haunss (2007) 156-172.
[918] Tilly (2006) 121.

spatial diffusion, intensity, organisation, and numbers than previous encounters. Three processes were at least partially responsible for the scale shift. The brokerage work of political entrepreneurs in activating, connecting, and representing the interests of social groups aided the widening of social space between opposing groups, and the gravitation of previously uncommitted or moderate actors toward extremes. The work of Gallicanus, competing senatorial factions, individual praetorians and local community leaders as entrepreneurs undoubtedly played a role in the escalation of contention between 'us' and 'them' groups. As a result of such brokerage, polarisation, politicisation and uncertainty rose across boundaries, as those on either side possessed less reliable information concerning the possible actions on the other side.[919]

Moreover, the collective identities that induced mass mobilisation were strong enough to force people to take substantial risks against better-resourced opponents. The framing of Maximinus as the 'barbarian' Other, and the unjust methods of his regime and those before him produced a nationalist frame that justified and legitimised transgressive forms of contention. It is significant that the enactment of popular justice rituals also increased alongside episodes of rioting. Both often occurred at the same time and in the same spaces, demonstrating that the same master frames were mobilising different forms of behaviour by the same people. Repertoires and space were also closely interlinked, and where claim-making occurred affected the probability and intensity of collective violence. The breakdown of the public transcript opened up contentious space elsewhere – temples, the praetorian *castra*, the Curia, the streets, and people's homes and neighbourhoods. As claimants employed new sites of contention, the importance of place, scale, networks, and socio-spatial positionality was elevated.[920] Scale and place worked together. The high walls of the praetorian camp, and the symbolic importance of temples, and other sites necessitated the scaling-up of violence and participant numbers to ensure success. Scaling of collective action frames also influenced violence levels. The nationalistic response to Maximinus made contention a city-wide claim, which meant that more people got involved and were prepared to push the boundaries further than they may have for a more specific claim. Also, the soldiers and civilians who were involved in the urban violence of 238CE

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[919] Tilly (2006) 127, 130-131.
[920] Leitner, Sheppard, and Sziarto (2008) 157-172.

were defending their homes, that is, the spatial representation of their lived experience and identity. The inclusion of 'private' space raised the stakes for participants, and so the scale of contentious activity.

Finally, social networks and positionality worked synergistically to increase the chances that violence would occur. Rumour and unofficial communication had repeatedly played a primary role in mobilising people for claim-making. Where people within these networks positioned themselves in terms of social hierarchy, collective identity, and lived experience framed their ontological and epistemological stance.[921] For the 'lower classes' (Herodian's *dêmotai*), violence and hardship were a more regular feature of their lived experience than other groups. With limited access to the corridors of power and a greater vulnerability to regime repression, social positionality provided a starting point for action as people will, when pushed, employ the tools and performances used against themselves. Of course, who was the claimant and who was the object also influenced behavioural choices. Chanted acclamations or petitions, for example, were not going to work on praetorians, but rioting was an effective way to apply pressure to a small number of senators or well-armed soldiers. The multiplicities of space, though, augmented the latent potential for violence, as these new locations for contention became spatial representations of collective identities now polarised and politicised.

238CE: evidence of a popular social movement?

A cyclical theory of political contention explains the almost unprecedented scale of urban violence in 238CE. As a protest cycle progresses, contentious activity increases as conflict heightens across the social system, and collective action diffuses into different spaces, social groups, and forms. Claims made by the populace, Senate, and soldiers during that year all confirmed that social and spatial diffusion occurred, alongside intensified political interactions between both established and new political actors. We can, though, delve deeper into this form of analysis. Within the field of contentious politics, a sizeable proportion of the literature focuses on the formation and nature of social movements. If we refer back to the discussion in Chapter One, social movements are collective challenges by

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[921] Leitner, Sheppard, and Sziarto (2008) 163.

people with common purposes and solidarity in *sustained* interaction with elites and authorities. As social movements usually encompass people who lack access to the formal political sphere (if they had access, there would be no need to launch challenges repeatedly), contention is often disruptive as claimants seek to assert the rights of ordinary people to hold power and limit the actions of power-holders.[922]

Although social movement analysis is a modern concept well suited to the multi-national, mass-media environment of today, the close relationship between protest cycles and movement formation during the phase of intense collective activity of 238CE makes it a useful tool to analyse the structural components of that year's events as they unfolded. According to Tilly and Tarrow, contentious politics assumes the form of a social movement only in the presence of six indicators: 'a plurality of independent political centres; a degree of opening of the political systems to the entry of new actors; unstable alliances; the availability of influential allies to support claims originating outside the system; a level of repression that is not too high; and decisive changes provoked by earlier cycles of mobilisation.'[923] These six indicators were undoubtedly present by the beginning of 238CE. Maximinus' accession added new political actors and centres of power to the political stage. The succession of popular contentious performances demonstrating the population's unity, numbers, and commitment were evidence of a sustained challenge to powerholders by those excluded from the corridors of power. Meanwhile, the emperor's prolonged absence from the capital and his unpopular administrative policies provided an opening for new actors and potential alliances. Finally, the very regime that Maximinus embodied was an almost natural culmination of the military-centric policies of his predecessors. Similarly, the sequence of that year's events also corresponds to the four stages of social movements identified by Herbert Blumer. The 'social ferment' stage corresponds with the widespread discontent that marked the initial years of Maximinus' reign, followed by a 'popular excitement' stage whereby discontent became focalised and collective, recognisable in the organised temple demonstrations. The next stage, 'formalisation,' describes senatorial claim-making and the organised collective violence that resulted from brokerage between elite and non-elite. The fourth stage, 'decline,' was a combination of praetorian repression,

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[922] Tilly (2006) 182.
[923] Tilly and Tarrow (2015) 11; Caruso (2015) 3.

exhaustion, and even feelings of partial success since the sole rule of Gordian III was peacefully backed by all parties. [924]

Maximinus' regime, therefore, produced a stream of issues, events, and governmental actions around which a social movement could rise.[925] The events of 238CE occurred because collectively, an aggrieved urban population recognised and collectively defined its situation as unjust and susceptible to change through group action.[926] Extant social networks that drew on legitimate, collective action frames were able to be sustained even during contact with powerful opposition. Actors seized political opportunities to launch claims, and perhaps most importantly, collective identities had become highly politicised and polarised. The spiralling effects of constant regime change, conflicting legitimacy claims, a loosening of the emperor-plebs relationship, identity clashes, and new claimant-object pairings brokered a short-lived social movement born of the identities and solidarities that had been coalescing and strengthening over the past decades of contentious politics. As Alberto Melucci articulates, conflict is key, as it forms the basis for the consolidation of collective solidarity, rather than shared interests.[927] In other words, the foundations of cultural framing and identity, grievance and opportunity, and collective memory meant the timing was right for a sustained campaign of popular claim-making.

Although political opportunity structures are a primary driver of protest cycles, I have also argued that the mobilising functions of collective identities had a significant effect on Roman contention. During a protest cycle, people see themselves as 'part of a broad and rapidly expanding political-cultural community fighting the same fight on a number of related fronts.'[928] At the height of a protest cycle, a community emerges where previously disparate groups form links or alliances with each other. To this end, social movements are also born in communities with associational and informal networks. Melucci sees social movements as networks of small groups that share a common culture and collective

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[924] Blumer (1969). Since his early work, scholars have refined and renamed these stages but the underlying themes have remained relatively constant. Today, the four social movement stages are known as: emergence, coalescence, bureaucratisation, and decline. See Christiansen (2009) 1-3.
[925] Tilly (2006) 186.
[926] McAdam (1982) 48-49.
[927] Melucci (1995) 47-48.
[928] McAdam (1995) 236.

identity. Likewise, Mario Diani argues that social movements should be defined as a network of informal interactions between people engaged in a political or cultural conflict on the basis of a shared collective identity.[929] The notion that social movements emerge in response to the culture of a protest cycle, rather than just political opportunities is significant, as it provides further insight as to why Rome's urban population mobilised in such numbers at that specific point in time. It was not just because political opportunities opened up, but also because communities and identities had formed around long-term socio-political grievances. Those communities, in turn, provided organisational and tactical opportunities for risky claim-making. The community basis of social movement theory also explains why contention dwindled after the praetorians executed Pupienus and Balbinus, since the community forged in the early months of 238CE as Senate and people worked together to reshape the political environment essentially lost its place at the bargaining table. Rioting as a repertoire created political space when dealing with the Senate, but only attrition resulted when dealing with the Praetorian Guard.[930]

The social movement of 238CE can be defined, then, as a collective, sustained struggle by ordinary people against the emperor, Senate and finally, the Praetorian Guard. Their aim was justice in its varied fashionings: access to the political stage, an acknowledgement that they were practical rather than theoretical members of the polity, and redress for the injustice of the Guard's political and social behaviour. All these claims related to broader values and debates that had existed much longer than the movement itself.[931] Social movements and collective violence are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but the ability of the masses to refuse obedience and to physically resist the authorities was and will always be a powerful disruptive mechanism. The power of a social movement like the one that briefly flourished in 238CE was its ability to exercise leverage through violent mobilisation and by the withdrawal of the cooperation rendered in usual socio-political exchanges.[932] Although almost every definition of a social movement reflects the view that it is intrinsically bound to social change, popular claims were not oriented at any real drastic

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[929] Melucci (1984) 829; Diani (1992) 13; Staggenborg (1998) 181-2.
[930] Staggenborg (1998) 183.
[931] See Klandermans and van Stekelenburg (2013) for a good discussion on the link between social movements and grievances.
[932] Fox Piven (2016) 25-26.

change. Contention was more about reasserting dormant popular rights and advocacy for minor change; in other words, a reformative type of social movement.[933]

The dividing of Rome's population into politicised collectives based on 'us' and 'them' categories also had spinoff effects. After the fire, Herodian describes criminals and the lower class (δημοτῶν) mixing with soldiers to loot the houses of the wealthy.[934] The cooperation of those who had very recently been trying to kill each other may seem unfathomable, but there was an enormous socio-economic gap between Rome's have and have-nots. Soldiers had also spent years taking what they wanted from Rome's inhabitants; here was an opportunity for the have-nots to ape the behaviour of those they despised against a common enemy. As we have seen with the enduring nature of popular justice rituals, polarisation between rich and poor in Rome was not new. There are numerous examples of elite sneers at the speech and customs of the lower classes, although perhaps unsurprisingly, far fewer examples in our sources of the poor attacking the symbols and behaviour of the elite.[935] It is not inconceivable that, after years of economic hardship, the chaos created by the fire and prolonged street battle provided an opportunity for those who did not have wealth or privilege to effect revenge against those who represented acceptable notions of inequality, and thus injustice. The coming together of pleb, soldier, and criminal as looters may have been a symptom of the breakdown in norms and relationships that polarisation causes, but the act itself was not directly tied to the identities and aims of the wider social movement.[936]

The role of collective identity and framing in early 3rd century CE contention

 Collective identity, justice framing, rumour, and shifting claimant-object relationships were all integral components of the transgressive contention of 238CE, but, if we step back and examine the broader context, the year's events reflected the evolution of contentious

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[933] David Aberle (1966) described four types of social movement including: alterative, redemptive, reformative, and revolutionary social movements, based upon what the movement is attempting to change and how much change is being advocated.
[934] Hdn. 7.12.7.
[935] *E.g.* Amm. Mar. 28.4.30. For an excellent discussion of the fear and hostility of Roman elites towards 'lower-class' language and customs, see O'Neill (2001).
[936] Simiti (2016) 133.

performances since the late second century. The cumulative effect of diffusion, extension, imitation, and reaction among political actors generated collective action frames. Innovation on the fringes of established repertoires was tested, information flows and interaction increased, and new centres of power arose. As the cycle widened, opportunities opened for challengers to make demands that may have seemed foolhardy in earlier years; when previously had the people successfully forced the appointment of their own imperial candidate without support from other quarters? Indeed, as Tarrow points out, 'the widening logic of collective action leads to outcomes in the sphere of institutional politics, where the challengers who began the cycle have less and less leverage over its outcomes.'[937] It may have been court insiders and senators who initiated the contentious cycle of the late second-early third century, but in 238CE, those same actors had little influence or control over how, where, and who performed contentious politics.

Certainly, the role of framing processes was more acute in 238CE than in earlier years. The rise of a so-called Thracian to the imperial purple delineated the line between an acceptably Roman emperor and one not Roman enough. Macrinus may have been a mere equestrian, and Elagabalus' effeminate self-presentation may have placed him along the abnormal and 'bad' end of the spectrum of Roman masculinities, but in the case of Maximinus, his professional status as a common soldier, and perceived barbarian Otherness clashed with the cultural identities of Rome's urban population in large part because of the polarisation and politicisation of civilian-military identities over previous decades. As the hidden transcripts of the early third century suggest, the populace had moved from feeling like insiders to a group estranged from the political institutions, values, and leaders who were meant to represent them.[938] Fergus Millar's famous *adagium*: 'the emperor was what the emperor did' was still clearly applicable to the third-century political environment.[939] In this light, the popularity of Gordian III can be seen as symptomatic of a collective yearning for the good old days when dynastic claimants cultivated the *eunoia* of their subjects. Unfortunately for Rome's inhabitants, senator and tradesman alike, emperors were now too dependent on military support, and too occupied with multiple crises elsewhere. Indeed, it

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[937] Tarrow (1998) 24.
[938] Citrin, McClosky, Shanks, and Sniderman (1975) 3.
[939] Millar (1992) 6.

is notable that, despite Rome being the epicentre of the collective violence of August of 238CE, it was the empire's peripheries that provided the spark for the conflict. As outlined in Chapter Two, it was uncertainty and instability generated from a combination of endogenous and exogenous factors that provided opportunities for claim-making as such pressures threatened established political actors, leading to increased competition for political space.

The Antonine Plague had a significant impact, not just on Rome's populace, but on the wider Empire. Its economic and demographic effects in part fuelled a rise in insurrection and instability on Rome's borderlands as the third century progressed. The endogenous results of these processes: a decrease in regime capacity, the formation of hostile group identities, and collective action framing, contributed to increased conflict among urban actors. Of course, internal and external factors are not necessarily mutually exclusive: both capacity and opportunity suggest the existence of a climate-conflict relationship. Certainly food supply issues, inflation, and natural disaster affected both the fiscal capacity of imperial regimes and the wealth of ordinary people, especially in contrast to favoured groups like the praetorians.[940] Overall, however, the confluence of endogenous and exogenous factors explains how a cycle of contention began, and why there was such a competitive escalation of transgressive contention leading up to 238CE.

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[940] Couttenier and Soubeyran (2015) 25. For modern empirical evidence, see 26-27.

Conclusion

In his mid-third-century letter to Demetrianus, Cyprian of Carthage bewailed the times, claiming that as 'wars continue to be even more frequent, sterility and hunger heighten disquiet, ghastly illness ravages men's health, the human race is devastated by rampaging decay.'[941] His pessimistic tone matched the earlier warnings of Dio and Herodian that the Empire had never faced so many systemic calamities. At the same time, both historians maintained that two of the most severe instances of mass violence in Rome were sparked by 'small causes.'[942] So, was it relatively trivial endogenous issues or wider exogenous factors that caused an escalation of conflict, and a breakdown in imperial authority and relations between Rome's main political actors? Hopefully, as I have made clear, the answer was both. Of course, whether an issue or grievance was really a small matter or something more substantial is a question of perspective and relativity. For those who lived in Rome between 180-283CE, the issues facing them were grave enough to generate a substantial upswing in collective action compared to previous decades.

The aim of this study was to quantify the structures, processes and mechanisms that facilitated the escalation of collective action in Rome using contentious politics theory. The arbitrary, and (for the non-elite) restrictive nature of imperial politics meant that claim-making by Roman political actors relied primarily on three key mechanisms of political contention: political opportunity structures, contentious repertoires, and the formation of collective identities and frames. Whether actors mobilised successfully for contentious purposes was dependant on the opening up or closing of political opportunity structures. Whether they mobilised at all was dependant not merely on grievances, but on how situations and issues could be framed as unjust and liable to change.[943] Notably, each contentious performance, and the interactions and bargains struck as a result, influenced the forms, settings and outcomes of future contention.

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[941] Cyprian: *Ad Dem*. 253, 255.
[942] Hdn. 7.4.1; Cass. Dio 80.2.3.
[943] Van Stekelenburg and Klanderm (2009) 28.

Political opportunity structures were impacted by the closing of imperial regimes to all but a few insiders; through an increasing division between elites and emperors, and because of rising instability due to frequent regime transitions. Repression and pace of change in each category provided multiple opportunities for political actors to make claims against the government. The impact of exogenous factors on political opportunity structures should not be underestimated. Both the short and long term demographic effects of the Antonine Plague along with the economic burden of persistent war made it harder for emperors to balance the interests of Rome's main political actors. As a consequence, the uncertainty that resulted from the inability of a regime to deal with simultaneous issues undermined imperial authority, allowing political space for claim-making, and increased competition between actors.[944] Learned modes of communication and consensus, and legitimacy claims were the heart of the relationship between the emperor, urban plebs, Praetorian Guard, and Senate. Intergroup power relations had never been symmetrical, but as the degree of asymmetry changed, relations between the groups – Flaig's parallelogram – became a source of intense conflict and competition. Likewise, legitimacy claims functioned best when all actors accepted them and their own role in upholding the political structure. But, when some political actors increased their power and independence, they adapted their own conceptions from whence legitimacy was founded. Also, as successive emperors become younger and unable to prove their military and political prowess before ascending the throne, they could be viewed as mere figureheads for these constituencies, providing an ever less convincing appearance of dynastic continuity and legitimacy.[945]

These coded cultural modes provided the basis for a cycle of contention. This cycle was initiated by early risers under Commodus as regime change, food shortages, plague, elite repression and the rising prominence of the Praetorian Guard shifted political opportunity structures, allowing mobilisation around a variety of grievances held by different groups. The turmoil of 193CE introduced a new conflict between popular conceptions of justice and legitimacy and the flexing of an augmented state capacity that led to diffusion and innovation of contentious performances. Severus re-established stability, and constrained contention through a careful cultivation of multiple legitimacy claims, moral economy, and

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[944] McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2002) 66.
[945] Kemezis (2016) 370-371.

state capacity. His reliance, however, on the military, and his disavowal of the discursive and institutional structures by which traditional power relations had been channelled, controlled and disguised sowed the seeds for conflict in the absence of strong leadership.[946] His son Caracalla consequently was unable to maintain any remaining semblance of balance among Rome's political actors. As the imperial regime became an overt military monarchy, traditional hierarchies, norms and identities were threatened, and as a result, became more salient in contentious politics.

The politicisation of civilian and military collective identities had its roots in the burgeoning 'us' vs 'them' boundaries between civilians and soldiers that was exacerbated by praetorian privilege. The injustice of an unequal distribution of resources that codified the imperial moral economy framed these developments as unjust for ordinary people and worth contending against. For the praetorians whose power resided in their close interdependency with the emperor, Elagabalus' behaviour impacted their own identities, pushing the unit to evolve from a specific-issue political actor to a moral arbiter capable of not just merely toppling a regime, but de-legitimising it as well. What justice meant to different people was, thus, complex. John Lonsdale articulates the nub of the matter, arguing that injustice is as much moral as material fact: 'moral economies are stubbornly disjunctive, historical bargains between informed people, not the theoretical construct of a trained mind. […] Inventively remembered rights show what is at stake.'[947] *Pietas* was a concept that articulated the link between justice and moral economy; *eunoia* was the result when it all functioned well. The idea that justice, morality and collective memory were all interwoven is verified by the outbursts of popular justice in the later stages of the protest cycle. When popular justice rituals were exacted upon symbols or even members of imperial regimes, they were effectively a public challenge to state institutions that left injustice unpunished. Citizens therefore referenced the moral practices and moral insecurity that remained inside their communities, and in so doing, highlighted the growing gap between the regime's conception of justice, and that of its constituents.[948]

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[946] Ando (2012) 46.
[947] Lonsdale (1992) 352.
[948] Grazioli and Di Pierro (2016) 188-189, 194.

Alexander's 'return' to a more traditional and cooperative model of governance validated and strengthened urban collective identities threatened by a military dictatorship, yet his reconstruction of political stability was laid bare by the exigencies of war. A vulnerable Empire needed a victorious general, and it was provincial military identities that helped elevate the first common soldier and so-called barbarian to the imperial throne. Conflicting notions of military, civilian, 'barbarian' and 'Roman' identities led to an outpouring of hidden transcripts and violent contention as control of Rome's political system became a zero-sum game for plebs, soldiers, and Senate. The events of 238CE should be seen, therefore, not as a clear break with the past, but as an almost inevitable result of longer-term constructions and perceptions of legitimacy, moral economy, identity and collective action frames. On a purely chronological basis, then, the progression of a contentious cycle between 180-238CE is clear. The initial mobilisation of one constituency encouraged others to mobilise to make claims. Over a half-century, the process of diffusion into new spatial and social spaces and innovative forms of violence progressed. A subsequent creation and modification of collective action frames and discourses, and increased interaction between challengers and authorities followed. Finally, institutionally oriented activism and extreme political violence predominated, after which political opportunities reduced as the Guard assumed effective control of the city's political environment, leading to containment and de-escalation.

The breadth of participants and the reactions of the elites and other groups to each wave of claim-making was the lever that either constrained or facilitated further contention. Both Severus and Alexander were able to mostly limit contention to contained, non-transgressive formats (the riot of 223CE excepted). Their policies were, however, closely tied to their own persona: it is significant that despite the continuity of what was a robust political structure, grievances and opportunities were closely intertwined with each political actor's views of an individual emperor. Regime transitions cleared the playing field so to speak, and each new incumbent had to emphasise or construct legitimacy claims by which he could claim a universal consensus. I am not saying this was an arbitrary system – far from it – but the increasing succession of *coup d'états*, violence, and conflict reveals the transitory nature of imperial authority from the late second-century onwards. To put all these strands together, the spiralling effects of constant regime change, conflicting legitimacy claims, polarisation

and politicisation of urban collective identities, and new claimant-object pairings fuelled grievances and opportunity, and framing and identity processes that brokered a short-lived social movement born of the identities and solidarities that had been forming and strengthening over the past decades of contentious politics.

Aligned with the weakening of traditional power centres (and the rise of others) during the late second and early third century protest cycle, the contentious politics theories employed in this study also offer further insight into the broader mechanisms and structures that propelled these processes. This study has identified key Roman repertoires that indicate a remarkable continuity and flexibility of urban contentious performances. Tarrow observed that repertoires are not simply ways of doing things, but learned cultural creations that result from the history of struggle, and it is contentious cycles that are the crucibles in which 'moments of madness' are tempered into the permanent tools of a society's repertoire of contention.[949] The power of massed crowds and aural displays had long been at the heart of popular Roman political participation. Acclamations, popular justice rituals, and contention at the spectacles all had antecedents in the Republican past, and all three forms would continue to be employed by various groups in later periods. The contention that intensified in Rome from the time of Commodus set patterns of conduct that worked profound damage, not just in the capital city but in nearly every part of the empire.[950] For example, the rituals of popular justice that characterised the urban life of the Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries CE shared characteristics with the punishment meted out to Cleander, Elagabalus, and various members of imperial administrations.[951] Those rituals along with the destruction of statues and other symbols of imperial authority retained virtually the same forms as the popular justice meted out to Vitellius in 69CE and Republican politicians decades earlier. We can also draw clear parallels between the political role of the circus factions in Byzantium/Constantinople and the contentious performances launched at Rome's spectacle spaces in earlier centuries. Indeed, just as in Rome, the role of the hippodrome as a medium for face-to-face communication between the people and emperor

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[949] Tarrow (1996) 592; Tarrow (1993)284.
[950] Ando (2012) 224.
[951] See Magalhães de Oliveira (2012).

made the space a focus of imperial politics in the fifth and sixth centuries, and its factions came to hold a comparable status to the military and the clergy as regime legitimators.[952]

The continuity of key performances underlines how important and enduring cultural norms and learned modes of behaviour were despite substantial social and political change. Thus, the identification and quantification of Roman repertoires allows us to reassert the primacy of material conditions, shared identities and beliefs, social relations, memories and experiences, collective interaction, and the reordering of power over mere reconstructions of historical events; these are the building blocks that ensured the continuity and flexibility of Roman modes of contention. As Roman regimes became more autocratic and repressive, rioting remained a useful option to contend against the state in the absence of alternative methods for the construction of a social consensus. As with other repertoires, rioting had long been a well-established, if relatively rare, method of popular claim-making, but the intensified relationship between the urban populace and the Guard in the early third century elevated the riot as a contentious performance. Consequently, when the frequency of imperial consensus rituals declined, this repertoire had a distinct advantage over more contained methods, providing a successful template for future political actors to follow.

Likewise, the formation and politicisation of collective identities was vital in packaging issues in a way that facilitated contention. The more politicised identities were, the better they functioned as structures through which contention could occur. In the case of the Praetorian Guard, their political identity coalesced around lived experience and their evolving role as regime legitimators. For the urban plebs, justice framing was a way to articulate and interpret events that inspired and legitimated collective action. And as social space between soldiers and civilians broadened, each side's identities became oppositional. The cumulative effect of corruption, a closed autocratic regime, repression, and badly behaved soldiers undermined the concept that the emperor was the font of justice and authority in the empire. When legitimacy claims faltered and opportunities opened, resistance in the form of hidden transcripts replaced contained forms of contention; a development that underlines how important rumour, conspiracy theories, and unofficial

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[952] See Cameron (1976); Main (2013) 50.

information were in the mobilisation of subaltern social networks. What all this means is that the expectations and obligations of the imperial moral economy remained vitally important despite substantial social and political change. One important implication of Severus' incorporation of the military as the principal arm of his regime that has perhaps been overlooked was that it created competition for the social goods that Rome's subjects had long viewed as a fundamental right. It was the basis around which consensus and legitimacy, identity and frames were all ultimately based. If competition for resources and access increased over a finite pool of resources, so did contentious activity.

The findings of this study have to be seen in light of some limitations. Negotiating the historiography of Dio and Herodian is quite different to parsing media biases or conflicting news reports in modern contentious political analyses. It is true that the ancient historians shaped their narratives to suit a moral purpose, and to reflect their own social viewpoint. But, as Dio and Herodian both explicitly make clear, they tried to tell the truth as they understood it.[953] Where Dio provided one assessment of events, and Herodian another, each converged on specific aspects of the same political conflicts. Graham Andrews rightly points out that we should view ancient historiography as reactive rather than objectively descriptive.[954] The contrasting portraits of Pertinax and Maximinus in the source material for example may not be entirely accurate, but where Andrews views the contrast as a deliberate rhetorical device, I argue that they were real-time frames not merely aimed at convincing the reader, but were the distilled product of the contemporary environment of each historian. Perceptions were just as important, if not more so, than the truth in terms of contentious politics, and the perspectives of our sources must join ranks with Rome's rumours, news, and hidden and public transcripts. The accuracy of each may vary, but all to an extent capture how certain sectors viewed issues and events, which was vitally important in terms of performing and reacting to contention.

Additionally, the spatial components of Roman contention have only had a brief treatment. Each episode of contentious politics had to take place somewhere and, as the constant employment of symbolic spaces for collective action demonstrates, the cultural implications

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[953] For a good discussion of these issues in Latin historiography, see Lendon (2009).
[954] Andrews (2019) 208.

of space and place had an important role to play. An adequate study of how space enabled, supported and shaped political processes and social relations of the time should be a study in its own right. Luckily, the 'spatial turn' is gaining more attention in the social sciences and humanities, and there is huge scope for spatiality as a fundamental element of analysis in the fields of classics and ancient history in particular. As the evolving political and social significance of the Circus Maximus between 180-238CE has shown, multiple spatialities – scale, place, networks, positionality and mobility – were implicated in and shaped Roman contentious politics, and claimants frequently drew on several at once.[955]

Ultimately, in terms of the bigger picture, this study has hopefully provided a fresh perspective of Rome's urban power dynamics. The evolving political position of the Senate and military has been well identified in scholarship, but not the reasons why individuals from each group, as well as ordinary people, would make risky claims against regimes that held substantial repressive capacity. Where the sources provide us with little or no explanation as to why collective activity occurred, the contentious politics framework employed in this analysis allows us to fill in the gaps so to speak, and offer plausible structures, processes and mechanisms by which urban collective action took place. Crisis of ideology, of norms, and lived experience should not be dismissed in favour of macro politics. We can argue that a military and political transformation or crisis took hold from the 240s at least, but in social terms, there is less clarity.[956] Lukas de Blois wisely suggests that any sense of crisis should be understood as 'an escalation of problems into an insoluble, complex, many-sided malfunctioning of the existing system, which [resulted] in changes in administration, power relations, and social structures applies to the contentious politics of the period.'[957] The word crisis may be too much perhaps for some scholars in an Empire-wide sense, but what happened in Rome during this period had serious import. As the capital, Rome was the ultimate landscape of power, and as such represented a social, political and moral yardstick for all who lived under its aegis.[958] A denial then, of a third-

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[955] Leitner, Sheppard, and Sziarto (2008) 157.
[956] Hekster (2008) 85.
[957] de Blois (2006) 25.
[958] Therborn (2006) 518, 521.

century crisis in urban and social terms, disregards the capacity of a regime to deeply affect the lives of ordinary people and communities.

This study also links Roman politics with the wider historical context**.** Contentious politics has existed forever, but its forms vary over time and space. Not only can a study of Roman contentious politics provide a greater understanding of ancient Rome, it also contributes context to modern studies within the field, as we can use the past to test our assumptions of the present. After all, as Tim Hitchcock persuasively argues, 'the lessons of history are very seldom about 'how we got here' with all its teleological assumptions, but more frequently about how we can think clearly about the present, when we cannot escape from it.'[959]

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[959] Hitchcock (2015).

The database of Roman contentious performances between 78BCE-238CE that underpins this study was collated in part from episodes of collective action gathered by Vanderbroeck (1987), and Courrier (2014) that was then sorted according to the definition of contentious politics (that at least some of the collective action adopted non-institutional forms, at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims, and the claims would, if realised, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants).[960]

Recorded episodes of political contention between 180-238CE

Date	Source	Type	Where	Detail
182CE	Hdn. 1.8.4-6 Cass. Dio 73.4.2-5 SHA *Comm*. 4.1-4	Physical	Colosseum	Assassination attempt on Commodus
184CE	Hdn. 1.9.18	Verbal	Odeon	'Philosopher' harangues Commodus about Perennis
185CE	Hdn. 1.10.1, 10.5-7	Physical	Hilaria-Via Sacra	Assassination attempt on Commodus
185-187CE?	Cass. Dio 74.4	Verbal	Circus Maximus	Opposition to Commodus by partisans of the Blues faction
190CE	Hdn. 1.12.5	Verbal	Theatres	Audiences shout insults concerning Cleander
190CE	Hdn. 1.12.7-13 Cass. Dio 73.13.1-5	Verbal, Physical	Circus Maximus Villa of the Quintili Rome	Circus demonstration against Cleander, followed by a march to the emperor's villa. Street fighting between imperial cavalry and civilians.
190CE	Cass. Dio 73.13.6	Physical	Streets	Popular justice-parading of Cleander's body and execution of associates by crowd.
191-2CE	SHA *Comm*. 13.2	Written	Rome	Libels circulated about Commodus

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[960] Tilly (2006) 121; Vanderbroeck (1987) 218-267; Courrier (2014) 745-916.

Date	Source	Type	Location	Description
192CE	Cass. Dio 73.20.2	Physical	Colosseum	Refusal to attend Commodus' two week long festivities for the Plebeian Games
193CE (night)	SHA *Comm*. 17.4, 20.4-5, *Pert*. 6.3 Cass. Dio 74.2 Hdn. 2.2.3-4	Verbal Physical	Outside Curia Streets	Demands for popular justice on the death of Commodus. Imperial statues pulled down.
193CE (night)	Hdn. 2.2.3	Verbal	Temples Altars Capitol	Thanksgiving at temples and altars for Pertinax's accession, chants against Commodus.
193CE (night)	Hdn. 2.2.4, 2.2.9	Physical	Praetorian camp	March to praetorian camp by crowd to protect the accession of Pertinax
193CE (night)	Hdn. 2.2.10	Physical	From camp to palace	Crowd of civilians accompany the traditional praetorian escort for Pertinax to the imperial palace
193CE	Aur. Vict. *Caes*. 155.6 Also SHA *Pert*. 14.6	Verbal	Streets	Pro-Pertinax acclamations after accession of Didius Julianus
193CE	Hdn. 2.6.12-13 SHA *Did. Iul*. 4.6	Verbal	From camp to palace	Crowd shouts curses and insults at Julianus and his armed escort
193CE	Cass. Dio 74.13.3-4 Hdn. 2.7.2 SHA *Did. Iul*. 4.2-4	Verbal Physical	Forum Rostra	Crowd shouts and throws stones at Julianus while conducting a sacrifice. Attempts made to block his way from Curia.
193CE	Cass. Dio 74.13.5 SHA *Did. Iul*. 4.7 See Hdn. 2.7.3	Physical Verbal	Circus Maximus	Crowd occupies Circus overnight and following day in protest. Calls for Pescennius Niger to save Rome
195CE	Cass. Dio 76.4.2-6	Verbal	Circus Maximus	Anti-war chants
203CE?	Cass. Dio 77.2.2-4	Verbal	Circus Maximus	Chants mocking Plautianus
212CE	Cass. Dio 78.4	Verbal	Via Sacra	Crowd and urban cohorts protest the public beating of Cilo
213CE	Cass. Dio 78.10.3 Hdn. 4.6.4-4.7.1	Verbal	Circus Maximus	Protests against Caracalla's regime, and violent repression by Praetorian Guard

217CE	Cass. Dio 79.9 Hdn. 5.2.2	Verbal Physical	Rome	Anti-Caracalla chants after his murder. Popular justice exacted against officials and informers
217CE	Hdn. 5.2.3	Verbal	Rome-games?	Crowds call for Macrinus after murder of Caracalla
217CE	Cass. Dio 79.20 SHA *Macr*. 14.2-3	Verbal	Circus Maximus	Anti and pro-Macrinus chants in Latin and Greek
217CE	SHA *Macr*. 11.3-7	Written	Forum	Verses written about Macrinus
217CE	SHA *Macr*. 12.9	Verbal	Circus Maximus	Shouts for Diadumenianus (anti- Macrinus)
222CE	Cass. Dio 80.21.1	Physical	From camp to streets	Praetorian Guard drag Elagabalus' body into the streets after his execution
222CE	Cass. Dio 80.20- 21.1 SHA *Elag*. 17.3-9 Aur. Vict. *Caes*. 157.6	Physical	Circus Maximus Tiber/sewer	Crowd drag Elagabalus' body around Circus before throwing it in the Tiber Lynching of imperial officials
223CE	Cass. Dio 80b.2.2-3	Physical	Streets	3 day battle between the populace and the Praetorian Guard
225CE?	SHA *Alex. Sev* 22.7	Verbal	Rome	Crowd petitions Severus Alexander for a reduction in meat prices
237CE	Hdn. 7.3.6	Physical	Temples	People set up a collective guard around Rome's temples
238CE	SHA *Gord*. 13.5-6 Hdn. 7.7.1-4	Physical	Rome Sewers	Rioting on rumours of Maximinus' death Statues and portraits pulled down, informers killed
238CE	Hdn. 7.10.5-9.	Physical	Capitol	Crowd riots, throw stones and threaten Senate
238CE	Hdn. 7.11.6-7.12.7	Physical	Praetorian camp Streets	Soldiers killed by senators and civilians Populace besieges praetorian camp City-wide battle between the two groups

238CE	Hdn. 8.6.7-8 SHA *Max*. 24.4	Physical	Temples Altars Circus Maximus Theatres	Spontaneous thanksgiving on confirmation of Maximinus' death
238CE	SHA *Max*. 31.5	Physical	Campus Martius Tiber/sewer	Desecration and destruction of the bodies of Maximinus and his son
238CE	Hdn. 8.8.6-7 SHA *Max. et Balb.* 14.3-8	Physical	Streets	Praetorian Guard kidnap and publicly execute the co-emperors Pupienus and Balbinus

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