

ABSOLUTIST CELEBRATION IN LATE ANCIEN RÉGIMES: REFLECTIONS ON  
THE RULER RITUALS OF EMPRESS CATHERINE II OF RUSSIA AND KING  
GUSTAV III OF SWEDEN

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# Absolutist Celebration in Late Ancien Régimes: Reflections on the Ruler Rituals of Empress Catherine II of Russia and King Gustav III of Sweden

## Abstract

This *Essay* aims to flesh out and systematize a series of reflections on the inversely proportional relationship between the eroding conceptual basis, in terms of legitimacy and sovereignty, of absolute rulership in the mid- to late eighteenth century, on the one hand, and the proliferation and growth of public celebrations thereof, on the other. The analysis is based on the life circumstances and ceremonial trajectories of empress Catherine II of Russia (r. 1762–1796) and king Gustav III of Sweden (r. 1771–1792). By offering an overarching typology of ruler celebrations and their attendant principles and patterns, the *Essay* serves as a stepping stone towards a) systematic exploration of other eighteenth-century ruler-ruled equations in Europe and beyond, and b) connecting this burgeoning framework to an already existing apparatus for studying ‘ruler visibility’ and ‘popular belonging’ in nineteenth-century and later contexts globally.

This *Essay* is a link in a chain of works I have written over a number of years that have brought forth and developed a novel theoretical and methodological apparatus, centered on the concepts of ‘ruler visibility’ and ‘popular belonging,’ for studying the origin, nature, and evolution of the modern mindset on a mass scale. The essence of it is that macro belonging<sup>1</sup> began as a popular cult of the monarch/dynasty, set in motion by a wide range of ruler and dynastic ceremonies and their attendant cultural production, before transforming into the nation-centered mentality still alive today.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, this *Essay* has a two-fold goal. First, it is a pilot text towards an extension of this framework back to the time preceding the French Revolution, a period referred to by terms such as ‘absolutist’ and ‘late ancien,’ to which I will return shortly. Second, the *Essay* is a starting point for a book I am about to write on the relationship between Swedish and Russian monarchs and their Finnish subjects from the mid-eighteenth century to Finnish independence in 1917. Specifically, it will study the impact of public royal celebrations (imperial tours, royal birthdays, accession and coronation anniversaries, etc.), from Gustav III to Nicholas II,<sup>3</sup> on the evolution of the modern Finnish ethnonational project.

The main body of the *Essay* provides the reader with some relevant condensed historical context in a number of ways. It discusses the rationale for comparing Catherine II and Gustav III. In doing so, the text makes references to royal relatives

and dynasty members, both domestically and abroad, both preceding and contemporary to Catherine and Gustav. These are key pointers to personal networks and role models, which have had a very significant impact on the plotting of the empress's and the king's own ceremonial trajectories. In the process, various legacies come to the fore and are discussed. These include the degree and types of both ruler visibility and popular belonging, and the combined ruler-ruled symbolic interaction prior to these two monarchs' reigns.

With these goals in mind and due to limitations of space, emphasis in this *Essay* will be 1) on the introduction of an overarching typology of ruler celebrations;<sup>4</sup> and 2) on the definition and clarification of its attendant terminology.

It is a self-evident truth that public ceremonies are a microcosm of their respective societies and their core beliefs. They can be read as a mixture of positive (what is) and normative statements (what ought to be) from the most literal level of interpretation to ever higher levels of abstraction. Their evolution is a subject that can also be studied at a number of levels, from concept(ion) to planning and execution. In reality, the power of absolutist rulers was never really 'absolute,' an issue raised with increasing frequency and effectiveness in historical scholarship over the past several decades.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, retaining the concept still seems necessary as a designator of the imbalance of power between the monarchic office and its holder, on the one hand, and any other institution or actor in a number of European polities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, on the other. In fact, despite its gradually weakening metaphysical foundations over the previous few centuries, the monarchic figure was still central to the vast majority of social configurations and their enveloping state formations in this period. In the realm of public ceremony, absolutist rulers exercised an even greater actual control. What follows is an attempt to flesh out and systematize a series of reflections on the inversely proportional relationship between the eroding conceptual basis, in terms of legitimacy and sovereignty, of absolute rulership in the mid- to late eighteenth century and the proliferation and growth of public celebrations thereof by recourse to the individual cases of empress Catherine II of Russia (r. 1762–1796) and king Gustav III of Sweden (r. 1771–1792).

The number of similarities between the two monarchs is staggering. To begin with, they were not only closely related by blood (first cousins), but also intensely involved with each other, presiding as they did over neighboring states, each holding a portion

of what later became the modern state of Finland. Second, Catherine II and Gustav III were both strongly interested in literature and the arts, passionate about theater, wrote for it, as well as in other genres, and even acted in it (Gustav III in the earlier part of his reign). Third, they were both profoundly influenced by the thinkers and ideas of the Enlightenment. For example, each maintained a lively correspondence with Voltaire. Most importantly, for our present purpose, the empress and the king shared a set of questionable circumstances accompanying their respective rises to power, which, guided by equally strong political ambitions, each overcame in large part thanks to ceremonial innovation *en route* to a long reign. All of these considerations, whose list here is by no means exhaustive, make the comparative exploration of the terms and dynamics of ritual interaction between the ruler and the ruled in Russia and Sweden on the threshold of the modern era not only feasible but highly promising. Beyond improving our picture of the two historical trajectories in question, what we stand to gain by pursuing such a course is nothing less than a better overarching understanding, both theoretically and empirically, of that still under-researched ‘grey area’ between early/pre-/non-modern mentalities and modernity proper as a form of belonging playing out to this day.

Before we initiate a discussion of the remarkably similar policies of representation and self-celebration of Catherine II and Gustav III, a brief overview of their no less similar starting positions is in order. Each rose to the throne abruptly—in Catherine’s case, by the *coup d’état* against her husband, emperor Peter III, barely six months into his reign, and his subsequent death under murky circumstances on June 29, 1762, and in Gustav’s case, by the sudden death of Gustav’s father, king Adolf Fredrik (r. 1751–1771), on Feb. 12, 1771. Despite this unexpected coming to power, each had already been well-known and liked by the public. Princess Sophia Augusta Frederica of Anhalt-Zerbst lived in Russia since 1744, married to the heir since 1745. Upon arrival, she also converted to Orthodoxy, baptized as Ekaterina Alekseevna by empress Elisaveta Petrovna (r. 1741–1761) herself.<sup>6</sup> As crown prince, Gustav himself had gained recognition and popularity via two widely publicized rituals—his wedding to Princess Sofia Magdalena of Denmark in 1766 and his tour of the Swedish countryside in 1768. These ceremonial events not only forged his own compelling public image but also helped shore up the reigning king’s and queen’s own legitimacy after their two unsuccessful attempts to seize full power in 1756 and 1768.

The backdrop to king Adolf Fredrik's and his wife queen Louisa Ulrika's<sup>7</sup> two *coup d'état* attempts was the limited monarchical system established in Sweden in 1719 in the aftermath of the reigns of Charles XI (r. 1660–1697) and Charles XII (r. 1697–1718). This system was a response to the devastation these tumultuous absolutist reigns brought to Sweden via a series of domestic measures (especially, crown appropriations) and a catastrophic Great Northern War against Russia (1700–1721). Thereafter, parliamentary governance prevailed, a period which came to be known as the 'Age of Liberty' (1719–1772). This state of affairs was the main stumbling block for Gustav III *en route* to an absolute exercise of power. Of secondary, though still substantial significance for his future ceremonial course, was the fact that the new king belonged to a very recent dynasty—the Holstein-Gottorp branch of the House of Oldenburg—installed only with his father, at the behest of empress Elisaveta of Russia. Although neither of these two factors affected Catherine's rise to power—there was no parliamentary arrangement in Russia, and the House of Romanov had been legitimately elected to office back in 1613, her legitimacy deficit was even more acute. Most damning was Catherine's direct involvement in the coup against her husband and his untimely death the following day. Secondly, Catherine's German origin did not bode well for her chances to assume the reins of supreme power in a country where twice in living memory (in 1730 and 1741), *coup d'états* involving high domestic nobility and powerful foreigners (acting as such), even if legitimate claimants, had been defeated. Third, her gender, although not thoroughly problematic in itself, given the stable reigns of at least three empresses before her, all of whom died naturally, had its serious drawbacks. Given that Catherine's ambition went far beyond serving as mother regent for her son, Grand Duke Paul, she had to design compensatory ceremonial measures. In this respect, she learned much from Maria Theresa of the Habsburg Empire (r. 1740–1780), who had faced an even greater such challenge upon coming to the throne. Finally, in a country where monarchs at least until Peter I (r. 1682–1725) had been widely revered for their intense religiosity, Catherine had to prove the sincerity of her recently acquired Orthodox faith.

The multi-pronged ceremonial responses of these two monarchs to their respective legitimacy crises can best be evaluated against the background of the ruler-ruled equation, sketched in broad strokes, prior to the French Revolution, which was radically different from our own today. Of paramount importance is the notion of a far more

limited macro public sphere where the vast majority of people predominantly belonged to a three-tiered social system locally. First, they belonged to a community of faith, based on their physical residence. Second, they belonged to fairly rigid social classes or estates, based on their origin, background, and type of livelihood, both locally and if/when they traveled. Third, spatially, they belonged in a very real and binding sense to their villages or hometowns and their respective districts up to the level of a historical region, defined by geography (lowland, river, mountain, etc.) and lived experience, i.e. linguistically (dialects), culturally (customs, sayings, etc.), sartorially (local and regional variations in dress) and so on. The notion of a greater realm, be it Russia or Sweden, existed, but was not a commanding presence in the lives of most royal subjects outside the topmost social layer in the capital and the major towns. Naturally, public rituals reflected this state of affairs. Although the name of the ruler was regularly read from pulpits of temples across provinces and denominations, and some of his/her festive occasions were from time to time marked locally, this was rarely done with regularity or intensity. As a matter of fact, the vast majority of subjects never got to experience the sovereign's presence, whether directly or indirectly, except when it had been truthfully imprinted on circulation coins.<sup>8</sup>

With all of this in mind, Catherine II's and Gustav III's decisions to greatly increase their exposure to the public gaze are easy to understand. In fact, both set precedents for their respective realms. Catherine II initiated the practice of extensive royal travel throughout the far-flung imperial domains, accompanied by heavy rituality—local welcoming ceremonies, royal inspections of schools and hospitals, military reviews, public processions, balls, decorations, illuminations, salutations, etc.<sup>9</sup> Picked up most vigorously by her grandson, the future Alexander I, over whose upbringing she had taken personal charge, royal travel became an imperative for all subsequent rulers over the rest of the Empire's existence.

Gustav III's trajectory was analogous. As already mentioned, he travelled widely throughout Sweden even as crown prince, a trend which only accelerated after he became king. Gustav III held Finland in particularly high esteem, for both personal and geopolitical reasons, and visited it no fewer than eight times, that is, twice more than the next most frequent royal visitor<sup>10</sup> over the previous two and a half centuries, and eight times more than his immediate predecessor Fredrik Adolf who had visited Finland only once, in 1752.<sup>11</sup> Although Gustav III would later claim that the purpose of his first

and most extensive visit (1775) was “to see (things) with my own eyes [...] and gain a full acquaintance with the country’s needs,” one would be well-justified to suspect that *to be seen* was just as vital to the new king.<sup>12</sup> For example, on his first stop, the capital Åbo (Turku), he was welcomed with cannon salvos, bands playing, and a triumphal arch. In the evening, all houses were illuminated, and a great firework display, which included a portrayal of the king’s name in various colors, was arranged across from the royal residence.<sup>13</sup>

As Catherine II and Gustav III were travelling throughout their realms, they were connecting, quite literally, the series of largely compartmentalized, semi-autonomous local circles contemporary society operated through. Whereas in the past, Russian and Swedish monarchs had been involved overwhelmingly in court rituals accessible to a privileged few and restricted to the capital and nearby palatial complexes alone, the new strategy, reflected in a periodical press, which was booming in both Russia and Sweden in the 1770s and 1780s, took ruler visibility to new heights. It provided regular and detailed descriptions of the royal travelers’ ceremonial outreach to their subjects along the way, irrespective of language, location, creed, or class, to a larger reading public than ever before. The removal of physical barriers between the ruler and the ruled initiated a slow but steady erosion of mental ones as well, and led to a gradual, inexorable extension of the circle of ceremonial inclusion towards the periphery and the very bottom ranks of society. This is not to say that the newly added participants had any ceremonial agency or freedom to improvise in their encounters with the center embodied by the ruler. On the contrary, their expected position was of near complete passivity and full ideational receptivity. What this meant was a tilt towards the didactic nature of ruler-centric celebrations and their potential virtue-enhancing, character-edifying capacities with respect to celebrants. In the Swedish case, this philosophy can be traced back to two actual letters, dated July 15 and August 1, 1773, from Pierre Samuel Dupont de Nemours (1739–1817), a French economist, political figure, and philosopher to Gustav III’s close adviser, Carl Fredrik Scheffer (1715–1786). In them, Dupont viewed rulers as obliged to educate their people in open and exciting ways and, with the help of ceremonies, instill in them feelings of (macro) patriotism, monarchic loyalty, and social cohesion.<sup>14</sup> Ideas of this kind underwrote a very wide gamut of more or less public festivities meant to cultivate a virtuous and obedient populace in both

realms. In terms of temporal orientation, these celebrations can be divided roughly into three clusters.

The first cluster consisted of more or less archaic ceremonies of bygone times, ranging from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to the glorious absolutism of the seventeenth century, most vividly captured in the image of the French king Louis XIV (r. 1643–1715). These celebrations, re-imagined and harnessed in the service of contemporary power projections, included *divertissements* (theatricalized spectacles) and masquerades, carousels (spectacles featuring an element of a knightly tournament), and mock knightly tournaments. Gustav III idolized the Sun King to such a degree that he also borrowed his *levee*—the daily ‘morning toilette.’<sup>15</sup> In fact, the king had it performed both in Stockholm and while on tour in Finland. By incorporating in this prestigious public ritual Swedish and foreign elite members alike, Gustav III intended it as a co-optation strategy drawing, quite literally, select individuals into the royal orbit.

The second cluster consisted of internationally accepted and increasingly common contemporary public ruler celebrations, such as the royal birthday, accession day, coronation day, and name day. Although they had been marked in a familial atmosphere within each royal household and the highly restricted courtly environs for a long time, they only began to gain more regular traction farther afield in the latter half of the eighteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

The third cluster of celebrations was also tied to the present, but unlike the latter, it was neither privately sourced (exclusively ruler- or dynasty-centric) nor predictable. Instead, it was inspired by particular, newly unfolding historical events of various magnitudes and their unique cultural contexts. These new socioeconomic and geopolitical developments in the public arena concerned both the ruler and the realm, inextricably linking the two. One example specific to Sweden was Gustav III’s successful *coup d’état* of 1772, which led to the promulgation of a new constitution increasing the royal prerogative. The cases of the third cluster, which were most numerous and with a comparable impact in each realm, invariably had to do with war, whether with each other (Russo-Swedish War of 1788–1790) or a third party (Russo-Ottoman Wars of 1768–1774 and 1787–1792; Swedo-Danish War of 1788–1789). In this highly profitable area, battles, ranging from skirmish to stalemate, could be celebrated as victories, at times with a large degree of flexibility regarding the truth, or

even an entire war (the Swedo-Danish War) could and did become known as “the Theater War (*Teaterkriget*).”<sup>17</sup>

All three clusters of celebrations went hand in hand with the practice of ‘cross-dating,’ whose deployment would only grow in subsequent centuries, leading up to the present day. ‘Cross-dating’ refers to the act of combining one ceremonial occasion (such as, for example, the inauguration of a building) with another (such as, for example, the royal accession anniversary) on the same day for an accumulated effect on the public mind. This was a major strategy for autocratic legitimation in many late empires and nation-state regimes alike.<sup>18</sup> The significance of the temporal cluster delineation notwithstanding, a subject we will re-visit at this *Essay’s* end, the Catherinian and Gustavian absolutist regimes witnessed an incredible variety of combinations across the three types. The most defining characteristic of this ceremonial hybridity was a paradoxical, from our present-day perspective, drive for and a kind of yin-and-yang co-existence of the principles of ‘theatricality’ and ‘authenticity.’ A further, subordinate feature, which can be described as a fixed (static) aspect of theatricality, was the visual deployment of ‘allegory.’ In fact, if we define the standard types of ruler visibility as direct (literal)<sup>19</sup> and indirect (figurative),<sup>20</sup> it becomes obvious that allegorical representations of the ruler, by being both direct and figurative, constitute a third type of ruler visibility, a hybrid of the other two.

Let us examine in some detail a concrete ceremonial example from the outset of Catherine II’s reign as a) an instructive illustration of foregoing theoretical considerations and b) a stepping stone for further systematic reflection. While still in Moscow, as part of her extended (six-month) stay in the old capital on the occasion of her coronation in Sept. 1762, the empress had an extraordinary spectacle organized for the population at large at Shrovetide, in January 1763. Its title was “‘Minerva Triumphant’ in which the vileness of the vices and the glory of the virtues are presented.”<sup>21</sup> Although it was not uncommon for masquerades to accompany coronation festivities, they had until then been the domain of the elite and had taken place exclusively behind closed doors. Such did indeed take place shortly after Catherine II’s coronation, although they were not publicized, probably due to the empress’s wish to downplay her foreignness and/or elitism. In contrast, “Minerva Triumphant” was a street masquerade,

a cavalcade that lasted three days and comprised nearly four thousand individuals and two hundred floats [...] The floats satirized stupidity and ignorance, drunkenness, deceit, arrogance, and prodigality. The masquerade was combined with extensive popular amusements, games, dances, puppet shows, and magicians [...] The cavalcade of dwarfs and giants, satyrs, drunkards, and fools concluded with the figures of Vulcan and Jupiter and then a parade of the virtues accompanying Minerva herself. The choruses ended with invocations of Astraea and the Age of Gold.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, barely a few months into her reign, the empress justified her right to rule by recourse to a noble Enlightenment-style mission to purify and uplift her subjects. She did so as Minerva, the Roman iteration of the ancient Greek virgin goddess Athena Pallas, a symbol of both military strength and wisdom/science/progress. Although this image had been equated with early modern rulers at least since Elizabeth I of England, including Catherine I, Elisaveta Petrovna, and even Louisa Ulrika,<sup>23</sup> Catherine II made it her own. Early on, her identification with the goddess became the subject of numerous odes,<sup>24</sup> firework displays,<sup>25</sup> medals,<sup>26</sup> gold boxes,<sup>27</sup> paintings,<sup>28</sup> and portrait busts (in a helmet, a bellicose image).<sup>29</sup> The image of Astraea, another virgin goddess, first employed by Elisaveta Petrovna, was also embraced by Catherine II due to her strong association with ‘justice’, the saving of the realm, and the return to the fabled Age of Gold.

Another member of the large Greco-Roman pantheon of deities and heroes whose images had been circulating across Europe’s royal courts since the Renaissance was Hercules. In Russia, Peter I, the great military leader, reformer, and glorious autocrat, had adorned Russia’s first triumphal arches with him since 1696. For the medal commemorating his 1772 coup-d-e’tat-cum-revolution, Gustav III had himself depicted as Hercules crushing the Hydra of party politics and discord.<sup>30</sup> The point was to present the ruler and his family as awe-inspiring objects of veneration, standing far apart from their subject people(s) in an increasing number of ways. To this end, portrayals of the royal membership in realms not subject to popular opinion or contestation (as opposed to acclamation) went a long way. Along these lines, the Greco-Roman pantheon of gods and heroes, the most removed from everyday realities, was only one of several such realms. The closest, most ceremonially exploited realm connecting lived and mythical pasts was the realm of dynastic history in Russia and Sweden. Against the picture of division and chaos inherited from their power-wielding predecessors (Peter III and the Hats/Caps parties, respectively), whom they cast as

enemies of the people, both Catherine II and Gustav III re-enacted a return to an ‘Age of Gold’ by assuming the mantles of famous ancestors going further back in time. For the empress, none loomed larger than Peter I, whom she called “grandfather,” conjured up at every step, and imitated in a myriad ways from start to finish in her long reign. For the king, the fortuitous fact that the two previous monarchs of the same name had been widely considered the greatest—Gustav I (r. 1523–1560) who founded both the Vasa dynasty and the latest Swedish state, and Gustav Adolph who turned it into a great power—not only settled the choice of name for his heir, the future Gustav IV Adolf (r. 1792–1809), but became a source of endless ceremonial improvisation (from drawings,<sup>31</sup> paintings,<sup>32</sup> busts and statues<sup>33</sup> to pocketbook histories<sup>34</sup> and historical operas<sup>35</sup> whose librettos Gustav III penned himself).

A closer look at the gradual unfolding and kaleidoscopic breadth of Gustavian celebrations reveals a curious pattern, which can be called ‘targeted theatricality,’ worthy of further elaboration. The base target audience consisted of the immediate royal family, its closest attendants, and select court members. For them, *divertissements* dedicated to notable occasions, such as birthdays<sup>36</sup> and name days,<sup>37</sup> or even one’s recovery from illness,<sup>38</sup> were composed and staged within the royal precincts by the king and his relatives themselves. The next, wider target audience comprised the nobility. They became increasingly drawn into mythologically and historically themed carousels and tournaments, which gradually spilled out to fully accessible public spaces in Stockholm and its vicinity. By the mid-1780s, the final and by far largest target audience comprising the entire subjecthood, was not only granted access to all of these festivities, including *divertissements* (such as the one accompanying the laying of the cornerstone of a new palace at Haga, near Stockholm, on the anniversary of the king’s *coup d’état*, Aug. 19, 1786), but also to the previously elitist artistic entertainment and Gustav’s most favorite monologic medium—the opera.

This targeted (differential) theatricality can be illustrated by the words denoting slightly varied emotional responses these top-down celebratory stimuli were meant to evoke in their recipients—‘pleasure’ for the upper class and ‘joy’ for the rest. Over time, however, it seems that these feelings got merged and subsumed in a common state of paradisiacal ‘happiness,’ the ultimate validator of a monarch’s right to rule. By sifting through a great number of ruler ceremonies and examining their minutiae, it becomes obvious that this ‘happiness’ had two components. The first was a utilitarian,

somewhat materialistic notion of ‘prosperity’ and its own constituent cluster (‘social good,’ ‘order,’ ‘reform,’ ‘justice’). The second was a largely idealistic form of love circulating between the ruler, the land, and the people. Both were infused with the notion of ‘duty’ naturally arising within a familial model of the realm, in which the ruler and the land could each play the paternal/maternal role, whereas the people invariably filled the subordinate role of ‘children.’ On the contractual side of this two-way duty, the ruler upheld the overall power structure and committed to ‘tireless/incessant care,’ ‘largesse,’ and ‘mercy,’ whereas the people repaid her/him with law-abiding conduct and loyalty. On the emotional side, the metaphor of the heart (‘pure,’ ‘true,’ ‘burning,’ etc.), a metonymy of the individual, did unite but also subtly equate the ruler with the ruled. Over time, despite the fact that neither Catherine II nor Gustav III was willing to close the loop with the people, thereby providing solid avenues for her/his own legitimacy, along modern, post-French-Revolution lines, the two monarchs nonetheless responded to pressures in that direction and oriented themselves towards a softer (truncated) version thereof, namely, the principle of ‘authenticity.’

First, in terms of descent and language, Gustav III clearly had the upper hand over the empress. Being the first native-born Swedish monarch in almost a century,<sup>39</sup> he also became the first to a) address his subjects directly, and b) do so in Swedish, employing his natural oratorical skills and extensive rhetorical training to great effect. Moreover, the king single-mindedly promoted Swedish as the engine of an operatic Golden Age he eventually presided over. Even though Catherine II became proficient in Russian, a language which was beginning to hold its own and attract patriotic attachments in the second half of the eighteenth century, her strongest suit remained the undisputed leadership over a militarily successful and ever-expanding empire, which she took full advantage of on the ceremonial plane.

Second, in terms of the authenticity of dress, the king and the empress took very similar ceremonial measures. Following up on one of Dupont’s suggestions, Gustav III designed a “Swedish national costume,” derived from Gustav-Adolph-era fashions, and made it a court requirement.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, Catherine II introduced ‘the Russian dress’ for highly placed women to wear at important ceremonies. It included native elements, taken from seventeenth-century robes, and was worn with a Russian-style tiara (*kokoshnik*).<sup>41</sup>

Third, when it came to the authenticity of the people, especially peasants—the lowest, most numerous social strata in each realm—despite the existence of great structural differences, ceremonial patterns of convergence between the two absolutist regimes were also at play.

Given the reality of serfdom and the much more rigid social hierarchies in Russia, it would be natural to expect the ceremonial role of the people to be limited to Roman-imperial-style acclamation only. Such did indeed take place on a grander scale than ever before, starting with unprecedented coronation crowd ‘Hurrahs,’ night and day, continuing on the empress’s multiple far-ranging and long-lasting domestic trips, where she explicitly forbade crowd dispersal, and spreading to newly opened spaces designated for public victory (and ruler) celebrations, such as Khodynka Field in Moscow.<sup>42</sup> However, in the spirit of rightful rulership and its Enlightenment template, Catherine II also laid claim to the image of a legislatrix, visualized, among other ways, with the aid of yet another Greco-Roman goddess, Themis. Early on, in 1767, the empress established a commission of “deputies from the estates—nobility, townspeople, state peasants, and deputies from the ‘non-Russian tribes.’ The Instruction (*Nakaz*) that she composed to guide them [...] was published in German, French, English, and Latin, giving it immediate notoriety.”<sup>43</sup> This iconic Enlightenment text underwent “six editions [...] between 1767 and 1771, and four more during the remaining years of Catherine II’s reign.”<sup>44</sup>

By contrast, in Sweden, where peasants were free, one of the four estates at the sporadic Diets (French-*parlement*-style deliberative councils), Gustav III sought to leverage their support vis-à-vis an increasingly disenchanted nobility by way of deft rhetorical and ritualistic maneuvers. A keystone in his symbolic structure, of much larger ceremonial than factual import, was the drawn-out opening of a new court of appeals in Vasa (Ostrobothnia) in the aftermath of the king’s 1775 trip to Finland, which included a sequence of celebratory steps, all centered on the ruler, in a number of locales over a number of years. Due to space limitations, it suffices to list the proclamation (Tavastehus), installation (Stockholm), court inauguration (Vasa), and building inauguration (Vasa) ceremonies, not to mention the commemorative medals, paintings, etc., from 1775 to 1786. Clearly, this was Gustav III’s response to Catherine II’s *Nakaz*. Needless to say, the court building was dedicated to Themis.

Catherine II and Gustav III met on two separate occasions—in 1777 in Saint Petersburg and in 1783 in Fredrikshamn (Hamina), Russia-controlled Finland near the border with Sweden. The first series of encounters during the king’s month-long visit to the Russian capital and its vicinity came at a far more favorable time geopolitically and was consequently full of amicable ceremonial gestures and gift exchanges imbued with a shared jovial mood. As a way of bringing together many threads developed in this *Essay*, let us examine in some detail one particularly colorful set of rituals the two royalties shared, namely, a visit to a new palatial complex *7 versts* (~7.5 km)<sup>45</sup> south of Saint Petersburg and an Orthodox ceremony of laying the foundation stone for its church. Allegedly, the location coincided with the spot where Catherine II had received the news of Russia’s first ever naval victory in the Mediterranean—the annihilation of the Ottoman fleet at the Battle of Chesme (June 24–26, 1770) during the 1768–1774 Russo-Ottoman War. A palace meant as a resting place on the road from St. Petersburg to Tsarskoe Selo, the empress’s favorite summer residence, was built and furnished, from 1774 to 1777, just in time for the Swedish king’s visit. In the early afternoon of June 6, 1777, the day after Gustav III had first arrived in Russia and met Catherine II, on an incognito trip, under the assumed identity of ‘Count of Gotland,’<sup>46</sup> the above-mentioned ceremony began. A religious procession set off from the palace to the selected site along a route covered by a red carpet. First came the court singers, who intoned “the Heavenly Tsar” prayer hymn, followed by priests, archimandrites, and metropolitans, with the two monarchs and their retinues at the back. On arrival, the Orthodox service, conducted by the clergy, dedicated the new church to the Acquisition of St. John the Baptist’s Head<sup>47</sup> while the exalted guests looked on from a specially placed section on a laid carpet, with the front railing covered in green velvet edged with gold. After the service, on completion of the litany of lesser supplication and the singing of the prayer “for many years,”<sup>48</sup> the empress kissed the “Life-giving”<sup>49</sup> cross held by Gabriel, the Metropolitan of Novgorod and St. Petersburg, whereas all clergymen kissed her hand. The symbolic apex of royal participation came when the palace engineer Lieutenant-General Mikhail Mordvinov brought forth a silver tray with some soil and a gilded trowel on it. First the empress and then the king scooped up a bit of soil from the tray with the trowel and poured it down in the shape of the church’s first two bricks. With the dedication ceremony complete, the entire procession returned to the palace which was sprinkled with holy water by Metropolitan Gabriel following

another prayer “for many years.”<sup>50</sup> This palace was then known as *La Grenouillere* in French or *Kekerekeksina/Kekeriki* (from a local onomatopoeic Ingrian word for the frog marsh originally on the site). Architecturally, its neo-Gothic style was a throwback to the English Middle Ages, an impression confirmed by the masterfully executed porcelain dining set the royals used for dinner there that day, which displayed a wide variety of landscapes<sup>51</sup> from old England,<sup>52</sup> each unit also sporting a specially designed green-frog crest. While at the palace, the king of Sweden inspected two sets of dynastic portrait galleries recently installed. One was domestic and historical containing portraits and medallions/bas reliefs of 59 rulers, from the Varangian Rurik of mythic status all the way to Catherine II.<sup>53</sup> The other was foreign and contemporary containing portraits of the core members of all major European dynastic houses (as of 1775). The latter included “the Swedish Room” with 3 portraits—of the king, his wife, and the queen mother—whose procurement Gustav III had facilitated years earlier.<sup>54</sup> As Magnus Olausson points out, “impressions from this trip no doubt spurred the king in his resolve to establish a ‘gallery of contemporaries’ of his own at Gripsholm Castle.<sup>55</sup> It was modelled, though, not on Catherine’s portrait collection [...] which was arranged by family, but on Gustav Vasa’s gallery of princes at Gripsholm itself.”<sup>56</sup> Three years later, on June 24, 1780, the feast of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist, another European royalty, the Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II (r. 1765–1790) on an incognito trip under the assumed identity of “count Falkenstein”<sup>57</sup> played a role very similar to Gustav III’s except in the church’s Orthodox sanctification rites. On that day, which also marked the tenth anniversary of the by then famous battle, the empress had the entire palatial complex renamed Chesmensky in honor of the victory.<sup>58</sup> In 1783, after meeting with Gustav III in Fredrikshamn, Catherine II once more hurried back to the same church for the same anniversary service.<sup>59</sup> Over the following fifty years, this church served as the titular temple for the Order of St. George for “the rewarding of excellent military feats and the encouragement of the military arts.”<sup>60</sup>

This spectacular example illustrates the exceptional plasticity of ceremonial time/space as Catherine II and Gustav III envisioned and practiced it in the latter part of the eighteenth century. The Chesmensky Palace and its church thus became a complex and captivating cross-point of a number of physical, temporal and metaphysical realms—from the organic *topos* of the local marsh and its metonymic emblem of the frog to the Eastern Mediterranean battle victory, which seemingly

announced the resuscitation of the Byzantine Empire under the aegis of Catherine II's "Greek project,"<sup>61</sup> to the English Middle Ages (far away in both time and space, yet supporting that same project), to say nothing of the longitudinal (domestic) and latitudinal (foreign) dynastic realms evoked by the portrait galleries.

The stacking and interweaving of all these layers of meaning, which I have barely begun to decode in this *Essay*, was a well-crafted strategy containing far more calculation than personal whimsy and leaving little place for coincidence. In the end, what these two monarchs undertook was a rich, drawn-out experiment, permissible by the standards of their time, in regaining and enhancing the mystique of absolute rulership in principle and for themselves, in their life and thereafter. Incidentally, along the way, the empress and the king also cast very long shadows over their successors, both of whom got overthrown after relatively brief reigns; one losing his life (Paul I in 1801), the other being exiled abroad, the last of his dynasty (Gustav IV Adolf in 1809). As it turned out, training the spotlight on the ruler as the cynosure of public attention invariably implied a large and increasing burden of (adaptive) public expectations, which could and occasionally did prove crushing to persons of weaker or altogether inadequate character, as the case of Emperor Nicholas II (r. 1894–1917) also demonstrated more than a century later. Of far greater significance, however, was the fact that in their quest for immortality, Catherine II and Gustav III employed unprecedented techniques for unlocking the imagination of the people and anchoring their loyalties to the sovereign. Subsequent monarchs borrowed these techniques almost wholesale and deployed them against their own legitimacy deficits in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the continuous expansion and gradual intensification of this sort of symbolic politics led to the ever closer ceremonial integration of the populace and the gradual fusion of the previously dominant social estates into emergent, increasingly homogenous religio-linguistic communities. Thus, in the long run, the immortality of nations replaced the immortality of rulers as the overarching concept driving popular belonging. It is this author's firm belief that contextual variances notwithstanding, the core logic, principles, and patterns sketched out in this *Essay* can be profitably applied in the study of monarchic and nation-state ceremonial regimes not only in Europe, but across the globe, from the eighteenth century to this day.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Belonging to a realm greater than the combined parameters of one's lived reality expressed in physical, mental and emotional terms.
- <sup>2</sup> For an overview of the entire thirteen-point model, see Darin Stephanov, "Modern Monarchic Visibility in Eurasian Empires," in *Staging Authority: Presentation and Power in Nineteenth-Century Europe. A Handbook*, eds. Eva Giloi et al. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2022), 363–392, here: 368–369.
- <sup>3</sup> The formation of the Grand Duchy of Finland (1809–1917) signaled a sovereignty transfer from the Swedish kings to the Russian emperors, with Alexander I (r. 1801–1825) serving as its first Grand Duke.
- <sup>4</sup> For a similar essay on Alexander I's successor, see Darin Stephanov, "Public Celebrations of Emperor Nicholas I (1825–1855) in the Grand Duchy of Finland: Typology, Dynamics, Impact," in *400-letie Doma Romanovyih, 1613–2013. Politika Pamyati i Monarhicheskaya Ideya*, eds. Vladimir Lapin and Yulia Safronova (Saint Petersburg: European University Press, 2016): 89–103.
- <sup>5</sup> The scientific literature on various aspects of absolutism is immense. The following examples spanning four decades comprise but a small selection: J.S. Morrill, "French Absolutism as Limited Monarchy," *The Historical Journal* 21, no. 4 (1978): 961–972; Charles Ingrao, "The Problem of 'Enlightened Absolutism' and the German States," *Journal of Modern History* 58, Suppl. (1986): 161–180; Richard Bonney, "Absolutism: What's in a Name?," *French History* 1, no. 1 (1987): 93–117; Nicholas Henshall, *The Myth of Absolutism: Change and Continuity in Early Modern European Monarchy* (London: Longman, 1992); Horst Dreitzel, *Absolutismus und ständische Verfassung in Deutschland: ein Beitrag zu Kontinuität und Diskontinuität der politischen Theorie in der frühen Neuzeit* (Mainz: Ph. von Zabern, 1992); Volker Bauer, *Die höfische Gesellschaft in Deutschland von der Mitte des 17. bis zum Ausgang des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1993); Jörg Jochen Berns and Thomas Rahn, eds., *Zeremoniell als höfische Ästhetik im Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1995); Richard Bonney, *The Limits of Absolutism in Ancien Regime France* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1995); Wolfgang Schmale, "The Future of 'Absolutism' in Historiography: Recent Tendencies," *Journal of Early Modern History* 2, no. 2 (1998): 192–202; Hans Blom, John Christian Laursen and Luisa Simonutti, eds., *Monarchisms in the Age of Enlightenment: Liberty, Patriotism, and the Common Good* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007); Dagmar Freist, *Absolutismus* (Darmstadt: WBG Academic, 2008); Cesare Cuttica, "A Thing or Two about Absolutism and Its Historiography," *History of European Ideas* 39, no. 2 (2013): 287–300; Cesare Cuttica and Glenn Burgess, eds., *Monarchy and Absolutism in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2016).
- <sup>6</sup> Thus, in effect, Peter I's daughter gave the German princess her own mother's exact adopted Russian name (Catherine I was of Polish or Lithuanian descent). Doubtless, the idea was to give the newcomer a flying start in terms of personal mystique and subject loyalty.
- <sup>7</sup> Louisa Ulrika (r. 1751–1771) was the sister of king Friedrich II of Prussia (r. 1740–1786), who was also a Voltaire admirer and a paragon of Enlightenment rulership.
- <sup>8</sup> See Jonas Nordin, "Mediating Images of Monarchy from Castle to Cottage in Eighteenth-Century Sweden," in *Media & Mediation in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Jonas Nordin and Penelope Corfield (Lund: Lund University Press, 2023): 25–72, here: 50.
- <sup>9</sup> See Nina Bessarabova, *Puteshestviia Ekateriny II po Rossii* (Moscow: Institut RI-RAN, 2005); Guzel' Ibneeva, *Imperskaya Politika Ekateriny II v Zerkale Ventsenosnyih Puteshestviy* (Moscow: Pamyatniki Istoricheskoy Myisli, 2009); Alina Mahotina, *Panegiricheskaya Programma i Ee*

*Hudozhestvennoe Voploshtenie v Isskustve Gosudarstvennyih Prazdnenstv Epohi Ekateriny II* (Moscow: MGY, 2011).

- <sup>10</sup> This was King Gustav Adolph (r. 1611–1632).
- <sup>11</sup> Stuart P. Oakley, “Gustavus III and Finland in 1775,” *Scandinavian Studies* 51, no. 1 (1979): 1–12, here: 9, endnote 1.
- <sup>12</sup> Oakley, “Gustavus III,” 2.
- <sup>13</sup> Oakley, “Gustavus III,” 3.
- <sup>14</sup> Maria Berlova, *Performing Power: The Political Secrets of Gustav III (1771–1792)* (London: Routledge, 2001), 116–117.
- <sup>15</sup> The levee was traditionally a daily moment of intimacy and accessibility of the ruler, as he/she got up in the morning, got dressed, had their hair made, etc. The opportunity to participate was bestowed as a privilege to members of the top echelon of society. See Berlova, *Performing Power*, 9–11, 19.
- <sup>16</sup> On seventeenth-century Russian court celebrations of name days, see Gary Marker, *Imperial Saint: The Cult of St. Catherine and the Dawn of Female Rule in Russia* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007), 17–18, 72–73.
- <sup>17</sup> Ulf Sundberg, *Svenska krig 1521–1814* (Stockholm: Hjalmarson & Högberg, 1998), 353.
- <sup>18</sup> Stephanov, “Modern Monarchic Visibility,” 377, footnote 44.
- <sup>19</sup> The ruler’s physical presence or his/her visually faithful representations, such as portraits, busts, etc.
- <sup>20</sup> Symbolic proxies of the ruler, such as monograms, cyphers, regalia-based motifs, etc.
- <sup>21</sup> *Torzhestvuyushchaya Minerva: Obshtenarodnoe Zrelishte Predstavlennoe Bol’shim Maskaradom v Moskve* (Moscow: Imp. Moskov. Universitet, 1763).
- <sup>22</sup> Richard Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy. Vol. 1. From Peter the Great to the Death of Nicholas I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 118–120.
- <sup>23</sup> See Merit Laine, “An Archivist Queen? Lovisa Ulrika and the Historical Documents at Drottningholm Palace,” in *From Dust to Dawn: Archival Studies after the Archival Turn*, eds. Otto Fischer et al. (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2022), 272, where she identifies “an established Minerva ‘genealogy’ of Swedish queens starting with queen Christina [r. 1632–1654].” See also Henrika Tandefelt, “‘Enlightened Monarchy’ in Practice: Reforms, Ceremonies, Self-Fashioning and the Entanglement of Ideals and Values in Late Eighteenth-Century Sweden,” in *COLLeGIUM: Studies across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences* 16, (2014): 6–33, here: 8.
- <sup>24</sup> See Mikhail Lomonosov, “Oda Torzhestvennaya Eya Imperatorskomu Velichestvu ... na Preslavnoe Eya Vosshestvie na Vserossiyskiy Imp. Prestol Iyunya 28 Dnya 1762 Goda...,” in *Polnoe Sobranie Sochineniy t. 8*, ed. M. V. Lomonosov (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1959), 780; Alexander Sumarokov, “Oda Gosudaryine Imperatritse Ekaterinyi Vtoroy na Den’ Eya Tezoimenitstva 1762 goda Noyabrya 24 Dnya,” in *Izbrannyye Proizvedeniya*, ed. A.P. Sumarokov (Leningrad: Sovetskiy Pisatel’, 1957), 67; Mikhail Kheraskov, *Oda ... v Den’ Vyisochayshago Rozhdeniya Eya Imperatorskago Velichestva...* (Moscow: Imperat. Mosk. Universitet, 1763), 5, among others.
- <sup>25</sup> *Opisanie Allegoricheskoy Illyuminatsii Predstavlennoy vo Vseradostneyshiy Den’ Koronatsii Eya Imperatorskago Velichestva Ekaterinyi Vtoryie v Moskve pred Universitetskom Dome v 1762 godu* (Moscow, 1762).
- <sup>26</sup> For Catherine II’s accession medal portraying her as Minerva, see Wortman, *Scenarios*, 112.

- 27 Round Box with Catherine II as Minerva, Paris, 1781–82, gold *verre églomisé*, 7.3 cm (Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens, Washington, DC).
- 28 Stefano Torelli, *Catherine II in the Image of Minerva surrounded by Muses*, late 1760s (the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg).
- 29 For example, Pierre Louis Agi, *Catherine II as Minerva*, 1781 in Magnus Olausson, cat. ed., *Catherine the Great & Gustav III* (Stockholm/St. Petersburg: Nationalmuseum, State Hermitage Museum, 1999), 547.
- 30 Berlova, *Performing Power*, 124.
- 31 Inger Matsson, ed., *Gustavian Opera: An Interdisciplinary Reader in Swedish Opera, Dance and Theatre 1771–1809* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell Tryckeri, 1991), 33. This drawing by J. T. Sergel shows “Gustav III exhorting his son Gustav Adolph to emulate his famous ancestor Gustavus Adolphus [represented by a bust in the background].”
- 32 Olausson, *Catherine the Great & Gustav III*, 71. This painting by Cornelius Høyer shows “Gustav III with a Bust of Crown Prince Gustav Adolf,” 1783.
- 33 Peter Hallberg, *Ages of Liberty: Social Upheaval, History Writing and the New Public Sphere in Sweden, 1740–1792* (Stockholm University: PhD Dissertation, 2003), 254–255.
- 34 Hallberg, *Ages of Liberty*, 267.
- 35 Matsson, *Gustavian Opera*, 174. Gustav III’s historical operas on his two namesakes premiered in 1786 (“Gustav Vasa”) and 1788 (“Gustav Adolph and Ebba Brahe”). He also wrote a historical drama on Queen Christina.
- 36 For example, the divertissement “The Sibyl’s Grotto” staged for Gustav III’s birthday in the Royal Palace in Stockholm on January 24, 1781, in which Gustav III was invited to play himself. See Berlova, *Performing Power*, 110.
- 37 For example, the divertissement “A Camp in Skåne” by which the king surprised his brother Duke Karl on his name day in January 1777. See Berlova, *Performing Power*, 94.
- 38 For example, the divertissement “The Temple of Asclepius” organized by Gustav III to celebrate the queen mother’s recovery from illness in November 1776. See Berlova, *Performing Power*, 108.
- 39 Nordin and Corfield, *Media & Mediation*, 59.
- 40 Matsson, *Gustavian Opera*, 227.
- 41 Wortman, *Scenarios*, 136.
- 42 Ingrid Schierle, “Patriotism and Emotions: Love of the Fatherland in Catherinian Russia,” *Ab Imperio* 3 (2009): 65–93, here: 76, 83–84.
- 43 Wortman, *Scenarios*, 122.
- 44 Wortman, *Scenarios*, 122. In the end, by not producing a law code, the commission constituted another failure to “close the loop” with the people.
- 45 This location, whether genuinely derived or ingeniously contrived, is very significant for a number of reasons, evoking parallels with Byzantium and providing symbolic support for Catherine II’s ambition to reclaim it. First, in medieval Constantinople, there was indeed a famous suburban imperial palace, “the Hebdomon,” whose name derived from its location 7 miles outside the fortification walls. Second, like this palace, which was on the road from St. Petersburg to Moscow, the Hebdomon was located on the road (Via Egnatia) from the new capital to the old one (Rome). Third, as Asen Kirin points out, “its location—outside the fortification walls, yet close to the Golden Gate, which was the ceremonial entry into the city—made Hebdomon the starting point of imperial triumphal processions.” Given that it was thus intimately connected to Byzantine coronations, by

symbolic analogy, the new palatial complex and the victory it stood for eliminated, both domestically and internationally, the issue of Catherine II's legitimacy as ruler, serving as, "in a manner of speaking, the empress's second coronation." Asen Kirin, ed., *Exuberance of Meaning: The Art Patronage of Catherine the Great (1762–1796)* (Athens, GA: Georgia Museum of Art, 2013), 78.

- <sup>46</sup> Gotland is a large Swedish island in the Baltic Sea.
- <sup>47</sup> One of the Hebdomon's two churches was dedicated to St. John the Baptist and did hold at one time his head. Cf. Kirin, *Exuberance*, 78.
- <sup>48</sup> *Kamer-furyerskiy Tseremonial'nyiy Zhurnal 1777 goda* (St. Petersburg, 1880): 399.
- <sup>49</sup> *Kamer-furyerskiy Tseremonial'nyiy Zhurnal 1777 goda*, 400.
- <sup>50</sup> This detailed description is drawn from the official court ceremony journal for the year 1777. Cf. *Kamer-furyerskiy Tseremonial'nyiy Zhurnal 1777 goda* (St. Petersburg, 1880): 398–401.
- <sup>51</sup> The total of 1,222 scenes, without a single repetition, depicted on the porcelain service of 952 pieces, included "real landscapes, gardens, natural wonders, and numerous buildings (castles, churches, palaces, bridges)—many but not all in the Gothic style." Kirin, *Exuberance*, 76.
- <sup>52</sup> Perhaps the most compelling (geopolitical) reason for choosing England as the source of inspiration was its staunch support for Russia in the Russo-Ottoman War of 1768–1774. Cf. Kirin, *Exuberance*, 74.
- <sup>53</sup> See Ekaterina Skvortsova, "Representing Imperial Power in Eighteenth-Century Russian Art: The Portrait Gallery of the Chesme Palace," in *"A Century Mad and Wise: Russia in the Age of the Enlightenment*, eds. Marcus Levitt et al. (Groningen: Netherlands Russia Centre, 2015), 457.
- <sup>54</sup> Olausson, *Catherine the Great & Gustav III*, 66.
- <sup>55</sup> One of the Swedish royal family's residences, from the time of king Gustav I Vasa until the end of the eighteenth century.
- <sup>56</sup> Olausson, *Catherine the Great & Gustav III*, 69.
- <sup>57</sup> Burg Falkenstein is a relatively intact castle ruin built in the eleventh century located in today's Lower Austria.
- <sup>58</sup> *Sankt-Peterburgskiy Vestnik*, June 1780, 480.
- <sup>59</sup> Simon Dixon, "Religious Ritual at the Eighteenth-Century Russian Court," in *Monarchy and Religion: The Transformation of Royal Culture in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Michael Schaich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 217–248, here: 231. Dixon gives the wrong year, 1784, when it is 1783.
- <sup>60</sup> Archimandrite Avgustin (Nikitin), "Chesmenskaya Tserkov'—Pamyatnik Slavyi Rossiyskogo Flota," *NEVA* 12 (2016): 223–250; here: 230.
- <sup>61</sup> This project entailed the restoration of the Byzantine Empire in the lands of the central and eastern Balkans to be ruled over by Catherine II's second grandson, who was given the name Constantine. It never came to fruition.