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**Shane Bobrycki.** *The Crowd in the Early Middle Ages*. Princeton University Press, 2024. Pp. 336. Cloth \$39.95.

Crowds are a universal phenomenon. Throughout history and across all societies, crowds have emerged and

continue to do so, particularly in urban settings, where they serve as a prominent expression of public life. Crowd dynamics are deeply interwoven with social, political, cultural, economic, and religious developments, making them a subject of great interest to societal leaders. Effective crowd management and control remain crucial for authorities tasked with overseeing the organized or spontaneous activities of large gatherings. Traditional modern scholarship on the early medieval period (500–1000 CE) has often portrayed this era as devoid of crowds. While crowds were undeniably a prominent feature of the Roman world and reemerged noticeably in the High Middle Ages, they seem to have receded into the background, almost as if they had vanished in the period in between. In *The Crowd in the Early Middle Ages*, Shane Bobrycki challenges this conventional perspective, aiming to demonstrate that the Early Middle Ages were in fact full of crowds.

In the introduction, Bobrycki provides a concise yet excellent overview of key trends in crowd research, highlighting how approaches from various disciplines, such as social psychology, sociology, history, and art history, have contributed valuable insights into crowd behavior, both historically and in contemporary contexts. Building on previous insights, Bobrycki introduces a fresh perspective by adopting the more neutral term “gatherings” (coined by sociologist Clark McPhail) to describe expressions of collective behavior in the Early Middle Ages. This choice enables Bobrycki to sidestep the semantic and conceptual baggage that the term “crowd” has accumulated over time, allowing for a more open and nuanced exploration of collective behavior as it emerges in early medieval sources. The author does constantly use the word “crowds” as well, so that does not always make it clear to the reader exactly what the difference is, but the interesting choice to choose a more neutral word in many places in the text is thought-provoking.

The book has six chapters focusing on the actual physical appearance of collectives on the one hand and on the crowd as an idea on the other. The first chapter explores three key characteristics of Roman crowds, which Bobrycki further analyzes in subsequent chapters as traits that either disappear or transform during the early Middle Ages. The first characteristic is scale. Whereas in the Roman world large masses of people came together on an unprecedented scale, a sharp decline in population numbers and deurbanization with subsequent marked but slow recovery led to substantial changes in the scale of large mass gatherings in the early Middle Ages (chapter 2). Based on demographic analyses, the author shows that this does not mean that collective behavior disappeared but that it likely shifted in frequency or in the type of gatherings, often adopting a more regional or local character.

The second characteristic of those earlier Roman crowds is that they also met regularly in the context of public institutions such as the political assemblies that confirmed their importance and to which members of the political elite always had to relate. Such assemblies changed or even disappeared in the early Middle Ages, although the value of the relationship between elite and crowds continued to be prominent, as the author demonstrates in chapters 3 and 4. The author aptly observes that vertical social relationships—rather than horizontal ones—were often the driving force behind large gatherings, as they highlighted the reciprocal and supportive interactions between elites and non-elites. The numerous examples presented in these two chapters, which illustrate a variety of social, political, religious, and economic contexts where collective behavior occurred, emphasize the need to shift our scholarly perspectives. By incorporating the role of the crowds, we can achieve a more comprehensive understanding of early medieval communities.

The detailed semantic analysis in chapter 5, along with the exploration of notable representations of crowds in chapter 6, builds on what Bobrycki introduced in chapter 1 as the third defining characteristic of Roman crowds: the ambivalence they evoke in literary and historical discourse. This ambivalence complicates efforts to form a clear and consistent picture of crowds. In the fifth chapter, the analysis of terms such as *populus*, *contio*, and *turba* reveals significant developments in how early medieval authors used these words. Notably, the author observes that many terms for crowds became more interchangeable, making it harder for modern readers to discern whether a word carries a negative or positive connotation in a given context. Moreover, it becomes evident that the meaning of these terms can vary significantly from one early medieval author to another. This highlights, once again, the indispensable role of philological analysis in shaping our modern interpretations. The sixth and final chapter, through its examination of a wide range of crowd representations across various literary genres, illustrates a notable shift in how crowds were depicted. In Roman contexts, crowds were often portrayed as unruly and vulgar, associated with riots and entertainment. By contrast, in the Early Middle Ages, crowd representations were increasingly used to emphasize the legitimacy of both secular and religious leaders.

This book is highly recommended for readers seeking a more comprehensive perspective on the early medieval world. It highlights the significant, yet often overlooked, role of crowds during this period. While the book can be read in its entirety, its chapters also work well as stand-alone readings for those interested in specific subtopics. It presents fresh perspectives and hypotheses, which, as the author notes, are intended to spark further research. Clearly, this subject remains far

from fully explored, but this book provides an excellent foundation for future investigations.

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