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Introduction

The Early Middle Ages: A World without Crowds?

What became of Roman crowds after Roman Antiquity? In the fifth and sixth centuries, a civilization famous for riots, triumphs, bread and circuses, and mass acclamations gave way to a quieter world. Urban and demographic decline meant that large and frequent gatherings grew rare. By 650, the ruins of the Colosseum, built in the first century to accommodate an audience of fifty thousand in a city of one million, could have held Rome's population twice over.¹ Across Europe and the Western Mediterranean, the crowds of old Rome became a memory. But they were not replaced all at once by the forms of collective behavior most commonly associated with the Middle Ages. Such quintessentially "medieval" crowds as acts of peasant unrest, mass preaching, popular heretical movements, pogroms against Jews, and collective armed pilgrimages to the Holy Land only arrived on the "stage of public events" much later, after the year 1000, when European populations and cities were expanding again.² This book is about gatherings in Europe during the five hundred years between an age of circuses and an age of crusades.

Scholars generally characterize c. 500–1000 as a time of quiescence in European collective life. The standard view is that the Western Roman Empire gave way to a largely rural, peasant-centered political economy, increasingly aristocrat-dominated by the 700s and 800s. Decentralization was still the rule when much of Western Europe came under the sway of the Carolingian empire (eighth to early tenth centuries). Compared to the north, southern Europe (coastal Spain, Provence, Italy, the eastern Adriatic) retained greater urbanism, population density, and integration with Byzantine and Islamic societies. But even city-rich Italy lacked the multitudes of Constantinople, Córdoba, or Baghdad. As a result, scholars see early medieval crowds as either epilogue to ancient Rome or preface to high medieval Europe.³ The consensus, closer to a default than a position staked out, is that the de-urbanized, depopulated early

Middle Ages was a time in which masses did not play a decisive role in social, political, or economic life: a world without crowds.

There is some truth to this view, depending on how one defines the crowd. Urban riots were a statistical rarity in the early Middle Ages, though factional squabbles involving gatherings were not uncommon. Known peasant revolts across the whole period can be counted on the fingers of one hand. The mass entertainments and mass politics of old Rome, which lasted in the East, vanished in the West. But gatherings of many kinds retained their importance. Early medieval European sources are full of crowds—just not the sort historians have trained themselves to look for.

A gang of harvesters stands waiting for beer rations at the end of a long day in the fields. Merchants at a busy port jostle along the piers. A grumbling populace makes a count think twice about releasing a prisoner. Before a throng of grieving supplicants, a bishop resurrects a child thought to be dead. An abbess vindicates the chastity of her nuns against an accusation by processing before local onlookers. In an annual assembly, nobles hear decisions promulgated as troops muster for war. A town's multitudes clamor as magnates set out to the hunt. A ruler bathes in hot springs near his palace, surrounded by a hundred subjects. A priest asks God to protect and Mary to intercede on behalf of the people assembled in a church. Hundreds flock to see new relics of saints brought from distant lands, bringing gifts to the saints' earthly stewards. Supporters of rival candidates for bishop shout slogans and wave banners. As a pope takes power, crowds of clergy and laymen acclaim him as their chosen one. From the sphere of heaven, troops of angels and saints look down on the inhabitants of this world. At the end of time, "multitudes, multitudes" will gather in the valley of decision to be judged by the Lord.⁴

Crowds like these are ubiquitous in early medieval sources. In conceptual isolation, agricultural, mercantile, liturgical, ecclesiastical, monastic, elite, non-elite, and imaginary gatherings have enjoyed scholarly interest. But scholars have not brought these disparate crowds together to ask what unites them in this age of the crowd's scarcity. Indeed, some may doubt whether such gatherings, excepting rare acts of non-elite crowd resistance and the rowdy politics of southern cities, were really "crowds" at all.

The argument of this book is that the history of early medieval crowds, taken as a whole, tells a meaningful story: one of systemic, scalar change in economic and social life and of reorganization in the world of ideas and norms. In the early medieval West, gatherings became a scarce resource, and this changed how people thought about them and what it was possible to do with them. At the same time, early medieval culture remained bound up with a Roman past marked by abundant multitudes. Crowds, being open to the imagination, escaped the confines of real-world demographic limits. The lens

of the crowd allows us to see how reality and ideal responded to drastic change.

There were meaningful differences in how post-Roman crowds worked from setting to setting, particularly between the more urbanized south and the less urbanized north. But the crowd as subject illuminates early medieval Europe's structural coherencies in diachronic and synchronic comparison. By contrasting the early medieval European case to the Roman past and later medieval future, or to the Byzantine and Islamic present, a new crowd regime in Western Europe, c. 500–1000, comes into view.

What happened to collective behaviors—riots, assemblies, armed bands, violent groups, peaceful gatherings, religious processions, mass calamities, and laboring crowds—and the words, images, and ideas that stood for them between c. 500 and c. 1000?

In broad terms, in the wake of fifth- to seventh-century urban and demographic change, physical gatherings became smaller, less frequent, and less spontaneous. The uses to which they were put were circumscribed. Crowds were more predictable, more controllable. Ideas about their legitimacy changed. A negative discourse of mobs attenuated. Without regular riots, the word for a “riot” (*turba*) was given over to more peaceable assemblies.⁵ This contrasts with contemporary Byzantium and Islam, where urban multitudes remained large, frequent, unpredictable, and discursively ambivalent.

Yet the early medieval European crowd regime, for all its peculiarity, was inventive and influential. Later European history owed more than has been recognized to this unusual chapter of crowd history. Laws of collective responsibility, politics of assembly, and the discourse of crowds, including both positive links between crowds and legitimacy and enduring negative associations between crowds and women, have early medieval roots. This book uses the crowd to situate the legacy of early medieval Europe in its wider history. But first, it is necessary to define what is meant by “crowd.”

The Crowd as Historical Subject

The fact that there is no concerted study of the crowd in early medieval Europe makes this period exceptional. Innumerable settings across human history have been examined through this prism.⁶ But what sort of scholarly subject is the crowd? The word alone casts a large semantic net.⁷ Even by a narrow definition, like the *Oxford English Dictionary's* (“large number of persons gathered so closely together as to press upon or impede each other; a throng, a dense multitude”), there are endless ways of tackling “the crowd” as a topic of investigation.⁸

First, there is the old crowd psychology, which defines the “crowd” as a gathering marked by shared mental alterity. Second, a sociological take on the

psychological crowd focuses on collective effervescence as a component of ritual. Third, literary scholars and art historians pursue crowd representations in speech, writing, or art. Fourth—and most commonly in the discipline of history—crowds become proxies for the motives of the socially marginalized. Each of these approaches (barring the first, perhaps) has something to recommend it, but all, as we will see, are unsuited to the early medieval story. A new synthetic approach, influenced by a more recent sociology of crowds, is proposed instead.

Crowd Psychology: The “Open” Crowd

In classic psychological theory, a “crowd” is a gathering in a state of alterity. Participants lose their sense of self, decouple from normal social roles, and feel, say, or do things they never would in everyday life. The history of crowds by this definition is the story of how contingent values and institutions interact with a transhistorical psychotropic. Within this framework, there have been two ways of proceeding, one focused on collective behavior as the dissolver of social order, and the other focused on it as the servant of social order. Elias Canetti (1905–94) articulated this as the difference between “open” crowds (spontaneous, egalitarian, temporary), and “closed” crowds (nonspontaneous, hierarchical, perennial), a distinction to which we will return.⁹

The best-known account of the “open” crowd comes from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century crowd psychology.¹⁰ Typical is Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931), author of the influential *Psychology of Crowds* (1894).¹¹ Le Bon insisted that numbers alone do not make a crowd.¹² Shared goals triggered a metamorphosis from mere gathering to “psychological crowd” (*foule psychologique*). He portrayed this shared crowd-mind as irrational, violent, and emotional, likening it to drunkenness, femaleness, childishness, and savagery, but acknowledging its power. Its natural impulse was to demolish, but its emotionality made it manipulatable.¹³

This approach casts an ambivalent shadow. Today, scholars are more inclined to study the antidemocratic, misogynistic, or racist politics Le Bon and his ilk smuggled into their ideas than to take them seriously.¹⁴ But the traditional crowd psychology influenced the theories of Freud and Bernays, guided the policies of dictators and populists, and still informs the more palatable sociology and anthropology of the crowd.

Durkheim and Turner: The “Closed” Crowd

The “closed” crowd, in Canetti’s terminology, is the domesticated version of the “open” one. Its theorists begin with the same premise that crowds trigger a state of giddy exception, but they ask how this state is used in the interests

of social order. Festivals solidify group identity. Focal rites direct attention, veneration, or hostility toward a target. Reversal rituals, like the carnival as world-upside-down of Mikhail Bakhtin, offer release from the burdens of hierarchy.¹⁵ This crowd breaks society apart in order to keep it going.

The foundational articulation comes from Le Bon's contemporary, the French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917). "As soon as individuals come together," he argued, "there arises from their interaction a kind of electricity that rapidly transports them to an extraordinary pitch of exaltation."¹⁶ While this electricity was sometimes destructive, Durkheim believed "collective effervescence" provided stability to social realities.¹⁷ It made change (relatively) safely. The norm-bending "liminality" of collective action, as Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957) called it, facilitated rites of passage.¹⁸ The anthropologist Victor Turner (1920–83) developed an even rosier vision of this: crowd alterity as "communitas," whose effects "flood their subjects with affect."¹⁹

The Durkheimian or Turnerian approach, focused on the making of social order through controlled deconstruction, has proven more attractive to historians than the pejorative essentialism of Le Bon. Both reuse the same trans-historical claim: minds transform in a crowd. But there is a deeper functional point: whatever their stated purposes, crowds serve as a social maintenance project. Perhaps some Romans grasped that games and circuses functioned as a "safety valve" to hinder riots or as a "microcosm of empire" to induce solidarity; it hardly matters. The social scientist seeks the crowd's "etic" function (the outsider explanation), not its "emic" one (the insider explanation).²⁰

Limitations of "Open" and "Closed" Crowds

There is something to all this. Experiments have detected raised levels of opioids and endorphins as well as coordinated heartbeats in those performing or just watching synchronized activities.²¹ Societies doubtless adapted to changes in human physiology triggered by collective behavior. Nevertheless, there are problems with any definition of the crowd that stakes everything on mental transformation.

There are other, more fundamental, ways of characterizing collective behavior. Swarms of insects, schools of fish, flocks of birds, and herds of mammals perform coordinated behavior in which individual interactions add up to something greater. Although the mental or hormonal state of animals may alter when collective behavior is underway, that is not what defines the phenomenon. Instead, scientists stress an emergent problem-solving capacity, a kind of artificial intelligence arising from a cascade of individual stimuli.²²

This emergent collective problem-solving serves many functions: risk mitigation, exchange of care, acquisition of information. Crowd theory's focus on altered mental states—put bluntly, how our one species reacts physiologically

to collective behavior—is limited. After all, gatherings do more in human societies than to flood minds with affect. They offer strength in numbers, a venue for resource exchange, an efficient mechanism for sharing news, an occasion for deliberation, a chance for pleasure, and a public sphere. All these functions might be accompanied by the shared altered mental state that interested Le Bon, Durkheim, and Turner. None of them require it.

There is also an evidential problem. How can historians detect fleeting mental transformations from second-hand reports? Across the literature, there is a version of Potter Stewart’s test for obscenity: “I know it when I see it.” But what if participants are disengaged or faking it? Theodor Adorno argued that totalitarian crowds depend not on real mass unity, but on the coercive manipulation of its appearance.²³ The “function” of the crowd in societies may be a result of seeming rather than being. This speaks to the enduring importance of discourse.

The Crowd in Discourse

The “crowd” is an idea as much as a reality.²⁴ To cultural, literary, or intellectual historians, this makes it an important subject in its own right. One does not need to read the mind of dead participants or reconstruct ephemeral details of assembly, action, and dispersal. Discourse is revelatory on its own.²⁵

For premodernists, an influential model is Erich Auerbach (1892–1957).²⁶ A historicist in the tradition of Vico, Auerbach believed representation was the key “to grasp the special nature of an epoch.”²⁷ For him, crowd representations were particularly revelatory. Tacitus’s motiveless crowd reflected his aristocratic worldview; Ammianus Marcellinus’s grotesque crowd reflected late antique mannerism.²⁸ Although scholars quibble with Auerbach’s historicism, his work has inspired studies of the literary crowd.²⁹

That includes work on the later medieval crowd (c. 1000–1500). Several studies explore the figure of the crowd in sermons, exempla, and literature.³⁰ Alexander Murray has shown how twelfth-century university men nourished a snobbish discourse of mobs and rabbles.³¹ Gary Dickson has probed the conception of crowds in later medieval spirituality, and the fears they awakened in thinkers like Roger Bacon, who worried that heresiarchs possessed a power of *fascinatio*, or “bewitchment,” over crowds, just as Gustave Le Bon thought that leaders enthralled crowds by a sort of hypnotism.³² Sara Lipton has explored the moral and civic significance of the crowd’s gaze in late medieval art and society, particularly with respect to the depiction of Jews.³³ Two valuable articles on early medieval crowds, by Joaquín Martínez Pizarro and Hugh Magennis, were written in this literary mode.³⁴

In discourse history, evidential vices become virtues. If a text copies a type scene from the Bible, this reveals an authorial filter. If it oscillates between concrete gatherings (a crowd) and abstractions (the people), this illuminates a thought-world. Nevertheless, most discourse histories share Auerbach's interest in the realities behind representations. They seek the economic, social, and political context behind crowds-in-texts.

The "Historical" Crowd: Rudé, Thompson, Davis

Since the mid-twentieth century, historians have approached that task in a particular way, focused on non-elite motivations. In the 1930s, the pioneer of bottom-up history Georges Lefebvre (1874–1959) attacked Le Bon's crowd as vague and stereotyped.³⁵ In 1961, the British Marxian historian George Rudé (1910–93) followed through with a definition of the crowd limited to "what sociologists term a 'face-to-face' or 'direct contact' group and not any type of collective phenomenon."³⁶ Rudé attacked scholars "preoccupied with mental states." He criticized the mission creep of theorists who used the term "crowd" to describe all imaginable collectivities. This, he argued, conflated analysis with judgment. "The crowd" became everything good or everything bad about (non-elite) collectivity: "the people" versus "the rabble."³⁷

Rudé jettisoned "crowds" he felt were irrelevant to social history: casual onlookers, crowds assembled "on purely ceremonial occasions," event audiences whether passive or participatory, and "outbursts of mass hysteria." Such gatherings, he argued, may be "fascinating material for the student of crowd psychology, but they may be of only casual interest to the historian."³⁸ He limited himself to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century "strikes, riots, rebellions, insurrections, and revolutions."³⁹

This pruning was the culmination of a long-term effort in sociology and history to rescue a social-scientific concept from metaphorical contamination.⁴⁰ In practice, it meant using prosopography and price/wage data to reconstruct the motives behind non-elite political crowds.⁴¹ Strikes, riots, and the like were not the flailing rages of a disgruntled underclass, but reasoned reactions to socioeconomic stimuli, filtered through contemporary values and expectations. Just as Rudé recast eighteenth- and nineteenth-century workers' uprisings as reasoned actions, medievalists like Rodney Hilton, Michel Mollat, and Philippe Wolff found "real" socioeconomic causes for late medieval peasant revolts and heretical movements.⁴² Common folk grabbed firebrands, followed millenarian leaders, or attacked minorities not because of a mob mentality, but for identifiable reasons rooted in class-based antagonisms and economic hardships.⁴³

Still, something was missing. Rudé conceded that some crowds—moments of religious hysteria or pure rage, for instance—fell outside of the “historian’s” (meaning the social or economic historian’s) purview, and properly belonged to the psychologist or the scholar of religion. In the early 1970s, two historians, E. P. Thompson and Natalie Davis, reclaimed this *terra incognita* for history. In Thompson’s 1971 article “The Moral Economy of the Eighteenth-Century English Crowd” and Davis’s 1973 article “The Rites of Violence,” and in their related articles on English and French *charivaris*, they altered the way historians talked about crowds for decades.⁴⁴

The Moral Economy and the Rites of Violence: Thompson and Davis

At the heart of both contributions was the cultural turn. Instead of seeking socioeconomic explanations for crowd behavior, they sought what Thompson called a “legitimizing notion,” the fact that “the men and women in the crowd were informed by the belief that they were defending traditional rights or customs; and, in general, that they were supported by the wider consensus of the community.”⁴⁵

Thompson criticized earlier historians for treating food riots as lurching reactions to hardship. Food riots were not “spasmodic” responses to grumbling stomachs, but the work of offended minds, responding in a culturally rooted fashion. Eighteenth-century rioters saw themselves as upholding a violated “moral economy” of price and distribution. They were “fixing” the price of bread (a quasi-legal procedure); they felt they had to do this because the government and gentry had failed to. In Davis, religious violence worked similarly. The crowd’s exclamations mimicked the exhortations of pastors; its rough justice, the punishments of magistrates; its pageantry, routine liturgy, and folk tradition. For both, “the crowd” was a “curious continuation” of “repertory” under abnormal conditions: the people taking on the job of the authorities.⁴⁶

These interventions prompted a shift. Formerly, non-elite crowds were seen as acting out of desperation. Doomed riots, orgies of violence, and ecstatic religious acts were quintessential “open” crowds. People suffering from what Durkheim called “*anomie*,” the sense of being left out, turned to group unruliness out of alienation. The “economizing” explanation restored some of these crowds to a more precise rationality—their misrule being rooted in specific hardships—but Rudé’s socioeconomic crowd was still saying a desperate “no” to a malign social order. Thompson and Davis, however, saw food riots and lynch mobs as would-be “closed” crowds. These crowds appealed to norms and aped official rituals. If people are primed by “repertory” (law, ritual) to

think that the world is periodically made right by crowds, then riotous or ecstatic gatherings are not desperate rebellions against the status quo, but rational efforts to maintain it. This inversion—"open" crowds turn out to be "closed" crowds in anomic conditions—is central to Thompson's "moral economy of the crowd" and to Davis's "reasons of misrule" and "rites of violence," and has proven justly influential.⁴⁷

Still, in Thompson, Davis, and those influenced by them (including some critics), a breach, or a perception of a breach, always separates crowd and repertory. Thompson's crowd defends a moral economy affronted. Davis's religious rioters act because order has not been defended "officially" and "formally."⁴⁸ Officialness or formalness becomes the absence that defines a crowd. But how should historians identify the border between norm and exception? In practice, historians look for non-elites acting unusually. If laborers take arms against their masters despite the inevitability of defeat, if commoners engage in ecstatic acts despite recriminations, if neighbors attack neighbors despite the social damage it causes—in short, if collective behavior is non-elite, anomalous, and maybe a little hopeless—that makes it a "crowd."

But the crowd–repertory dichotomy, for all its explanatory power, is as arbitrary and unprovable as Le Bon's distinction between the gathering and the "psychological crowd." If the distinction is between gatherings that resist public order (e.g., a riot that breaches a ruler's palace) and those that constitute it (e.g., a procession organized by the ruler), the deciding factor is a sense of public order.⁴⁹ But whose? If disruptive crowds turn out to be motivated by a desire to defend proper order after all, this distinction, as Suzanne Desan has noted, allows historians to have their cake and eat it too.⁵⁰ It is as if historians uphold the crowd–repertory distinction in order to be able to blur it.

Moreover, dividing collective behavior into repertory and crowds insists that the defining function of gatherings is to regulate order. In "repertory," order is shaped officially by elites; in a "crowd," unofficially by non-elites. Hence, the former tends to be associated with elite domination and the latter with non-elite resistance, or, at least, agency. Certainly, it is possible to categorize gatherings this way. But if we consider other functions, the limitations of this approach become clear. In all premodern societies, a crucial function of gatherings is to act as venues of information exchange. Yet historians do not draw a categorical distinction between gatherings in which information is shared vertically by design (sermons, assemblies) and those in which it is shared incidentally and horizontally (harvests, markets). Such a distinction might be analytically useful, but it would not occur to anyone to insist that the former are "real" crowds and the latter are some other kind of gathering.

The Crowd Regime of the Early Middle Ages

How then should we define the crowd in early medieval Europe? One way would be to use the restrictive definition of the historiography—the crowd as non-elite transgressive extension of normal social behavior—and to ask how this stably unstable subject was affected by post-Roman scale change. Applying this approach to the early Middle Ages would mean investigating an imbalance in domination and resistance. The period is known for orderly assemblies organized by elites, not for popular uprisings. One finds, in Davis’s terms, “repertory” but not “the crowd,” in Canetti’s, “closed” but not “open” crowds. In 1980, Moore spoke for many when he argued that “the crowd” in its usual historiographical sense was largely absent in early medieval Europe.⁵¹

One could attempt to substantiate, explain, or add nuance to that observation. Did a lack of opportunities for resistant crowds deprive the marginalized of a means of asserting themselves? Did other weapons of the weak replace them? Hilton, Wickham, Goldberg, Rembold, and others have ably pursued these questions.⁵² One could dwell on regional exceptions. For instance, Italian cities held onto rowdier crowds than other regions of post-Roman Europe. Brown, Herrin, and West-Harling have located the causes in Italy’s greater urbanism and Byzantine political traditions.⁵³ These are valid perspectives, but they exclude the nonpolitical majority of early medieval gatherings.

Another way would be to focus on discourse, to conduct a literary history in the Auerbachian mode centered on the early medieval depiction of collective behavior. Here, one could question Moore’s framing, and ask to what extent the apparent absence of historiographically familiar “crowds” is a mirage of the sources—and this is just what Moore himself wondered in a 2016 reconsideration of his 1980 argument.⁵⁴ One could ask how classical and Christian patterns of representation influenced writers c. 500–1000. This book certainly considers the extent to which biblical and hagiographical topoi inform the legitimizing crowd that predominates in surviving texts, even as classical contempt for unruly crowds did not entirely die out.

But the present study is more interested in how physical and discursive crowds interacted. To do this, it proposes the concept of an early medieval “crowd regime,” a holistic ideal type of how collective behavior was organized and represented. In thinking about physical phenomena, it borrows the neutral term “gathering” from sociologist Clark McPhail.⁵⁵ A “gathering” is a crowd in the most neutral sense: active or passive, large or small, orderly or disorderly.⁵⁶ The term presupposes nothing about motivation, psychological state, or “officialness.” It simply refers to numbers. This offers a way forward that depends on neither the “madding crowd” of crowd theory nor the self-effacing distinction between “crowd” and “repertory.”

In thinking about the discourse history of crowds in this period—the blurring of technical differences, the attenuation of negative discourse, the tendency to associate crowds with legitimacy—this book balances two opposing tendencies. First, early medieval concepts drew upon classical and Roman models; second, they arose from new logistics of assembly. Instead of starting with prefabricated assumptions about what a “real” crowd must be, the goal is to trace the mutual interaction of gatherings and their representations.

The distinctive role of crowds in early medieval societies was a function of these different modalities. In diachronic and synchronic comparison, early medieval Europe was under-supplied with gatherings. Between c. 500 and c. 1000, many complex systems in the West—economies, social hierarchies, political regimes—adapted to a smaller demographic scale. But scale change, though it acts as a frame, does not fully explain the early medieval crowd regime. Post-Roman Europe was not much less densely populated than long stretches of the Iron Age before the Roman Empire. What sets this period apart is not downward scaling alone, but contraction alongside engagement with the Roman and Christian past.

In early medieval Europe, gatherings retained great importance. In economic and social life, they coordinated labor, information, and resources in seasonal venues. This made them easier to predict and manipulate by those controlling assembly. But although crowds ceased to be a weapon of the weak in the sense that non-elite uprisings were rare, as a tool of the strong, crowds had limits. Since resource extraction and authority depended on numbers, gatherings were an expensive necessity. They were vulnerable to resistance and misdirection too. In a world where taking dues, giving justice, providing pastoral care, and receiving political consent depended on the physical assembly of dependents or followers, refusal to assemble—or the choice to assemble on behalf of one lord as opposed to another—were effective tools of resistance and competition. A measure of this is a new pejorative discourse of rustic, foreign, and female crowds that arose from the 500s to the 800s, almost as a strategy of desperation, to replace the lost Roman language of rabbles and mobs. In discourse, crowds retained their electricity, but they were wired differently.

The dichotomy between crowd and repertory favored in the historiography—the religious riot versus the holiday procession—is not universal. It is best suited to demographically dense, economically complex societies with clear distinctions between public and private life, pronounced axes of domination and resistance, and regular non-elite recourse to crowd action in the form of riots and protests (complex anti-institutions whose existence cannot be taken for granted). These are the historical ecologies best known to crowd history. They include Greco-Roman Antiquity, the high and later Middle Age, the early modern West, the early industrial world, and our own times. But early medieval

Europe was a different environment. There was a blurrier distinction between public and private, so that differentiating “official” and “unofficial” crowds is difficult. While there are sometimes clear lines of domination and resistance, for most rural non-elites, passive resistance was a safer, more effective recourse than mass assembly. This meant that crowds served all the more powerfully as a source of legitimacy in this period, given the marshaling of resources and interclass cohesion it took to assemble them.

Sources and Structure

To trace this change, the present study uses texts, manuscripts, archaeology, artwork, and computational philology. The archaeology of churches, monasteries, palaces, cities, markets, and settlements in which gatherings assembled has improved markedly in the last half-century. It is easier than it once was to reconstruct a horizon of possibilities for gatherings in the post-Roman West. Early medieval narrative and literary sources are almost comprehensively word-searchable after decades of labor. Data-mining tools have enabled the comprehensive analysis of the early medieval language of crowds. Back in 1971, a valuable study focused on the use of the single term *populus* in two authors; now, with searchable databases rather than indices and concordances, it is possible to see at a glance, author by author, century by century, how thousands of texts used dozens of different crowd words.⁵⁷ Deluxe images of crowds in manuscripts and the visual arts are increasingly digitized and published.⁵⁸ Many of the logistical challenges of engaging upon a project of this purview have been eased by these developments. This book is aware of its debts: only thanks to decades of patient and skillful labor by others is it possible to ask these broader questions.

There are risks inherent to the sources of this period, which will be discussed in greater detail in the chapters below. Two should be foregrounded. First, early medieval written sources disproportionately represent the perceptions of elites, especially male ecclesiastical elites who monopolized (but never entirely) the written word. Second, such authors tended to use topoi inherited from the Roman and Christian literary past. One reason early medieval crowds seem so peaceful and pious is that early medieval texts were written by ecclesiastical authors copying hagiographical or biblical models. If we characterize these depictions as “typical” of early medieval perceptions of the crowd, we risk overstating or overinterpreting the evidence. It is not easy to say how typical one representation of the “crowd” really was in any given period.⁵⁹ This study attempts to overcome this difficulty by putting the written evidence in conversation with nonliterary sources, but the methodological difficulty should be mentioned at the outset.

The Crowd in the Early Middle Ages is roughly divided into two parts. The first examines gatherings as physical phenomena. The second turns to the crowd as idea. A background chapter (chapter 1) sets up the Roman legacy with which the early medieval crowd regime was in conversation. A chapter on numbers (chapter 2) uses archaeology and demography to reconstruct the size and density of crowds in the early medieval West, showing the downward scaling in the possibilities for post-Roman gathering. The subsequent chapters (chapters 3 and 4) examine the resulting ecology of gatherings, in non-elite and elite contexts. Despite constraints upon assembly generated by the new demographic regime, the seasonality of agricultural labor, warfare, political culture, and liturgy allowed for the regular assembly of large numbers. Crowds, it will be argued, played a central role in questions of domination, resistance (including “slantwise” resistance), and competition, but in new ways.

In the second part, a chapter on words (chapter 5) traces the semantic history of crowd words and expressions in early medieval Latin, looking also to Gothic, Romance, Old High German, Old English, and Greek. This shows a loss of specificity and negative connotations in the vocabulary of collective behavior. Finally, a chapter on representation (chapter 6) uncovers some of the patterns with which early medieval writers described collective behaviors: clichés and type scenes that repeat themselves in hagiography, history, liturgy, poetry, and other genres. Here, the focus is on a discursive elision between physical gatherings and the wider abstractions of community or group they can be made to stand for. Attention is given to negative exceptions: the rustics, foreigners, and women used by elite authors to account for “bad” crowds. It concludes with the political, religious, and legal institutions organized around mixture of reality and ideal. The book ends with a transformation around 1000: an age of mass pilgrimages, great assemblies, open-air sermons, and, ultimately, crusades that marked a departure.

The historiography on the topic of crowds in the early Middle Ages directly has, until recently, been small, limited to a handful of literary studies, essays on violence in early medieval Italian cities, and work on peasant collective action.⁶⁰ Yet the subject has ramifications for many spheres of interest for early medieval historians, and, in certain respects, has been touched on by many of them.⁶¹ Early medieval Christianity, from churchgoing to the cult of relics to councils, is bound up with crowds.⁶² Numbers were a scarce resource that elites struggled to control, making crowds a revealing vista onto early medieval social and political power.⁶³ Gatherings are at the heart of a vibrant historiography on assemblies.⁶⁴ Two excellent recent collections, on legal consensus and assembly culture, stress the order-making role of gatherings in the early Middle Ages.⁶⁵ The subject also touches upon the efficacy and mechanics of early medieval law.⁶⁶ Were crowds of witnesses called for in legal texts summoned

in reality, or did they prove more effective in the breach (that is, in protecting elites from prosecution)? Finally, this subject speaks to the way later medieval collective forms—from liturgical gatherings to parliaments—arose from early medieval precedents.⁶⁷

A wider view illuminates all these questions. Even in the face of logistical hurdles to assembly in the early Middle Ages, bishops, abbots, abbesses, counts, kings, and queens found ways to mobilize gatherings to assert power over or extract resources from subjects and to legitimize religious or political behavior. Non-elites too developed uses for crowds, including acts of resistance by nonparticipation and ways of getting by that resisted the intentions of elites in a more “slantwise” manner.⁶⁸ The prominence of the crowd in this period, its value as a way of organizing resources and legitimacy, was a reflection of the peculiar circumstances of early medieval Europe. This helps us grasp an essential truth about this period. Scholars have debated whether to understand Europe, c. 500 to 1000, as an extension of antiquity or as a prelude to the later Middle Ages.⁶⁹ The “crowd” helps us see how this period was its own entity, an age of demographic and logistical constraint committed to remaining as Roman as possible. The history of how a Roman way of crowds gave way to a distinctively early medieval one illuminates the slipperiness of ideas, historiographical and otherwise, about crowds. It is a story that helps us recognize the instability of “the crowd” as we know it now.

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