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Putting Down the Diadem:

The Late Antique Emperor's Dependence on Persuading the People

In Late Antiquity, the emperor normally wore a diadem in public. If he did not, this was an important political gesture: In 512 the emperor Anastasius, confronted with an uprising, assembled the rioting mob in the hippodrome and appeared bareheaded; the crowd became quiet and begged him to put on his diadem. Twenty years later, Justinian in a similar situation spoke to the people with soothing words but he did not put down the diadem; the result was the Nika revolt, which almost cost him his throne.

Scholarship tends to emphasize the sacral aura of an almost invisible, distant emperor, surrounded by a strict court ceremonial, which anchored him in a sphere far above his people. But even the most autocratic ruler cannot govern without the consent of his subjects. The inhabitants of Constantinople, Milan or Ravenna saw the emperor regularly, they interacted with him and, if they did not approve of his behavior, they could demonstrate their displeasure. To avoid being embarrassed, threatened or—the ultimate escalation—overthrown, the emperor had to win their acceptance. Modern politicians do this by fulfilling some of the wishes of their constituents. But in a society where political responsibility lies with just one person, this is often not possible: the emperor did not want to concede to everyone's wishes for financial reasons, to avoid appearing weak, and because he had to consider competing interests of other sociopolitical groups. So very often, the emperor could express his appreciation only in a symbolic way: he acknowledged the people's importance by accommodating gestures. Actually, the people were satisfied by such demonstrations of respect—and they had to be satisfied. Otherwise, the political system would have broken down. Appearing without the diadem, the most significant symbol of imperial power, fits in this context as a very forceful gesture of humility, performed only in a time of utmost crisis, when the lines of communication were already faltering. This way, without being actually restricted in his factual handling of issues, the emperor was able to persuade his subjects.

Length: 20 minutes

Preferred Panel: nr. 5 (Powers of Persuasion) – may also fit in nr. 2, 4 or 13