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DEPICTIONS OF THE PERSIANS IN THE CONTEXT OF JULIAN THE
APOSTATE'S DEATH IN PERSIA

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INTRODUCTION

“Nobody was allowed to see the king, and it was an offence for anyone to laugh or spit in the royal presence...There was a risk that if they saw him habitually, it might lead to jealousy and resentment, and plots would follow; but if nobody saw him, the legend would grow that he was a being of a different order from mere men.” Herodotus

When Julian the Apostate bled to death in his tent in Persia, it was the starting point for a war of ideas and words that was to be waged over this moment. Julian’s religious policies would determine the way that people wrote about his life, career and death, and it further made the war against Persia into an ideological tool. Instead of a simple narrative of Roman victory or loss against a foreign foe, the story of the Persian Expedition held great potential for furthering the debate between Christian and pagan. A natural part of any writing is the way that content and form are shaped by the goals of the author, but the Persian Expedition offers us an opportunity to examine the process of authorial shaping of a narrative. This opportunity arises because the accounts of the Persian Expedition have both an easy division between sides (Christian and pagan) in the debate, and with over a dozen works written there is a wealth of evidence concerning this one event.

The historical situation surrounding Julian’s reign revolves around the repercussions of Constantine the Great’s decision to legitimatise Christianity.¹ A nephew of Constantine, Julian was one of the few survivors of a purge of the imperial family by his cousin Constantius II in 337. His brother, Gallus, became Caesar before being executed for attempted usurpation. The imperial family was heavily associated with Christianity, and Julian spent his early childhood being educated in a Christian fashion, though both he and our other sources emphasise his surreptitious pagan education, leading to his later preoccupation with philosophy. Upon being made Caesar by Constantius II, Julian made a mark with successful campaigns against the tribes on the far side of the Rhine, and by restoring the province of Gaul to health after long depredations. This set the stage for his usurpation, as his soldiers became attached to him through these campaigns; when Constantius

¹ For more detail, please see Tougher (2007), as well as Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae*.

tried to call them to the east in order to fight the Persians under the Shahanshah Sapor II, they rebelled and proclaimed Julian as Augustus. Julian is presented in our pagan sources as refusing this elevation at first, and attempting to prevent the rebellion from taking place, but we should be careful to note that reluctance to accept the title was a common element in imperial acclamations, and that there is a reasonable possibility that Julian helped to orchestrate the rebellion among his troops. When Constantius II died of natural causes, neither side had yet come to blows; by naming Julian his heir, he allowed Julian to take the imperial power without bloodshed. This fortuitous turn of events – combined with Julian’s successful campaigns in Germany – may have persuaded the new emperor that his luck would hold. He began a policy of religious reform, attempting to bring paganism back into prominence: a new hierarchy and set of unified beliefs was prescribed for pagan cult, which clearly reflect the influence of the Christian church as well as the neo-Platonism that Julian was so fond of. Part of this reform package was a law that sought to prevent Christians from teaching rhetoric or other elements of the ‘Classical’ education.² The tension between traditional Classical education and learning – dominated by pagan figures and mythology – and Christian teaching was one that the Christian intellectual elite was struggling to overcome at this time. His law was thus a direct threat to the ability of the new Christian elites to consolidate their place within Roman society. Julian, now in preparation for the Persian Expedition, moved to Antioch where he met the orator Libanius; however the people of the city received Julian less kindly, and his time here is recorded in the *Misopogon*, which along with the *Contra Gallileos* show us a picture of the emperor at war with his subjects over religion. When Julian was launching his invasion of Persia, the empire that he ruled was divided by his unfinished religious reform. It seems likely that Julian hoped to give strength to these reforms by a great victory in Persia; however we do not have any concrete description of his objectives to clarify this possibility.³ So the situation at the time of the Expedition was tense, and the sharp divisions and sectarianism that we see in the accounts are the result.

² For more details, including Gregory Nazianzus’ response to this challenge, see Elm (2012), chapter 8.

³ A problem which is discussed at more length at appropriate points in the work that follows.

The focus of this investigation will be the way that the Persians are depicted in the context of Julian's death during his invasion of Persia. The Persians had been depicted in a remarkably static way within Greco-Roman writings since Herodotus, forming a tradition that Greco-Roman authors could draw upon without need for other evidence.⁴ Furthermore, they occupy an interesting ideological position, being both barbarians and also civilised, meaning that they did not fit easily into the categories that the Greco-Roman writers liked to use. They could win battles against Roman armies, kill emperors, and successfully besiege cities. This all made them a far more significant threat, and one that had lasted a very long time, meaning that any writer depicting them had to decide how to explain their stubborn refusal to be annexed by Roman forces. Critically to this project, they had defeated Julian,⁵ humbled his army, and extracted a treaty that all of our sources decry to various degrees. Any description of Julian's death must – to some degree – describe his opponents who achieved that death. In describing the Persians, including elements such as their habits and actions, the authors had the opportunity to shape the forces that prevented Julian's success on the battlefield, and indirectly his religious policies that were so controversial. This process of shaping the Persians required the author to decide what purpose they would serve in his narrative.

The goal of this dissertation is to try and unpack all of these processes. Examining the ways that authors have depicted the Persians is a route to understanding what those Persians were designed to *do* within the narratives. As such, the methodology shall not revolve around ideas of historical truth or accurate depiction of events: instead it shall focus upon the portrayal of the Persians from a *literary* standpoint. That is, when they appear within a work, what purpose do they serve? How does the author make use of them? Why do they appear the way that they do? This is not to overlook the relationship of the Persians in our authors to the historical reality, but to treat it as essentially unknowable, given our paucity of sources on the Persian side to corroborate it. In

⁴ De Jong, (1997) 22-29, provides a brief discussion of the way that Greek writers presented a consistent and unrealistic image of the Persians and other barbarians. Though he focuses on a different period and subject, his remarks are valuable for showing how care needs to be taken with the depiction of Persians in Greco-Roman writings, as well as the existence of a tradition regarding their depiction.

⁵ Elm (2012), 284 notes that Julian apparently considered the Germans "beneath him".

CONCLUSION

The Christian narratives considered here differ in many ways from the pagan ones, especially in terms of having a triumphant concept underlying them, a teleological underpinning that makes all the elements depicted reflect the ultimate victory of the Church of Christ. These narratives thus depict the Persian Expedition, and Julian's death therein, as a means towards that ultimate victory. The Persians are utilised by the authors as a literary device to demonstrate Julian's failings, and that dramatically affects their depiction. In the process each author utilises the Persians in more-or-less different ways, subtly changing comment elements such as the deserter to fit the exact requirements and tone of their account. The Persian Expedition plays a relatively minor role in many of the works considered here, resulting in accounts that are brief and feature only those elements which the author thought to be most vital to their purpose. As a result, we can see the centrality of the deserter to the Christian conception of the expedition.

Further differences exist between the Persians in these accounts, but it is notable that the basic purpose that underlies them remains the same: to condemn Julian. Thus we have seen how a deserter's advice concerning the ships, which we find mentioned in our pagan sources, here becomes a magnified tale of Julian's folly in listening to lies, as the narrative of the Expedition becomes largely focused on the axis of the deserter and the emperor. In order to further the consistently anti-Julian atmosphere of these works, the deserter is made into a patriot and a tyrannicide.

The Persians themselves, depicted as variously powerful or weak, are also used to create the right depiction of Julian. Their narrative role is entirely subsumed to the need to highlighting Julian's failings. The way that the two sides are depicted owes very little to the historical account, and rather more to the teleological goal of depicting Julian's failure. So our depictions of the Persians, shaped by this dramatic need, is at the one time very different in each account, and at the same time very similar in its purpose.

The sections dealing with the treaty are masterpieces of misdirection, with each author striving to depict Julian as actually culpable for the treaty signed by Jovian. Here too, we see the Persians depicted in a strangely benevolent light, offering reasonable or lenient terms, the complaints about humiliation notwithstanding. The Persians cannot fill conceptual space that the man-devil Julian must occupy, and so their depiction is shunted into a more positive angle.

Ephrem, showing us the view from Nisibis, uses the Persians in a harsh series of juxtapositions with the dead Julian, their king and their banner used to depict the ultimate failure of the emperor and his works. The Persians are again being used in order to serve the end of demonstrating just how crushing Julian's failures were, a judgement delivered through explicit comparisons between Julian and Sapor, along with a focalisation upon Julian's corpse.

So for our Christian authors, the Persians are rather closer to a literary tool than to a coherent adversary within the Persian Expedition narrative. They have taken the Persians and twisted and shaped them for the precise end of demonstrating Julian's failures, within a series of works that strives to show how Christianity had won. The Christian authors are clearly willing to sacrifice both fact and narrative sense to achieve this, as some of the extremely compressed accounts show: the essential moralistic statement of Julian's failure is prioritised above forming a coherent narrative. Though the different authors all depict the events in different ways, with some noteworthy disagreements in their accounts, the Persians remain essentially a literary method to depict Julian's failings.

CONCLUSION TO DISSERTATION

The Persians as depicted by our authors are a varied people. Though they look the same, they certainly shared no common purpose. The different accounts portray Persians with motives so widely divergent as to have been drawn from different wars. It may be that attempting to form a unified and coherent picture of the Persian perspective of the war would not be possible with these sources. However, this dissertation set out to examine the way that the Persians are portrayed with the intention of drawing wider conclusions about the authors' goals, ideological approaches and genre traditions. We have seen this wide divergence in portrayals, and we have also seen the way that those portrayals point to different objectives. The objective of each author was further complicated by the fact that the Persians had killed Julian – the hero for the pagans – and inflicted a bad treaty upon Jovian – whom the Christians idolised. This created a tension that each author had to resolve.

The Persians have been used as a consistent element: by looking at each author through this one specific element, we removed the great mass of other details and focus specifically on how the authors manipulated that one element. Furthermore, the Persians are used as a literary device by our authors, a set element that they utilise to achieve a set effect within their works, which this dissertation has shown tended in the main to reflect upon the conduct and actions of Julian the Apostate. Because they were used as a literary device, the Persians offer us an easy route to analyse the intentions of the authors who first manipulated them. The findings here suggest strongly how our authors intended the Persian Expedition narrative to function, and when they are taken together they can form a comparison between the authors.

We have noted that the Persians are a good analytical tool for examining the motivations of the authors. However the Persians themselves are also of note in this endeavour. In distinction to other barbarian groups, the Persians are typically presented by Greco-Roman writers

as possessing some element of culture, and in Ammianus we see not only interest in that culture, but also a degree of respect. This is a unique position within Greco-Roman writing, and one that distinguishes the Persians from both other barbarian groups and the Greco-Roman participants of historical accounts. A further vital element that distinguishes the Persians from other groups is the way that they successfully defeated Roman armies and captured Roman cities on numerous occasions, meaning that they did not fit into the traditional depiction of barbarians being easily defeated by Roman forces. The Persians are thus a unique element in the Greco-Roman portrayal of the world, as outsiders that could not be treated in a simplistic reductionist manner with other outsider groups. This leads to our interest in investigating the Persians, as they already possess a unique role within the ideological framework of this time. Furthermore, the Persians are a vital element in the accounts, thanks to their role as antagonists to Julian and the Expedition taking place in their territory. Most critically, they had defeated Julian, who was the hero of the pagan authors, and then forced Jovian to accept a bad treaty, which was problematic for the Christian authors.

This means that each author had to decide how to resolve the tension caused by the Persians either killing Julian or inflicting the treaty on Jovian, while simultaneously aiming for their own ideological objective. The finding of this dissertation has been that each author achieved these two objectives by conflating them into one, treating the Persians as a way to further their ideological objective and resolve the tension at the same time. We can now take this important overall finding, and in light of it look at the findings of each chapter.

To briefly summarise the main points of the three chapters, we found that Ammianus used the Persians to defend Julian's reputation, the other pagan authors to control the damage to their side caused by Julian's death and the treaty, and the Christians to show Julian's justified defeat. These different approaches show clearly the focus upon Julian that we have found throughout the work. The centrality of his presence to the depictions of the Persians is hard to overstate, as it has become clear that all our authors have used the Persians to reflect in some way upon Julian.

Ammianus is notable for having a significant focus on the Persians that does not particularly reflect upon Julian for large sections – especially his geographical description of Persia – but the other authors all used the Persians rather more narrowly for this purpose.

By following this thread throughout the narratives, we find very clearly stated the different goals of the authors. Ammianus sought to salvage Julian's reputation almost on a personal level, using the Persians to form a flattering image. Their exoticism and malevolence combine to try and persuade the reader that Julian's invasion – or, rather, his *decision* to invade – was correct and the right decision. This differs significantly from the other pagan authors, who are less focused on exculpating Julian's decisions than with trying to persuade the reader of Julian's importance and abilities. Ammianus' account is much longer, which gives him more space to expound more complex ideas, as well as being written in the genre of Roman historiography, which traditionally includes sizeable descriptions of wars abroad. This gives him the opportunity to try and depict Julian as more Roman, by presenting the Persians as more foreign. The pagan authors, meanwhile, have more to say about Persian power than Persian exoticness. This power ties back into their discussion of how Julian's abilities were crucial to the Expedition's success. For the pagan authors, the purpose that they are following is to show how vital Julian was as an emperor, and how important his own role in affairs was. They implicitly show him as the sole reason for the successes that the Expedition had, and steer clear of assigning blame to him for the failure of the Expedition overall.

When we then compare this to the Christian authors, the comparison shows us the narrative being taken in a completely different direction. Though the focus upon Julian remains steady, we now find the Persian Expedition being used to further the story of Christian victory in the struggle with paganism. This dimension had played a large part in the pagan narratives, as it was one of the essential reasons for the way that Julian dominates, but the Christian authors are in many ways bolder. Taking things that had been minor elements in the pagan accounts, such as a deserter deluding Julian, they turned them into major foci of the Expedition narrative. The differences

between the Christian accounts and the pagan ones must have been obvious at the time, while bitter debate between the pagan and Christian traditions was taking place regarding Julian's accomplishments and death, and so it seems unlikely that this was an accidental occurrence. The Christian authors adhered to their own genre, which was focused on church history as opposed to secular history, and their own tradition, one which pursued a narrative of Julian's death resulting from God's will, and so their accounts pay little attention to those written by the pagan authors. With this different set of priorities, the Christian authors present their dramatically divergent accounts and focus upon the ways that Julian failed during the expedition. The Persians are used as a foil to his attempts to succeed, with the Persian desert and deserter demonstrating his foolishness. The Persians act even more as a malleable element than they did in Ammianus, being shaped according to the method chosen by the author to depict Julian as a fool. In contrast to Ammianus there is no interest shown in the geography or culture of Persia, and unlike the pagan authors there is not the same focus upon the relative power of the two sides. Instead we have the Persians reduced to their simplest depictions, given the singular role of denigrating Julian.

This consistent use of the Persians as a mirror shows that each author seized upon the Persians as a vital tool in the war of words over Julian's legacy. It also introduces a strong note of warning against attempting to sketch a historical account of the Persians or other barbarians from accounts of foreign or hostile groups within Greco-Roman writing. It is clear that if the Persians were so malleable within these accounts, then other outsider groups are equally likely to have been changed and morphed by those who wrote about them, in order to achieve some desired effect. That they did this, instead of following the tradition of Persian portrayals or focusing upon an unbiased account, is a valuable reminder of the way that ancient historians saw their craft as including vital elements of literary skill.

FUTURE RESEARCH PATHS

One possible future option for this research project is to expand the scope, and look at depictions of the Persians in other contexts, to see if their use is consistent with that presented here. It is clear that the Persian Expedition was unique in terms of how widely discussed it was and how much it divided opinions. Other time periods, lacking this vigorous debate, may depict the Persians in a more consistent fashion, leaning on the traditional account. In particular, the religious element to the debate meant that aspects of the traditional Persian portrayal – such as ethnographic ideas of wet and warm countries – were suppressed in favour of elements more conducive to the purposes of our authors. Or we may see the trend continuing, with the Persians (and other barbarian peoples, perhaps) used as a malleable element that can be shaped to reflect upon the protagonists. This expansion would use the current chapters as a base, and add extra ones handling the other time periods, resulting in a work that was longer but with much the same structure.

An alternative approach would be to look at other elements in the Persian Expedition, such as Julian's religion, and use that as a complementary element in examining the accounts. This approach would broaden the topic to be about the way that authors depicted the entire Expedition, with the Persians being only one element within it. This has the benefit of using the current research as the basis of further research, but it would radically alter the structure of the work, requiring a total re-write.

The most radical possibility is to use the current work as an inspiration for a wide-ranging investigation into the way that ancient historiography used outsiders (such as the Persians and other hostile groups) in general, and to then compare that to the way that it uses insiders (such as Roman or Greek generals), in order to see what it could reveal about the genre's use and depiction of those groups. It may be that the way the Persians have been used by our authors is indicative of a wider

trend, one that could be analysed at length to see how it affects not only the depiction of outsiders, but also the purpose and intent of the genre as a whole.

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