

Jonathan Stutz: *Stasis. Crowd Violence and Religious-Political Discourses in Late Antiquity*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2024 (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 137). X, 254 S. € 89.00. ISBN: 978-3-16-162637-1.

Today perhaps more than ever we are aware of the political power of accounts of public violence – live streams, images, videos, and analyses proliferate, offering divergent narratives and interpretations that are then debated, denied, instrumentalized and weaponized in opposing ideological directions. The emotive power of stories of violent crowds and abusive authorities alike, of heroes and villains, is also familiar to us as students of Late Antiquity. It has often been noticed that late antique prose texts are filled with accounts such as these – the idea of the volatile baying crowd is a cliché of the period, particularly with regard to both inter and intra religious conflict. After all, Gibbon famously lamented the “melancholy truth [...] that the Christians, in the course of their intestine dissensions, have inflicted far greater severities on each other, than they had experienced from the zeal of infidels”.<sup>1</sup> A more recent eminence, Ramsay MacMullen, wrote of the “violent tenor of life” in the period.<sup>2</sup> That the violent crowds can be approached somewhat differently however, has been shown not least by the important 2020 article of Julio Cesar Magalhães de Oliveira, who elucidated the idea of Late Antiquity as an “Age of Crowds” by arguing convincingly that we should see non-elites taking advantage of a whole range of opportunities to make their voices visible in the streets, going some way beyond the riots of caricature.<sup>3</sup> That the accounts of urban violence that we have were not objective reportage, but partial narratives, filled with *loci communes*, produced by members of the elite who were trained in rhetoric, and who targeted these narratives for particular purposes is clear. This much is foundational for Jonathan Stutz’ new study.

Stutz’ monograph proceeds by a series of case studies to examine a range of representations, across different genres – classical oratory, sermons, letters,

1 E. Gibbon: *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. H. Bury (2nd edition). Vol. 2. London 1992 [1775], p. 147.

2 R. MacMullen: *Cultural and Political Changes in the 4th and 5th Centuries*. In: *Historia* 52, 2003, pp 465–495.

3 J. M. Magalhães de Oliveira: *Late Antiquity: the Age of Crowds*. In: *P&P* 249, 2020, pp. 3–52.

historiography – in order to look at how and why various authors instrumentalized episodes of urban violence (although at times violence recedes from view, as I shall discuss below) to various ends and before various audiences. Underlying these discussions is the “working hypothesis [...] of collective violence as a literary and rhetorical event” (p. 2). Stutz is particularly keen to emphasize “the *performative* quality of these literary representations”, and indeed he stresses that we should understand the texts as rhetorical events. However, they are nonetheless generally considered very much as written texts – it is not particularly important to Stutz perhaps how or even whether they were actually performed (as with Libanius’ *Oration* 15, which although ostensibly addressed to the emperor Julian, was not delivered before him, it is unanimously agreed).

The ‘Late Antiquity’ under discussion here actually begins somewhat early with the inclusion of Dio Chrysostom (c. 40/50–110/20 CE) in the first case-study (Chapter 2, “The Dangerous Mob”, pp. 13–42). This does make sense in that Dio’s negative depictions of the people Alexandria in his *Oration* 32 are well-known for a reason, and the *topoi* used by Dio will recur throughout the later authors studied. Moreover, Alexandria is an important city for Stutz’ study, recurring as the site of disorder and rhetorical construction across several chapters. Aelius Aristides makes a brief appearance but we understandably move swiftly to the fourth century and to the beginning of a series of religious conflicts. Chapter 3 (“Looting Churches”, pp. 43–46) stays in Alexandria, focusing largely on the writings of the consistently-controversial Athanasius, patriarch of the city, repeatedly deposed and exiled, but remaining an irrepressible apologist and polemicist. The next two chapters move to Antioch and away from intra-Christian conflict. Chapter 4 (“Contested Dissent”, pp. 64–85) looks at the famous relationship breakdown between the emperor Julian and the inhabitants of the city that took place in 362/363. Chapter 5 (“A City in Lockdown”, pp. 86–111) considers the aftermath of another flashpoint in imperial/city relations, the Riot of the Statues, that took place in 387, with the rhetoric of the pagan orator Libanius and the preacher John Chrysostom coming to the fore. Chrysostom moved from Antioch to become archbishop of Constantinople in 397 and we too make this move (Chapter 6: “Concord and Communication”, pp. 112–115). Gregory Nazianzen’s work provides a major focus of this chapter, alongside the intriguing anonymous funeral oration for John, who died in exile in 407.

Chapter 7 (“With All Friendship”, pp. 151–179) involves considerable geographical mobility, taking in religious violence in Callinicum, Thessalonica, Rome and Calama, with a particular focus on two more rhetorically expert bishops, Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo. The final substantive chapter (8: “The Beginning of the End”, pp. 180–201) returns us, with a nice bit of ring composition, to Alexandria, and the famous conflict around the destruction of the Serapeum in 391, with a particular focus on the *Ecclesiastical History* of Rufinus. Most of these episodes and texts are well-known but rightly so, and Stutz draws out a number of interesting observations, not least through comparison and association: bringing different genres into conversation bears dividends.

The impressively wide ranging geographical and generic range of this study is perhaps testimony to the book’s origin as a Habilitationsschrift. It also means that sometimes the work feels more like a series of individual close-reading case studies rather than a single monograph with a clear argumentative focus, although the brief final conclusion makes a good job of bringing key themes into view, and might perhaps be read profitably alongside the introduction before proceeding to the main chapters. A key observation from the conclusion is that the *stasis* of the “title did not necessarily refer to the manifestation of physical violence, but rather served the rhetorical function of denoting a specific threat: to the public order and the concord of the state, and – in the context of doctrinal conflicts – to the unity of the Church” (p. 203). Throughout we see our main actors using the varied rhetorical and ideological resources at their disposal to persuade – an emperor, a fellow orator, a reader, a church congregation.

The key argumentative threads in the book relate to Stutz’ interest in the fundamentally rhetorical nature of late antique elite culture, in its full civic and political dimensions, and, correspondingly, of its literature. We are in what is by now quite a familiar late antique world of power, persuasion and *paideia*, as made most famous by Peter Brown. Stutz, as he acknowledges, is very much building upon the work of others in the field who have gone before, including in addition most notably perhaps that of scholars such as Neil McLynn, Peter Van Nuffelen and Claudia Rapp. Against this background, however, there is room for interesting and persuasive readings. The opposition between *stasis* and *homonoia*, for instance, appears across several case studies, and the instrumentalization of the threat of violence for political ends is a constant theme which again appears only too convincing.

Stutz argues convincingly that rhetorical descriptions of violence had a particular power in terms of persuasion, due to its affective nature, to the emotions it produced. However, at a number of points in the study the description of violence in particular rather recedes from view, perhaps more than might be expected from a book in which the term features so prominently in the title. The particular power of representations of *violence* is perhaps after all not Stutz' main interest – we might contrast for instance Brent Shaw's compelling "Sacred Violence", which shows its visceral presence in the textual evidence for the Donatist Controversy<sup>4</sup>: the debated account of the Riots at Calama in North Africa in 408 via which Augustine makes an appearance in Stutz' book is relatively tame. One could also in fact find quite a 'violent tenor of life' looking elsewhere in Libanius, most strikingly in his autobiographical first Oration: he gives a picture of Antioch in which violence, verbal and physical, is very much a general part of life, both at day and night. Amongst many such episodes we might consider his mention of skirmishes amongst students including sticks, stones and cudgels (Lib. or. 1.19–22), the murder of the governor whose body was dragged around the city (1.103), and an alleged plot against himself, as a result of which, he says, he lived in fear for four years (1.136–143). When even the most privileged members of the elite were not immune from such violence, of course the real threat of violence was correspondingly much greater for the less-privileged, who have not left us their accounts. Stutz does in fact recognise this, indeed, early in the book when he cites Joy Connolly's important observation about the role of 'civilized' rhetoric in distracting from the violence endemic in the ancient city due to class and gender inequalities (p. 9).<sup>5</sup>

Readers can profitably turn to the book as a whole and to its individual case studies. It is an attractively presented and usable monograph – the prose is clearly written, citations are ample and readers will welcome the fact that all quotes are given both as English translation and with the accompanying Greek/Latin original form; finally, they will appreciate the presence of a useful *index locorum*, as befits a study rich in close-readings.

4 B. Shaw: *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine*. Cambridge/New York 2011.

5 J. Connolly: *The Politics of Rhetorical Education*. In: E. Gunderson (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Rhetoric*. Cambridge 2009, pp. 126–141, esp. p. 128.

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