

The figure of Julian in Ammianus' History

1. Concerning the death of Julian, I. Hahn writes the following: Ammianus, who wrote the books of his History on Julian in circumstances of the victory of Christianity and the oppression of paganism, which fact left its mark on the concept and structure of his work, accepts the official version: *incertum unde, subita equestris hasta* (25,3,6), and he mentions only as *incertus rumor* that Julian had been killed by a Roman soldier (25,6,6).¹ In the postscript to the new Hungarian translation of Ammianus' History I stressed several times that Ammianus as a pagan historian criticises — although diplomatically — the Christians and praises the pagans.² According to this viewpoint he censures the Christian emperors but he speaks highly of his hero, the pagan Julian. On the basis of I. Hahn's paper it seems to be clear that a) Ammianus' books on Julian can be regarded as an answer to the attacks of Christians on Julian;³ b) if Ammianus wanted to preserve the appearance of objectivity, he had to treat his hero's character in terms of virtues and vices. We have to take this into consideration if we want to interpret Ammianus' claim to objectivity: *opus veritatem professum nunquam, ut arbitrator, sciens silentio ausus corrumpere vel mendacio* (31,16,9)⁴.

According to this principle our author discusses the deeds of other emperors, too, that is, he enumerates their good and bad actions, and in this sense he is objective.⁵ Nevertheless, he writes about the bad acts and vices to a much larger extent than about the good acts and virtues of the emperors Constantius II, Valentinian I and Valens, while he depicts the good deeds and virtues to a much larger extent than the bad acts and vices of Julian. This demonstrates that he preferred the figure of pagan Julian to the Christian emperors Constantius II, Valentinian I and Valens. A similar disproportion can be observed in the length of description allotted to these emperors. Although Constantius II, Valentinian I and Valens reigned for a longer period than Julian, they get fewer pages in Ammianus'

¹ I. HAHN: Der ideologische Kampf um den Tod Julians des Abtrünnigen. *Klio* 38 (1960) 225. ff. cp. H. GÄRTNER: Einige Überlegungen zur kaiserlichen Panegyrik und zu Ammians Charakteristik des Kaisers Julian. *Abhandl. d. Ak. d. Wissensch. und d. Lit., Geistes und sozialwissensch. Kl., Wiesbaden* 1968, Nr. 10, 515. ff.

² Ammianus Marcellinus, Róma története. Fordította SZEPESY Gy. A jegyzeteket és az utószót írta ADAMIK T. Budapest. 1993, 640–641.

³ H. GÄRTNER: op. cit. 515. ff.; G. CALBOLI: Ammian und die Geschichtsschreibung seiner Zeit. *Festschrift für Robert Muth. Innsbruck* 1983, 40.

⁴ Cp. J. C. ROLFE: *Ammianus Marcellinus*. Cambridge. Massachusetts 1956, I, XIX. The problem of the veracity of Ammianus is treated by K. ROSEN: *Ammianus Marcellinus*. Darmstadt 1982, 131–163.

⁵ Cp. H. GÄRTNER: op. cit. 509. ff.

History than Julian.⁶ In my paper I would like to demonstrate that some disproportion can also be found in the way Ammianus treated the characters of these emperors.

2. Ammianus presents Constantius II as cruel and merciless.⁷ In connection with the thirtieth anniversary of his reign he makes the following remark: *insolentiae pondera gravius librans* (14,5,1). The emperor was irascible and mistrustful and never had mercy on anybody: *Ideoque fertur neminem aliquando ob haec vel similia poenae addictum, oblato de more elogio, revocari iussisse, quod inexorabiles quoque principes factitarunt* (14,5,5). He took every word of his spies for granted and punished the persons under suspicion: *Nec enim quisquam facile meminit sub Constantio, ubi susurro tenuis haec movebantur, quemquam absolutum* (14,5,9).

According to Ammianus Valentinian I was even more cruel.⁸ At the beginning of his reign he tried to disguise his widely known ferocity (*hono propalam ferus*) (27,7,4), but in the course of time his innate wickedness burst out: *serpens tamen vitium et dilatatum licentius erupit ad perniciem plurimorum, quo auxit ira acerbius effervescens* (27,7,4). He and his confidential clerks killed a lot of innocent people (28,1). When he was angry, he became a bloodthirsty beast: *Valentinianus post eiusdem Maximini adventum nec meliora monente ullo nec retentante per asperos velut aestu quodam fluctuum ferebatur et procellarum adeo, ut irascentis saepe vox et vultus, incessus mutaretur et color* (29,3,2). Filled with anger he smashed a lot of innocent people to death (cp. 29,3).

His brother, the emperor Valens, was no better:⁹ he put to death people who did not know why they had to die. Sometimes he pardoned the condemned in order to deprive them of their riches (29,1, 23–29). Because of obscure prophecies he executed cultivated and important persons in large numbers. In short, he was cruel, greedy and uncultured: *Magnarum opum intemperans appetitor, laborum impatiens, duritiamque magis affectans immanem, in crudelitatem proclivior, subagrestis ingenii, nec bellicis nec liberalibus studiis eruditus, ...Nihil agi contra libidinem suam patiebatur, iniuriosus alia et iracundus et criminantibus sine differentia veri vel falsi facillime patens, quae vitiorum labes etiam in his privatis cotidianisque rationibus impendio est formidanda* (31, 14, 5–6).

I would like to emphasize that Ammianus does enumerate the good qualities (*bona*) of these emperors — i.e. of Constantius II (21,16, 1–7), Valentinian I (30,9) and Valens (31,14,1–4) — but he pushes these positive qualities into the background: he does not illustrate them by examples and does not tell stories about them. They are described briefly,

⁶ W. SEYFARTH states that in the preserved books of Ammianus Julian is in the centre: Ammianus Marcellinus, *Römische Geschichte. Erster Teil*. Berlin 1975, 36.

⁷ Already E. NORDEN points out that Ammianus wrote on Constantius with hate: *Die antike Kunstprosa*. Leipzig 1898, 646.

⁸ On the cruelty of Valentinian I see: R. C. BLOCKLEY, *Ammianus Marcellinus. A Study of his Historiography and Political Thought*. Bruxelles 1975, 33–34, 41–42; cp. Marie-Anne MARIÉ: *Ammien Marcellin, Histoire, Livres XXVI–XXVIII*. Tome V. Paris 1984, 256, note 246.

⁹ Cp. R. C. BLOCKLEY: *op. cit.* 47. ff.

and for this reason they look small beside the vices which are expounded in detail and illustrated by horrible episodes, consequently the readers remember only the latter.¹⁰

3. In the case of Julian, Ammianus follows the opposite strategy: he describes his good deeds lengthily: the greater part of Books 15–21, and Books 22–25 except 25, 5–10 are devoted to these. When Constantius II decided to appoint him *caesar*, the soldiers thundered their approval. Ammianus interprets this fact as the decision of divinity: *arbitrium summi numinis id esse* (15,8,9). Constantius II commented on the approval of the soldiers in the same sense: *Ergo, eum, praesente nutu dei caelestis amictu principali velabo* (15,8,10).¹¹ In order to strengthen the political connections Constantius II married off his younger sister to Julian. When the new *caesar* arrived at Vienna, the inhabitants of the city received their legitimate ruler with pleasure: *avidius pompam regiam in principe legitimo cernens* (15,8,21). Ammianus makes it perfectly clear that Julian is a legitimate *caesar*: Constantius II proposed him as their legitimate ruler.

As *caesar* in Gallia he accomplished great actions by the help of his *virtus* and *fortuna*: *Quia igitur res magnae quas per Gallias virtute felicitateque correxit multis veterum factis fortibus praestant* (16,1,2). The help of *fortuna* was very important for the appreciation of a Roman commander; e. g., Sulla bore the name *Felix* in order to stress that *fortuna* never left him. *Caesar*, too, emphasized that he always had *virtus* and *fortuna* (Gall. 1,40,4; 12–13), but Julian had more: he was led by divinity: *Videtur enim lex quaedam vitae melioris hunc iuvenem a nobilibus cunis ad usque spritium comitata supremum* (16,1,4). To this divine power can be attributed that he could unite in himself all those virtues which the earlier Roman emperors possessed separately, the wisdom of Titus, the tactical sense of Trajan, the goodness of Antonius Pius, and the deliberation of Marcus Aurelius (16,1,4).¹²

Julian always refused the flatterers,¹³ deliberated everything thoroughly and acted fast (16,2,2). He lived as simply as his soldiers (16,5,3). Concerning sleep he surpassed Alexander the Great (16,5,4). In one part of the night he slept, in the second part dealt with public affairs, in the third part of the night he studied philosophy: *per omnia philosophiae membra prudenter disputando currebat* (16,5,6). He was philosopher and ruler in one person (16,5)10).¹⁴ He was so merciful that he punished even grave crimes mildly, and to the people who disapproved of this he said: *Incusent iure clementiam, sed imperatorem mitissimi animi legibus praestare ceteris decet* (16,5,12). The inhabitants of *provincia Gallia* became conscious of his divine power: *ob quae tamquam solem sibi serenum post squalentes tenebras adfulsisse cum alacritate et tripudiis laetabantur* (16,5,14).

¹⁰ I agree with A. ALFÖLDI, who stresses the importance of the actual examples of cruelty: *A Conflict of Ideas in the Late Roman Empire*. Oxford 1952, 25. ff.

¹¹ Cp. Th. KLAUSER: *Akklation*. *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 1 (1950) 222.

¹² V. von GUTSCHMID: *Ammianus Marcellinus*. *Kl. Schr.* 5. Leipzig 1894, 583; J. STRAUB: *Heidnische Geschichtsapologetik in der christlichen Spätantike*. Bonn 1963, 16–18; H. GÄRTNER: *op. cit.* 510. ff.; R. C. BLOCKLEY: *op. cit.* 73. ff.

¹³ Good emperors always refused the flatterers: cp. P. HADOT: *Fürstenspiegel*. *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 8 (1969) 607.

¹⁴ Cp. J. BIDEZ: *La vic de l'empereur Julien*. Paris 1962², 119; P. HADOT: *op. cit.* 607.

4. If Julian was so perfect, just and law-abiding, how was it possible that he became a counter-emperor and marched against the legitimate emperor who had appointed him *caesar*? This is a very delicate question and Ammianus answers it carefully. According to the historian there were a lot of reasons which compelled Julian to act in such a way.

Out of Ammianus' description it seems that Constantius II regarded the achievements of Julian in Gallia with distrust.¹⁵ Perhaps there is a connection between the emperor's distrust and the fact that Julians' military actions were prevented by various commanders; e. g. Marcellus, the *magister equitum* did not come to the aid of Julian when he was besieged by enemies (16,4). Barbatio, the *magister peditum* sabotaged the foodsupply and by this he gave Julian a lot of trouble (16,11,8-12). There was a rumour going about that Constantius II had sent Julian to Galia in order to perish: *ut possit per bella deleri saevissima* (16,11,13). The empress Eusebia had Julian's child killed because she did not want Julian to have a successor. Although Barbatio had left Julian to himself in the battle at Argentoratus, Julian won the battle thanks to his courage. Already after this victory the soldiers acclaimed him their emperor: *Augustus acclamatione concordi totius exercitus appellatus* (16,22,64), but Julian protested and swore that he did not want this rank: *id se nec sperare nec adipisci velle iurando confirmans* (16,12,65).

After the battle of Argentoratus Julian added success to success, but at the court of Constantius he became suspicious (17,11). The emperor was jealous of Julian's success and luck, therefore he sent Decentius, the *tribunus* and *notarius* to take away the auxiliary troops from him (20,4,1-3). In the meantime the *magister equitum* Lupicinus and the *praefectus* Florentius left him in the lurch. After long deliberation Julian decided to send away the troops demanded by the emperor, and he even allowed them to take their families with them. The troops marched through *Lutetia* where Julian was staying. He went out to greet the soldiers and asked them to obey the emperor. Nevertheless the soldiers did not leave him but acclaimed him as emperor. Julian protested but the soldiers surrounded the governor's palace. Finally Julian was compelled to put on the purple of the emperor. He did it because the previous night he had a dream in which the *Genius publicus* said to him: „*olim, Iuliane, vestibulum aedium tuarum observo latenter augere tuam gestiens dignitatem et aliquotiens tamquam repudiatus abscessi; si ne nunc quidem recipior sententia concordante multorum, ibo demissus et maestus. Id tamen retineto imo corde, quod tecum non diutius habitabo*” (20,5,10). On the basis of all this it is evident that as Julian elected by divine power so he was elected emperor by divine power, too.

The figure of Julian described by Ammianus is in accordance with the speech delivered by the sounded Julian before his death. In this speech he states that he does not regret his deeds because he has preserved his soul spotless. He always served the public welfare: *reputans autem iusti esse finem imperii oboedientium commodum et salutem ad tranquilliora semper, ut nostis, propensior fui licentiam omnem actibus meis exterminans, ... guadensque abeo sciens, quod, ubicumque me velut imperiosa parens consideratis periculis obiecit res publica, steti fundatus* (25,3,18). When those present bewailed him, he scolded them with the words: *humile esse caelo sideribusque conciliantum lugeri*

¹⁵ R. C. BLOCKLEY stresses the same: op. cit. 51. ff.

principem (25, 3,22). Finally, when his friends had calmed down, he conversed with the philosophers Maximus and Priscus about the celestial nature of the soul (25,3,23).¹⁶

But Ammianus wants to seem objective and therefore he treats Julian's vices, as well: *Digestis bonis, quae scire potuimus, nunc ad explicanda eius vitia veniamus* (25,4,16). Julian was lightheaded (*levioris ingenii*), talkative (*linguae fusioris*), too religious (*praesagiorum sciscitationi nimium deditus*) and he liked popularity (*volgi plausibus laetus*) (25,4,16-18). Nevertheless these negative features are dwarfed by his great virtues and they demonstrate that Julian was a nice pious man, too.

5. From all this one can conclude that Constantius II, Valentinian I, and Valens were so villainous because they were not elected by divinity. On the other hand, Julian was chosen by divinity, that is why he was so virtuous and merciful. The emperors who are not elected by divinity are tyrants who can maintain their power only by cruelty and inhumanity. The emperors chosen by divinity rule by justice and clemency and they are accepted by honest people, however evil men hate them and hinder them in their good actions.¹⁷ In his method of character-drawing Ammianus adopted some devices of invective and panegyric.

One important device of invective is that the person attacked is evil by birth, but the circumstances hinder the development of his inborn evil nature. Nevertheless, if these circumstances change — e. g. if his good advisers are pushed into the background or die etc. — his evil nature begins to prevail. This process can be observed in the characterisation of Constantius II and Valentinian I. When their power grew stronger, they became more cruel. This is what we find about Constantius: *insolentiae pondera gravibus librans* (14,5,1); and about Valentinian: *serpens tamen vitium et dilatatum licentius erupit* (27,7,4). This device is used splendidly by Tacitus in order to characterize the emperor Tiberius (*Annales* 6,51).¹⁸

One compulsory commonplace of panegyric¹⁹ is that the king or emperor is compared to the Sun. Because of the tax reductions the inhabitants of Gallia thought that with Julian the clear Sun had arrived: *ob quae tamquam solem sibi serenum post squalentes tenebras adfulsisse* (16,5,14). Already Seneca named the emperor Claudius *sidus* (*Cons. ad Pol.* 13,1), and Curtius Rufus called the new emperor *novum sidus* (19,9,3). When in the 3rd century A. D. Menander prescribed that the new ruler should be greeted as Sun (*Rhet. Gr.* 3,378 Sp.), he formulated a long established custom of panegyric.

¹⁶ J. FONTAINE calls attention to the influence of Plato's *Phaedo* and Tacitus' *Annales* 16,34 (the death of Thrasea Paetus) on this speech of Julian: *Ammien Marcellin. Histoire. Tome IV (Livres XXIII-XXV). Commentaire.* Paris 1977, 226, note 561.

¹⁷ Die Chrysostom draws a distinction between *tyrannus* and *basileus*; the power of the latter is from the gods who elect him as the best; cp. or 6 and 62; P. HADOT: *op. cit.* 599-600.

¹⁸ Roman historians used both reliable historical facts and invectives as sources parallelly; cp. T. ADAMIK: *Bemerkungen zur Invectiva.* *Annales Univ. Scient. Budapest. Sectio classica* 5-6 (1977-78) 89-100; on *rumores* in Ammianus' History see: R. C. BLOCKLEY, *op. cit.* 31. ff.

¹⁹ The influence of panegyric in Ammianus' History is highlighted by H. GÄRTNER: *op. cit.* 499. ff. and R. C. BLOCKLEY: *op. cit.* 73. ff.

Considering the above-mentioned parallel with Tacitus it is imaginable that Ammianus took over this kind of contrast-based rendering from Tacitus, who often uses this device; e.g. he contrasts the greatness of Germanicus with the shiftiness of Tiberius, and the innocence of Britannicus with the perverse wickedness of Nero. Following this model Ammianus contrasted the justice of the pagan Julian with the unlawfulness of the Christian emperors.²⁰ Already A. Alföldi stressed the bias of Ammianus towards Valentinian and Valens: „He had been devoted, body and soul, to Julian, and this made him intolerant of the two brothers to whom the personality and policy of Julian were so alien.”²¹ But he did it very diplomatically because by the time he finished his work, Christianity had already triumphed over paganism.²² In order to evade the danger which could threaten him and the pagan aristocrats he sometimes praised the Christian emperors and blamed the pagan Julian. For instance, he lauds Valentinian for his tolerance: *Postremo hoc moderamine principatus inclaruit, quod inter religionum diversitates medius stetit nec quemquam inquietavit neque, ut hoc coleretur, imperavit aut illud* (30,9,5) and condemns Julian for his intolerance: *praeter pauca, inter quae erat illud inclemens, quod docere vetuit magistros rhetoricos et grammaticos Christianos, ni transissent ad numinum cultum*²³ (25,4,20). However the praise and the condemnation reflect the political situation of the age: the pagan aristocrats wanted tolerance.

²⁰ In this question I agree with S. D'ELIA: *Ammiano Marcellino e il cristianesimo*. Stud. Rom. 10 (1962) 372–390, and with A. SELEM: *Considerazioni circa Ammiano ed il cristianesimo*. RCCM 6 (1964) 224–261.

²¹ A. ALFÖLDI: op. cit. 3.

²² Cp. G. CALBOLI: op. cit. 48: „Es ist dieser präzise Hinweis, der uns erlaubt anzunehmen, dass Ammianus sich nach allen Seiten hin absichert.”

²³ I quote the text of Ammianus on the basis of W. SEYFARTH's edition: *Ammianus Marcellinus, Römische Geschichte. Lateinisch und deutsch*, 3., berichtigte Auflage. I–IV. Berlin 1971–1988.