

Pagan Propaganda during the Usurpation of Magnentius (350 - 353)*

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The usurpation of Magnentius belongs to the historiographic wasteland of the early years of Constantius II's reign. No detailed contemporary history of the period survives. What we possess of Ammianus Marcellinus' *Res Gestae* takes up the narrative with the events of 353, immediately after the suppression of Magnentius' revolt. Indeed the opening sentence of his 14th book contains a reference to the serious hardships endured by the Roman army during this war, as well as to its demoralizing impact on the soldiers of both sides, that of the emperor Constantius and that of the rebel Magnentius.¹ The information forthcoming in the Latin Epitomes of the contemporary writers, Aurelius Victor and Eutropius, is excruciatingly meagre. Later sources, namely the anonymous *Epitome de Caesaribus*, Orosius, the Ecclesiastical Histories of Socrates, Sozomen, and Philostorgius, the *Historia Nova* of Zosimus, the Epitome of Zonaras,² and the fragments of Petrus Patricius,³ can hardly make up for the deficiency of the contemporary sources. A few late chronicles help to establish the chronology of Magnentius' short reign, but they add hardly any new details.⁴

* This is the place to express my profound gratitude to Professor T.D. Barnes for his useful criticism of many points in this article. My indebtedness to him goes far beyond his contribution to my understanding of the issues involved on this present occasion. The content of this present paper will make it quite obvious that he should not be held responsible for the views expressed in it; of course only I am responsible for any of its remaining shortcomings.

¹ Amm. XIV.1.1: *post emensos insuperabilis expeditionis eventus, languentibus partium animis, quas periculorum varietas fregerat* etc.

² For modern reconstructions of the course of events from Magnentius' bid for power until his downfall, based on these sources, see n. 10 below. The passages analysed for the purpose of the present paper will be referred to each in its place.

³ Whose information is particularly useful for the course of the negotiations between the emperor Constantius and Magnentius before the outbreak of open hostilities between them; J. Sašel, 'The Struggle between Magnentius and Constantius II for Italy and Illyricum', *Ziva Antika* 21 (1971), 209.

⁴ For the analysis of the testimony of these sources and its relation to the other literary sources, see Ignazio Didu, 'Magno Magnenzio. Problemi cronologici ed ampiezza della sua usurpazione. I dati epigrafici', *Storia Critica* 14-1 (1977),

There is indeed some precious information in the non-historiographic contemporary literature. Julian imparts some facts in two Panegyrics which he delivered in honour of Constantius II as his Caesar.⁵ These facts are understandably swamped in a flood of rhetoric hostile to Magnentius. Julian's own portrayal of the usurper in his *Caesares*, written at a time when he was no longer forced to flatter Constantius, is much more balanced, but still too cursory to be of any real help.⁶ More helpful are a few incidental references to Magnentius by Libanius. On the Christian side, some sidelight is shed on this affair by Athanasius, in his first Apology.⁷

In view of this paucity of information about Magnentius in the literary sources, the numismatic and the inscriptional evidence assumes a special significance. The coins help to clarify some problems of chronology, whereas the inscriptions expose the extension of territories where Magnentius managed to gain recognition. Both these types of evidence are naturally important for the understanding of the usurper's propaganda as well as his subjects' response to it.⁸

The little that is known about this usurper may be summarized in a few lines. Magnentius seems to have been a native of the city of Ambiani (Amiens), born to a Breton (or British) father and a Frankish mother.⁹ According to the prevailing concepts of his time he was therefore of semi-barbarian stock. This did not prevent him from attaining an important military command under Constantius. When he proclaimed himself emperor in Lugdunum (Lyon) on the 18th of January 350,¹⁰ he was the commander of the Ioviani and Herculiani, the crack

11-56, esp. 12-24.

⁵ Passages of Julian's 1st and 3rd Orations are utilized especially by Sašel (n. 3), 204-16.

⁶ See n. 43, and text below ad n. 57.

⁷ See text below ad n. 34.

⁸ For a detailed discussion of the epigraphic evidence, see Didu (n. 4), esp. 34ff., and more recently Anna Gabriela Bianchi, 'Magnentius' in Ettore de Ruggiero, *Dizionario epigrafico di antichità romana* V, fasc. 12-13, Rome, 1996, 366-86. Two comprehensive studies of the numismatic evidence are: Lodovico Laffranchi, 'Commento numismatico alla storia dell' imperatore Magnenzio e del suo tempo', *Atti e memorie dell' Istituto italiano di numismatica* 6 (1930), 134-205, and P. Bastien, *Le monnayage de Magnence, 350-353*, Wetteren, 1964.

⁹ See Zonaras XIII.6.1, for his father's origin, cf. J. Bidez, 'Amiens, ville natale de l'empereur Magnence', *REA* 27 (1925), 312-8, esp. 313, where the faulty Βρεττανός is rendered as 'breton', but T.D. Barnes remarks to me that it ought to be more properly translated as 'British'. As for his mother's Frankish origin, this emerges from a note in one of the MSS of Julian's Panegyrics, the *Vossonianus* 77 III (=V), fol. 30^v, on which cf. Bidez, *ibid.*, 314. Zosimus II.53.1 may still be right when he describes him as *laetus*, since we know nothing of his father's status and of the nature of his father's liaison with his mother.

¹⁰ For a detailed chronological reconstruction of the revolt, see Bastien (n. 8),

regiments of the imperial field army.¹¹ A short time afterwards he engineered the murder of the western emperor, Constans, Constantius' brother, who was apprehended and executed in his flight south, at Helena (on the road from Narbonne to Port-Vendres). He managed to gain control of Italy by eliminating Nepotianus, a pretender to the imperial throne who had established himself in Rome.¹² Magnentius' attempts to gain Constantius' recognition lasted for nearly eighteen months. The negotiations between the two collapsed in August 351.¹³ In the mean time Constantius managed to depose another usurper, Vetricano, who had himself proclaimed in Pannonia, without bloodshed, merely by presenting himself at Vetricano's camp at Naissus, and by impressing the force of his dynastic legitimation on Vetricano's soldiers.¹⁴ Strangely enough no attempt seems to have been made to bring similar tactics to bear upon Magnentius' soldiers; or if there was one, it must have proved an utter failure.¹⁵ A military confrontation could no longer be avoided. It took place on the 28th of September 351, near Mursa in Pannonia Superior, on the right bank of the river Drave.¹⁶ Magnentius was defeated, but it was by no means an easy victory for Constantius. The battle of Mursa is described by the contemporary epitomator, Eutropius, as one of the cruellest carnages of the 4th century — one in which much precious Roman blood was needlessly squandered.¹⁷ Later sources follow suit.¹⁸ It is an

26ff.; cf. T.D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius*, Cambridge, Mass., 1994, 101-20; see also nn. 3 and 4 above for the valuable studies of Sašel and Didu.

¹¹ Their *seniores* top the list of the *Legiones Palatinae* in the West; see *Notitia Dignitatum*, Occ. V. 145-146, whereas their *iuniores* are next only to the *Lanciani* in the east; see *ibid.* Or. V. 43-44. See also Didu (n. 4), 22 with n. 42.

¹² Zosimus II.431-4.

¹³ Thus Bastien; according to Didu (n. 4), 30-1, the negotiations had reached a dead end already in March 351. Sašel (n. 3), 209, has tabulated and dated all the items of evidence for the negotiations in 351.

¹⁴ According to Bruno Bleckmann, 'Constantina, Vetricano und Gallus Caesar', *Chiron* 24 (1994), 53 (with n. 127, for the sources) it was not so much the force of Constantius' speech as the fact that the soldiers had been bribed before his arrival at the camp that decided the issue in his favour; in support of this claim he cites Zosimus II.44.3. Bribery is however a ploy that may be used by one party just as well as by the other, and the final outcome may depend on the question to whom the soldiers choose to be loyal after they have taken the bribes. Roman imperial history is full of the corpses of pretenders who had bribed their soldiers and were betrayed by them at the crucial moment in favour of persons with better claims to the throne in their eyes. See also n. 19 below. I am grateful to T.D. Barnes for having brought Bleckmann's article to my attention.

¹⁵ See text ad n. 19 below.

¹⁶ See n. 10 above.

¹⁷ Eutr. X.12.1: *Ingentes Romani imperii vires ea dimicatione consumptae sunt, ad quaelibet bella externa idonea*. The opening sentence of Ammianus' 14th book

intriguing question whether the loyalty of Magnentius' troops to their leader, which was manifested by the very difficulty in defeating them, and which was so strikingly different from the attitude of Vetrano's troops to their commander, ought to be explained solely by the difference between the personalities of these two protagonists, or by the suggestion that Vetrano's usurpation had been undertaken to safeguard Constantius' interests from the very start.¹⁹

Magnentius retreated, first to Aquileia, and then, when he realized that he could not hold out against Constantius close to the Alpine Passes, he crossed over first to Italy, where he managed to raise some forces,²⁰ and then to Gaul.²¹

may be recalled again. Another contemporary source which is less explicit on this issue is Aurelius Victor, *Caesares* 42.9, who describes the military encounters between the armies of Constantius and Magnentius as *acriora proelia*; the other sources make it clear that there was no other encounter between them that might qualify for such a description.

18 Epitome de Caesaribus 42.4: *quo bello paene nusquam amplius Romanae consumptae sunt vires totius imperii fortuna pessumdata*. Zosimus II.50.4: μάχης τε γενομένης οἷα σχεδὸν οὕτω πρότερου ἐν τούτῳ τῷ πολέμῳ φαίνεται γεγονῆαι πίπτουσι μὲν ἕξ ἑκατέρου πλείστοι κ.τ.λ. cf. 53.1: φόνος μὲν παμπληθῆς ἀνδρῶν τε καὶ ἵππων καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ὑποζυγίων ἐγένετο. The numbers of the victims given by Zonaras XIII.2.16-17, 30,000 out of Constantius' 80,000 soldiers, and 24,000 out of Magnentius' 36,000, are undoubtedly exaggerated.

19 According to Sašel (n. 3), 208-9, both Nepotianus' and Vetrano's usurpations were feigned, and instigated behind the scenes by Constantius' family, in order to impede Magnentius. The transfer of loyalty to Constantius by Vetrano's soldiers would thus be a deliberately staged manoeuvre. His arguments for this hypothesis are however far from being conclusive. Aurelius Victor, *Caesares* 41.26-42.1; 6, who at this stage seems to reflect quite faithfully Constantius' authorized version of the events, is blatantly hostile towards both these pretenders. It is far from certain that in an imperial family so openly beset by internal intrigue Constantius would have been wise to count on a kinsman like Nepotianus to serve his purposes, or to rely on a candidate for the throne promoted by Hannibalianus' widow, even though she happened to be his sister. True, Zosimus' account does create the impression that Constantius' entry into Vetrano's camp was co-ordinated with him, but Zosimus also makes it quite plain that his consent was granted in order to gain public recognition as Constantius' partner against Magnentius, not in order to allow himself to be shamefully divested of his imperial garb by his own soldiers. A fuller recent development of this theory is by Bleckmann (n. 14), esp. 42-59, which according to what T.D. Barnes suggests to me 'proves what many have surmized'. I do not believe that this is the case. The subject deserves a separate treatment, but it is a relief to realize that Bleckmann does not regard Vetrano as a mere puppet in Constantina's hand (*ibid.*, 44), nor does he treat him as privy to the plan of his own deposition (cf. n. 14 above).

20 Zosimus II.53.2.

In order to undermine his rival's position, Constantius resorted to the dubious measure of procuring the support of the barbarians across the Rhine.²² Magnentius' cause was doomed. His best men seem to have been killed at Mursa, and as will be shown in the sequel, their remnants had been disgracefully disbanded by Constantius.²³ Both along the Rhine and inland, provincial armies were proclaiming their loyalty to Constantius, so that Magnentius' position in Gaul was becoming untenable, and ways of retreat to Spain and to Africa were blocked.²⁴ He seems to have realized that whatever forces he would manage to raise in Gaul would be unequal to the task of stopping Constantius' advance. When Constantius' invasion of Gaul finally took place in July 353, Magnentius was unable to prevent a mass defection from his camp. Having been defeated at Mons Seleuci, he retreated to Lugdunum, where he committed suicide on the 10th of August 353. His brother, Decentius, whom he had appointed Caesar in 352, put an end to his own life in Sens, on the 18th of August.²⁵

Thus far there is very little in the story of this usurpation to mark it off from others of its kind in the 4th century. It follows a fairly regular pattern. A rebel who had assassinated one of the emperors widely accepted as legitimate turns to his surviving partner for recognition.²⁶ Fighting follows when he fails to obtain it. Interestingly enough during the period that concerns us no such enterprise ended with the rebel's victory.

Curious bits of information concerning an attempt at pagan restoration during the short reign of Magnentius are forthcoming in two late accounts. The Eunomian Philostorgius, who wrote an Ecclesiastical History, apparently in the first decades of the 5th century, describes Magnentius and his supporters as inclined to the worship of the demons.²⁷ Zonaras, who wrote in the 12th century, relates a startling story about the exercise of black magic by Magnentius. According to this story the usurper was advised by a female magician (γυνή ... τις μάγος) to immolate a virgin, to mix her blood with wine, and to make his

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

²² *Ibid.*, 3.

²³ See text below ad n. 59.

²⁴ Zosimus, *loc.cit.*

²⁵ See n. 10 above.

²⁶ For observations on the legitimization of imperial power and on the distinction between legitimate emperors and usurpers see A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, a Social Economic and Administrative Survey*, Oxford, 1973, 321-9, esp. 326-7, though some of them ought to be modified.

²⁷ Philostorgius, *HE* III.26 (*PG* 65, Col. 513); this statement is quoted in its context in n. 32 below.

soldiers drink this potion, while she herself accompanied the gruesome rite with incantations to invoke the aid of the demons.²⁸

How much truth is there in these elusive traditions? On the surface the prospect that there is any at all does not look promising.

Philostorgius couples his statement with the story about the cross which was allegedly seen in the sky of Jerusalem on the Pentecost of 351. A Christian *omen victoriae* is thus made to accompany the Christian emperor on his way to combat a pagan tyrant. Yet the story about the cross in the sky goes back to a letter of Cyril of Jerusalem in which there is no mention of either the tyrant himself or the campaign against him.²⁹ It has furthermore been pointed out that whereas the Pentecost of 351 fell on 7 May, the battle of Mursa was fought only on 28 September of that year.³⁰ Ostensibly this would make Philostorgius' statement that the cross in the sky was seen by the soldiers of both Constantius and Magnentius at the same time, forecasting victory to the former and defeat to the latter, irrelevant and inane. Attention must however be paid to the exact wording of Philostorgius' statement. In spite of what has been ascribed to him he nowhere claims that the cross was beheld in Jerusalem, and at one and the same time by both Magnentius' and Constantius' soldiers, while they were actually at the same place, at the battlefield of Mursa, preparing themselves for the showdown.³¹ What Philostorgius says is only that the 'resplendent and venerable sign did not remain unseen to those serving in the army, but being clearly seen, it brought Magnentius and his men, since they were inclined to the worship of the demons, into a state of enormous fear, whereas Constantius and his men it endowed with invincible courage.'³² Presented in this form the theme may well

²⁸ Zonaras XIII.8.12: *πάρθενον αὐτῷ σφαγιάσαι καὶ οἴνω ταύτης αἶμα προσμίξει, καὶ δοῦναι τοῖς στρατιώταις αὐτοῦ ἀπογεύσασθαι, ἐπὶ τούτοις ἐκείνης ἐπιφῶδης εἰπούσης τινὰς καὶ δαιμόνων ἐπικαλουμένης ἐπικουρίαν.* Of no historical value whatsoever is the tradition depicting Magnentius as no less than a pagan persecutor; see *Martyrium Sancti et Magni Georgii*, 18 (PG 115, Col. 153B). I am grateful to my friend and colleague Dr. Avshalom Laniado for having brought this tradition to my attention.

²⁹ Cyrillus Hierosolymitanus, *Epistola ad Constantium*, 2-3 (ed. W.C. Reischel and J. Rupp, vol. 2, 434).

³⁰ J. Ziegler, *Zur religiösen Haltung der Gegenkaiser im 4. Jahrhundert nach Christus*, Frankfurt (FAS 4), 1970, 67-70.

³¹ For instance by Ziegler, *ibid.*: 'gleichzeitig über Jerusalem und über Mursa, dem Ort, wo sich die Truppen des Constantius und des Magnentius zur ersten Schlacht gegenüberstanden' etc.

³² Philostorgius, *ibid.*: *τὸ δὲ σελασφόρον ἐκεῖνο καὶ σεβάσιμον θέαμα οὐδὲ τοῖς ἐπὶ τοῦ στρατοπέδου ἀθέατον ἦν, ἀλλ' ἐπιδήλως ὀρώμενοι, Μαγνέντιον μὲν καὶ τοὺς σὺν αὐτῷ ἅτε τῇ τῶν δαιμόνων θεραπεία προσανακειμένους, εἰς ἀμήχανον δέος κατέστησε· Κωνσταντίον δὲ καὶ τοὺς περὶ αὐτὸν εἰς θάρσος ἄμαχον*

have had its origin in Constantius' propaganda, for it makes no claim which is chronologically impossible. All that was needed in order to make it plausible in the eyes of Constantius' soldiers on the eve of the battle of Mursa was to spread around the story that some soldiers had seen the vision of the cross a couple of months before, wherever they had happened to be at that time, not only in Constantius' camp but also in that of Magnentius.

Zonaras' weird story about the ritual involving human sacrifice is even more suspect. It would seem to employ some confused reminiscences about Druidism, suppressed in Gaul already under Tiberius, in order to impute to Magnentius an attempt to resurrect it. True, Zonaras seems to have possessed some good contemporary source (or sources) now completely lost to us.³³ In our particular case it is Athanasius who furnishes a clue as to the origin of this story: in an attempt to exonerate himself from charges that he had sided with the usurper he maintains that he could never have supported an impious ruler, who had contrived charms and magic potions against the precepts of God.³⁴ Yet even a contemporary source might succumb to propaganda, adverse to the vanquished usurper. The complete silence of all the other literary sources does not mean that such a theme of propaganda was not employed by Magnentius' enemies against him, and the question why we hear nothing of such propaganda in the case of other usurpers, whose devotion to the Christian faith is subject to no doubt, has to be posed.³⁵

ἀνεκτίησατο.

33 See for example XIII.6.1 where his information about the Breton (British?) father of Magnentius (cf. n. 9 above) seems to be surprisingly accurate; he likewise knows that Magnentius commanded two legions when he laid his plot against Constans, though he fails to identify them as the Ioviani and the Herculiiani; cf. n. 11 above. On the question of Zonaras' sources, see also Bleckmann (n. 14), 44.

34 Athanasius, *Apologia ad Constantium Imp.*, 7 (PG 25, Col. 204): εἰς δὲ τὸν Θεὸν ἠσέβησε, φαρμάκους καὶ ἐπαιδοῦς ἐπινοῶν κατὰ τῆς τοῦ Θεοῦ κρίσεως.

35 Ziegler (n. 30), 69, points out that such charges were raised against Athanasius himself (cf. Ammianus XV.7.8; Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, IV.10 [GCS 50]). It is perfectly true that belief in divination and in the power of magic was as common among Christians as among pagans; see e.g. John Matthews, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus*, Baltimore, 1989, 225-6. This is however beside the point. Even according to the pagan Ammianus, Athanasius was accused of practices which were a *proposito legis abhorrentia cui praesidebat*, and hence were meant to be presented by his enemies as essentially pagan. On the basis of this parallel it may therefore be maintained that both Magnentius and Athanasius were depicted in contemporary hostile propaganda as pagan at heart. On the question whether such accusations were a necessary component in the propaganda against every single usurper, even when his conduct gave no reason to doubt Christian faith, see text below ad n. 40.

Finally, there is the numismatic evidence which has been subjected to an exacting scrutiny by both Lodovico Laffranchi and Pierre Bastien.³⁶ The former has rightly observed the attitude of complete religious neutrality shown by Magnentius' coinage almost throughout, but stressed the only exception: the occurrence of the Christogram on one particular series of coins, accompanied by the Greek letters A-W on both its sides. It evokes the words of the Apocalypse 1.8: 'I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, which was, and which is to come' (ἐγὼ εἰμι τὸ ἄλφα καὶ τὸ ὦ, λέγει κύριος ὁ θεός, ὁ ὢν ὁ ἦν καὶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος).³⁷ The theme is considered to be a Nicene-Orthodox one.³⁸ Hence, says Laffranchi, Magnentius' coins 'represent the greatest numismatic affirmation of Christianity in antiquity'.³⁹

A closer examination however reveals the complexity of the problem. The condemnation of an usurper as a sacrilegious pagan was by no means an indispensable component of hostile imperial propaganda. There is no evidence that it was used to besmirch usurpers whose devotion to Christianity was unquestionable, such as Vetricano, Silvanus, or Magnus Maximus.⁴⁰ The later traditions

³⁶ See n. 8 above for details about both these works.

³⁷ Cf. *Apocalypse*, 21.6; 22.13.

³⁸ Cf. Prudentius, *Hymnus Omni Hora*, 10-12: *Corde natus ex parentis ante mundi exordium, / Alpha et Omega cognominatus, ipse fons et clausula / Omnium quae sunt, fuerunt, quaeque post futura sunt*. For an attempt to refute its specific anti-Arian character, see Ziegler (n. 30), 59-60, but his interpretation of the relevant passages is not very convincing; see e.g. 60 with n. 316, where he admits that Athanasius does use Apocalypse 1.8 in several places to bolster the Nicene doctrine of the Son's full eternity, but points out that it is only the second half of this verse, where the letter symbolism is explained, that Athanasius insists upon, not the letter symbolism itself in its first half. This is quite natural, for in an anti-Arian argument the more explicit the statement in the New Testament, apparently favouring the Nicene point of view, the better. On the other hand, in the limited area of a coin the letter symbols themselves are the best means of conveying the idea.

³⁹ Laffranchi (n. 8), 199: 'rappresentano la più grande affermazione numismatica del cristianesimo nell' antichità'.

⁴⁰ Vetricano was the first to introduce on the reverse of his coins the emphatic legend *HOC SIGNO VICTOR ERIS* with his own figure bearing the Labarum; see Ziegler (n. 30), 71-2; a theme later adopted by Constantius himself. See *ibid.*, 74-85, on Magnus Maximus. On Silvanus see *Amm.* XV.31.18; he was caught and killed *extractum aedicula, quo exanimatus confugerat, ad conventiculum ritus Christiani tendentem*. Hence, when T.D. Barnes remarks to me that 'in the fourth century, the victors in civil wars set out to blacken and misrepresent defeated rivals, and often did so to such good effect that they effaced the truth for later writers', he is certainly right, but that does not explain why this particular theme was chosen to blacken Magnentius' memory and not that of other

concerning Magnentius' support of paganism must therefore be accounted for. There is at least one bit of contemporary evidence that may put us on the track of the kernel of historical truth that underlies them. An edict promulgated by Constantius on the 23rd of November 353, shortly after the suppression of Magnentius' revolt, re-imposed a ban on nocturnal pagan sacrifices, explicitly stated to have been lifted by Magnentius: *Abolentur sacrificia nocturna Magnentio auctore permissa et nefaria deinceps licentia repellatur*.⁴¹ Such leniency towards paganism on Magnentius' part may well have provided the starting point for the rumours that he was inclined towards paganism. Furthermore it has been pointed out by A. Chastagnol that Magnentius' choice of urban prefects in Rome betrays active sympathy towards paganism, not merely an attitude of tolerant neutrality.⁴² On the other hand, Magnentius could be depicted, apparently with good reason, as a supporter of the Nicene creed, and his alleged Nicene sympathies could be used in an attempt to implicate Athanasius in the eyes of the Arian emperor Constantius. This fact incidentally may explain the silence of the Nicene ecclesiastical historians, Socrates and Sozomen, about his religious policy. The picture that begins to emerge is one of a person whose religious convictions would not impede him from resorting to any theme of religious propaganda that he might find useful at any given moment.

Bastien is therefore inclined to regard Magnentius as a moderate pagan, who was not above stooping to measures of religious opportunism. Thus coins exhibiting the Christogram with the A-W find their easy and convenient explanation in the framework of this hypothesis. They are all confined to the mint of Trier and they were issued during the very last stages of the revolt. Hence, Bastien concludes, they betoken an attempt on Magnentius' part to rally to his support the Nicene-Orthodox Christians of Gaul against the Arian Constantius.⁴³

usurpers.

41 *C.Th.* XVI.10.5.

42 A. Chastagnol, *La préfecture urbaine à Rome sous le Bas-Empire*, Paris, 1960, 419-22; see also Didu (n. 4), 48, n. 129.

43 Bastien (n. 8), 8. Criticism of Magnentius' insincerity in the eyes of the gods seems to be conveyed by the statement of Julian, *Caesares*, 316A: οἱ θεοὶ δὲ ὀρώντες, ὅτι μὴ τὰυτὰ ἐκ καλῆς αὐτῷ πεποιήται διαθέσεως, εἶων αὐτὸν οἰμῶζειν ἀποτρέχοντα. This accusation is coupled with the admission that πολλὰ ἔδοκει πεπρᾶχθαι τῷ ἀνδρὶ καλά. It would hardly seem to stretch the sense of Julian's statement too much, if among the many achievements that he ascribes to Magnentius, some steps towards restoring paganism are to be understood. These however Julian appears to have judged as few and diffident; hence his characterization of them as not stemming from the right kind of disposition. See also Didu (n. 4), 42-3; 47-8.

This reconstruction of Magnentius' religious policy makes sense only if some crucial questions about its social setting are either ignored or too easily disposed of. Whom exactly was Magnentius' half-hearted proclamation of religious toleration meant to propitiate? The senatorial aristocracy of the City of Rome, staunch in its loyalty to ancient traditions, is one obvious suggestion.⁴⁴ Yet if this was the whole essence of Magnentius religious propaganda it proved a blatant failure right from the outset. His relations with the senate of Rome seem to have been strained, and senatorial tradition labelled him a ferocious tyrant and a butcher of the nobility.⁴⁵

The possibility that his favourable attitude towards paganism might have a strong appeal to substantial sections of the Roman army has thus far been neglected. There is good reason to believe that the conversion of the emperors to

⁴⁴ Thus e.g. Didu (n. 4), 47-8. On the pagan conservatism of the senatorial aristocracy in Rome, see A.H.M. Jones, 'The Social Background of the Struggle between Paganism and Christianity', in A. Momigliano ed., *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, Oxford, 1963, 21. This is basically the impression created already by A. von Harnack, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, 3rd ed., Leipzig 1915, vol. 2, 345. Recently it has been suggested by T.D. Barnes, 'Statistics of the Conversion of the Roman Aristocracy', *JRS* 85 (1995), 135-47, that the Roman aristocracy had been undergoing an intensive process of Christianization already in the course of the 4th century. This is however a far-reaching conclusion from his just criticism of the statistical methods applied by Raban von Haeling, *Die Religionszugehörigkeit der hohen Amtsträger des Römischen Reiches seit Constantins I. Aleinherrschaft bis zum Ende der Theodosianischen Dynastie*, Bonn, 1978. Barnes' correct analysis leads to the conclusion that Christian emperors since Constantine showed a marked preference for the nomination of Christians to important offices, and that there were enough Christian notables at hand, even under Constantine, to accept such nominations. It does not go far enough to dispel the impression that the Roman aristocracy was predominantly pagan until as late as the battle of the Frigidus and its aftermath, and it fails to account for such phenomena as the Victoria altar in the Roman Curia, and Symmachus' reaction against its removal by Arcadius in 382; see e.g. Richard Klein, *Der Streit um den Victoriaaltar*, Darmstadt, 1972. At any rate, his main suggestion, that a process of Christianization of the Roman aristocracy, ascribed by P.R.L. Brown, 'Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy', *JRS* 51 (1961), 1-11, mainly to the 5th century, ought to be transposed already to the 4th century, remains unsubstantiated.

⁴⁵ Eutropius, *Breviarium* X.11.2: *gravissimaeque proscriptiones et nobilium caedes fuerunt*; cf. Jerome, *Chron.* a.2366 (ed. Helm² March, 1998, 238). Victor, *Caesares*, 41.23, has a more general evaluation of his character: *gentis barbarae, diro atrocique ingenio*. See also Didu (n. 4), 47.

Christianity made little difference to most of the soldiers who were recruited in those parts of the empire where Christianity had made hardly any advance at all.⁴⁶ It may be recalled that Constantine the Great was greeted, on one occasion, by his soldiers with the salutation: 'Emperor Constantine, may the gods save you for us' (*imperator Constantine, dei te nobis servant*).⁴⁷ Furthermore,

⁴⁶ T.D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, Cambridge, Mass., 1981, 48, states that after Constantine's army had fought against Maxentius under the *labarum* on 28 October 312, 'the army of Constantine became officially Christian, whatever private religious sentiments his troops might cherish.' Constantine may well have wished an official conversion to have been a decisive turning point. His policy after the battle of the Mulvian Bridge however demonstrates quite clearly that the private religious sentiments of the soldiers mattered a lot more than any official pronouncement that the army was from now on Christian, and they had to be taken into account by the Christian emperor at every turn. See also Ramsey MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100-400)*, New Haven, 1984, 45-6.

⁴⁷ *C.Th.* VII.20.2. T.D. Barnes, *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine*, Cambridge, Mass., 1982, 69, n. 102; cf. 94, n. 14, argues from the subscription, *dat. kal. Mart. in Civitate Velevocorum*, which ought to be *in Civitate Bellovacorum*, i.e. 'in Beauvais' in northern France, that the edict must have been issued while Constantine was still in Gaul, and hence proposes an emendation of the consular date from *Constantino Aug. VI et Constantino* [or *Constantio*] *Caes. cons.*, i.e. 320, to *Maximiano Aug. VII et Constantino Caes. cons.*, a dating that would be compatible with 307, named by the consuls of that year proclaimed by Maxentius. He thus rejects the suggestion of O. Seeck, *Regesten der Kaiser und Päpste*, Stuttgart, 1919, 176, that the consular date ought to be *Constantino A. VII et Constantio C. cons.*, i.e. 326. It is not difficult to see why Barnes, who elsewhere describes Constantine's army as 'officially Christian' after the battle of the Mulvian bridge, is reluctant to accept a date later than 312 for this edict. Barnes however ignores Seeck's detailed reasoning for his proposed emendation, as well as his interpretation of its contents and the circumstances of its promulgation (*op.cit.*, 60). In my view, Seeck argues quite persuasively that the event recorded in the edict is the release of soldiers from the imperial army proclaimed in Nicomedia in 325, whereas the copy used by the editors of the Codex was the one promulgated by the praeses at Beauvais, in the following year. *C.Th.* VII.20.1 is best understood as a covering letter, sent together with VII.20.2 to the *praesides*, and it explicitly refers to a victory in Thrace that can be none other than the victory over Licinius. Hence the conclusion drawn from this event by A.H.M. Jones (see n. 44 above), that Constantine's army was still predominantly pagan after his victory over Licinius, even if this was not to the emperor's liking, does not seem to be so far fetched. See also Zosimus II.29.5, and A. Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, Oxford, 1969, 101-2, on the fundamental paganism of both the Roman army and the senate as manifested during Constantine's stay in Rome in 326.

Ephraem of Nisibis asserts that Constantius' army was predominantly pagan, and his testimony is significant because it clearly demonstrates how pagan soldiers could fight under the Labarum and still hold fast to their paganism.⁴⁸ Another Christian author of a pamphlet defaming Julian's memory, Gregory of Nazianzus, finds the ease with which this emperor converted his army to paganism, or rather exposed its innate loyalty to the ancient tradition, a very hard nut to crack.⁴⁹

As has been pointed out above, a usurper who had not gained acknowledgement as reigning legitimate emperor — one whose position was sanctified in the eyes of the soldiers by the halo of dynastic succession — could hardly hope for durable success. Yet in the battle of Mursa the fate of the dynastic Christian emperor hung in the balance, and Magnentius' soldiers remained, as Julian openly admits in his first panegyric of Constantius, staunchly loyal to their leader to the bitter end.⁵⁰ Was it their belief that Magnentius was ultimately going to effect a full restoration of paganism that bolstered their loyalty and provided Magnentius with a counterbalance to Constantius' dynastic legitimacy?

The following considerations may help to corroborate such a hypothesis.

i. Magnentius started his usurpation as the commander of two choice regiments established by the pagan emperors, Diocletian and Maximian. The titles of these two emperors, Jovius and Hercules respectively, reflecting their devotion to their divine patrons, Jupiter and Hercules, were imparted to the crack legions of their field army.⁵¹ The *Notitia Dignitatum* reveals that until as late as

⁴⁸ Ephraem Syrus, *Contra Iulianum*, III.9-11 (E. Beck, ed. and trans., in *CSEO* 174, 82, text, 175, 64, German translation; for an English translation, see J.M. Lieu, in Samuel N.C. Lieu, *The Emperor Julian, Panegyric and Polemic*, Liverpool, 1986, 119).

⁴⁹ Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Oratio IV = Contra Iulianum* I. 64 (*PG* 35, cols. 585-588).

⁵⁰ Julian, *Oratio* I.36B-C; Julian makes a distinction between the highly motivated Celtic soldiers, recruited in Gaul, who stubbornly resumed their fighting even when everything appeared to have been lost, and the barbarians who would have nowhere to return, if defeated, and continued fighting because they had simply no other choice. That barbarians in Magnentius' army should be characterized, even if implicitly, as less motivated than the soldiers recruited in Gaul, is a point whose significance will be brought out in the sequel. At any rate, Julian's overall impression of Magnentius' army is one of a body of soldiers fighting heroically on behalf of their leader: τοῖς μὲν ξὺν τῷ τυράννῳ τοσοῦτον περιήν θράσους πρὸς τὰ δεινὰ καὶ τοῦ χωρεῖν ὁμόσε πολλὴ προθυμία.

⁵¹ See Jones, *The Later Roman Empire* (n. 26), 53, with 1076, n. 30.

the turn of the 4th century, under devout Christian emperors, their overtly pagan honorary titles were still borne by them. The most reasonable explanation for this phenomenon would be that these emperors thought it detrimental to the morale of these choice units to change or modify them.⁵² Vegetius reveals an interesting detail concerning the history of these legions. They were originally recruited in Illyricum, the generic term for the Balkan and the Danubian provinces.⁵³ These provinces constituted a favourite recruiting area throughout the 4th century and there is good reason to assume that they continued to provide the Jovii and the Herculii with the bulk of their manpower. Adolf v. Harnack has convincingly shown that these provinces had been only slightly touched by Christianity in their urban centers when Constantine became sole emperor, and the implicit though unavoidable conclusion from the evidence he presents is that their rural population was still largely pagan.⁵⁴ No serious indication is forthcoming in any source that the situation changed over the 4th century. There is therefore strong reason to believe that Magnentius started his enterprise with a predominantly pagan force, recruited among the predominantly pagan rural population of predominantly pagan provinces.

Furthermore the rebellion started in Gaul, which was at least as thoroughly pagan as the provinces of the Balkans and the Danube.⁵⁵ Zosimus provides an

⁵² See n. 11 above.

⁵³ Vegetius I.17.

⁵⁴ Von Harnack (n. 44 above), 243-6; cf. 347, where Moesia and Pannonia belong to his third category, i.e. 'Provinzen in denen das Christentum wenig verbreitet war.' His evidence is derived mainly from data about episcopal sees in cities. On his own admission, 'das Christentum war Stadtenreligion', and hence, where it was only sparse in cities, it must have been even sparser in the countryside. A recent attempt to estimate the rate of spread of Christianity in the Western part of the Roman empire on the basis of the analysis of the evidence of epitaphs, arrives at the conclusion that in Macedonia, the turning point comes only after 400; see Carlos R. Cavalo-Sobrino, 'Funerary Epigraphy and the Spread of Christianity in the West', *Athenaeum* 83 (1995), 432-62, esp. 460. Though it does not deal with other provinces of the same region, there is little reason to believe that the pattern there would be different. I am grateful to Dr. Ephrat Habas-Rubin for having brought this study to my attention.

⁵⁵ According to von Harnack (n. 44), 347, most of Gaul belonged to his fourth category, i.e. 'Provinzen und Gebiete ... , in denen es (i.e. das Christentum) ganz sparlich oder kaum zu finden war.' In other words, it was even less affected by Christianity than the provinces of the Balkans and the Danube. The evidence of funerary inscriptions from Gaul (see Cavalo-Sobrino, n. 54) indicates the beginning of a shift not earlier than the last quarter of the 4th century. See further Z. Rubin, 'La Mediterranee et les origines de la France medievale', in I. Malkin ed., *La France et la Mediterranee*, Leiden, 1990, 58-68, for the evidence and its analysis.

interesting detail about the first stages of Magnentius' rebellion which may be of the utmost significance for the understanding of the type of propaganda he may have found it advisable to disseminate at the time.⁵⁶ When Magnentius was proclaimed emperor, he was greeted with enthusiasm by his Illyrian cavalry and his Gallic regiments. This was the starting point of a rebellion against an emperor well known as a devout Christian. The possibility that an upsurge of pagan religious sentiment swept aside Constans' claim to dynastic legitimation in the eyes of many of his soldiers cannot be easily denied.

ii. Both Julian in his *Caesares* and Libanius in his XVIII oration are surprisingly well disposed towards Magnentius. According to Julian he had been a man of promise which he had failed to fulfil. He had seemed capable of doing much good, but he had accomplished nothing sound.⁵⁷ Libanius is much more positive in his sympathy, but though he describes him as one who conducted his government maintaining the laws, he says nothing explicit about a pagan restoration.⁵⁸

iii. It is Libanius who actually proves that Julian's sympathy towards Magnentius was much stronger in deeds than in words. One of his first acts as emperor, Libanius maintains, was to re-enlist the remnants of Magnentius' army which had been disbanded by Constantius, and had been forced to find their sustenance by robbery ever since.⁵⁹ Where and when did this re-enlistment take place? Libanius is a poor guide on chronology and geography. All that we have said before about the last phases of Magnentius' usurpation, before its ultimate suppression in Gaul, shows that there he had hardly had sufficient soldiers to constitute the nucleus of a new fighting force, following his previous failures. It is a highly plausible inference that the reference is to the remnants of Magnentius' army which had been defeated at Mursa. And indeed, evidence of an extensive recruitment campaign to Julian's army after he had crossed the Alps, in Pannonia and in Moesia, is forthcoming in Zosimus.⁶⁰

It is therefore important to point out the significance of the timing of Julian's open proclamation of his paganism. It is a well known fact that during the Epiphany of 361, when he was still in Vienne, Julian feigned Christianity, and celebrated Christian rites in the church of that city.⁶¹ It was only after he had

⁵⁶ Zosimus II.41.4-5. His contemporary source is Eunapius.

⁵⁷ Julian, *Caesares*, 315D-316A; cf. n. 43 above. Julian's reserved attitude towards Magnentius may well have been shared by other pagans, such as Eunapius — a fact that may explain Zosimus' silence about his pro-pagan propaganda.

⁵⁸ Libanius, Oratio XVIII.33: ἀρχοντι δὲ αὐτῷ μετὰ φυλακῆς τῶν νόμων.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 104: καὶ στρατόπεδον ἀπὸ τῶν ληστεύειν ἡμαγκασμένων συναγαγεῖν, οἱ Μαγνέντιω συναράμεινοι τοῦ κινδύνου πράξαντες κακῶς τὰς ὁδοὺς κατειλήφεσαν ἀδίκοις τρεφόμενοι πόροις.

⁶⁰ Zosimus III.11.1.

⁶¹ Ammianus XXI.2.1.

crossed the Alps that he finally felt confident enough to discard his Christian mask. The earliest piece of explicit evidence is his letter to Maximus, sent probably from Naissus in November 361. The army, he proclaims in this letter, openly worships the gods together with the emperor — and Julian clearly speaks of an ongoing process.⁶² Julian's open proclamation of his paganism therefore coincided, in all likelihood, with the re-enlistment of the remnants of Magnentius' army. In view of everything said so far, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that this was expected to provide the core of a pagan military power ready to give its unwavering support to the newly proclaimed pagan emperor.

iv. If this conclusion is accepted it may be juxtaposed with the conditions that Julian had to face while he was still in Gaul. He was proclaimed Augustus in Paris by a force which had been recruited mainly among barbarians. Both Ammianus and Zosimus describe how the soldiers lifted him on a shield in an entirely un-Roman fashion,⁶³ and this is only one prominent symptom of the ethnic composition of his army at that time. Other indications are forthcoming.⁶⁴ It was while he was still among these barbarian soldiers, recruited in areas

⁶² Julian, *Epistulae*, 38 (Hertelein) = 26 (Bidez and Cumont), 415C. It is usually taken for granted that this letter reflects its writer's conduct only after the news of Constantius' death had reached him in Naissus on 3rd November 361; thus e.g. G.W. Bowersock, *Julian the Apostate*, London 1978, 62. The letter itself however makes no explicit reference to Constantius' death as an event of crucial importance. Furthermore, see *ibid.*, 415A-B, where Julian asserts that he had sought some oracular replies from the gods concerning Maximus' safety already on his way from Gaul to Illyricum. True, he admits that he had not made these enquiries himself but had asked others to make them on his behalf, but that was not because secrecy was needed for his own sake, but rather, as is very strongly implied, for the sake of Maximus who was still in Constantius' power, and he might have come to harm if it had become known that the usurper was taking interest in his fate. As for Julian himself, the letter clearly suggests that he had come out into the open as a pagan already during Constantius' lifetime, on his way to Naissus, after he had crossed over to Illyricum.

⁶³ Ammianus XX.4.17: *impositusque scuto pedestri, et sublatus eminens, nullo silente, Augustus renuntiatus* etc.; Zosimus III. 9.2: Καὶ ἐπὶ τινος ἀσπίδος μετέωρον ἄραντες ἀνείπον τε σεβαστὸν αὐτοκράτορα. According to Robert Browning, *The Emperor Julian*, London, 1975, 103, this was done 'in the old Germanic ritual that had become traditional in the Roman army.' For this there is to the best of my knowledge no support in the evidence at our disposal about proclamations of emperors by the soldiers.

⁶⁴ According to Ammianus, *ibid.*, 2, the incident that started the outburst of discontent with Constantius among Julian's soldiers was the former's demand that four of the latter's *auxilia* units, the Aeruli (i.e. Heruli), Batavi, Celtae, and Petulantes be sent over to him. Three hundred soldiers were to be selected of the other *numeri* of his army; Ammianus' text does not make it entirely clear

little affected by Roman civilization, and hence, so it seems, less staunchly loyal to the pagan traditions of the Roman empire, that Julian was afraid of exhibiting his paganism in broad daylight.

This may be one of a large number of pieces of evidence indicating that barbarians who had not been affected by Roman traditions were much more easily inclined to accept Christianity than the inhabitants of provinces that had undergone a process of Romanization while the empire had still been officially pagan, ruled by pagan emperors.⁶⁵ It is specifically in this context that Zosimus' testimony concerning Constantius' collusions with barbarians from across the Rhine against Magnentius may be viewed in a fresh light.⁶⁶ Even more significant is the prominence of Armenian mounted archers, under the command of Menelaos, in his army in the battle of Mursa.⁶⁷ If the assumption that the heroic devotion of Magnentius' soldiers to their leader (the only fact that would account for the catastrophic outcome of this battle) had something to do with their hope that his triumph would bring about a pagan restoration, Constantius' mobilization of military support from the first realm to have officially adopted the Christian faith becomes all the more intelligible. The expectation of a pagan revival would

whether John C. Rolfe's translation in the Loeb series, according to which 300 were to be detached of each *numerus*, is correct, but the fact that the best men of the two *scholae Palatinae*, that of the Gentiles and that of the Scutarii, were to be removed, indicates that the assumption underlying his translation is correct (*ibid.*, 3). Two of the units affected, the Heruli and the Batavi, bear the names of Germanic nations, but this does not necessarily point to the recruiting area of their soldiers. Nor does the name of one of the *Scholae* mentioned by Ammianus, namely the Gentiles, mean that it was more barbarized than the other one, namely that of the Scutarii. Much more significant for the understanding of the composition of Julian's army at the time is Ammianus' explicit statement that many of Julian's soldiers had been recruited from across the Rhine as *voluntarii barbari militares*, under contract that they would not be sent to serve beyond the Alps. According to Ammianus, Julian expressed his fear not only of the immediate consequences of the breach of this contract among soldiers already serving under his command, but also of the adverse effect that it might have on the future exploitation of this source of manpower (*ibid.*, 4).

⁶⁵ See Alföldi (n. 47), 60, and for a fuller statement of the case, see Z. Rubin, 'The Conversion of the Visigoths to Christianity', *MH* 38 (1981), 34-54; cf. id. 'La Méditerranée' (n. 55), 61-2.

⁶⁶ See n. 22 above. See further Bowersock (n. 62), 56-7, who draws a parallel not only between Julian's and Magnentius' propaganda at the initial stages of their usurpations, but also between the policy of enlisting barbarian support, adopted by Constantius in both cases. Bowersock however fails to point out the possibility that the sympathetic attitude towards paganism betrayed by both usurpers may have been a consideration in Constantius' policy.

⁶⁷ Zosimus II.51.4-52.2.

likewise be the best explanation why the charm of Constantius' dynastic legitimation, which had been so effective in his confrontation with Vetrano, failed to bring over Magnentius' army to his side before the defeat of his Ioviani and Herculiani.

v. Magnentius' coins emphatically proclaiming his Christianity belong, as pointed out by Bastien, to the very last phase of his usurpation, when he was desperately trying to enlist the former Nicene-Orthodox supporters of his victim, Constans.⁶⁸ A sediment of contemporary hostile propaganda against Constans, discernible in Aurelius Victor, may help to identify those supporters of Constans. On the one hand he treated his soldiers with contempt, and on the other, he aroused suspicions of homosexuality by surrounding himself with handsome barbarian hostages.⁶⁹ The truth that may be lurking behind this hostile propaganda is possibly the recruitment of barbarian bodyguards who accepted their emperor's religion and protected him against the mounting hostility of his largely pagan troops. It is not unreasonable to assume that Magnentius' Christian coins were designed to appeal to that element of Christianized barbarians in Constans' army, disbanded by Magnentius himself after his assassination of Constans. At any rate, the circumstances of Julian's rise to power indicate that the army put under his command by his uncle was recruited mainly among barbarians, and the fact that he found it advisable to feign Christianity while he was still among those who had lifted him on the shield, indicates that Christianity was strong among these barbarian recruits.

Two recent studies display the difficulty of assessing correctly the religious policy of the usurper Magnentius. One of them affirms that 'despite the chorus of vituperation after his death, which depicted him as a pagan as well as a tyrant, Magnentius was a Christian. Nevertheless, as one who challenged an established ruler, he needed to seek political support wherever he could find it.'⁷⁰ The other

⁶⁸ See n. 43 above.

⁶⁹ Victor, *Caesares*, 41.23-24; cf. Zosimus II.42.1.

⁷⁰ Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius*, 102, following Ziegler, but guardedly admitting that as a usurper he was not above seeking pagan support when he needed it. Barnes makes no reference to Bastien (cf. nn. 8 and 43) in this context, though he does refer to the 2nd edition of this book (inaccessible to me while writing these lines) for the date of Decentius' proclamation as Caesar (*ibid.*, 269, n. 10). In my view what he does say is as good as admitting a streak of religious opportunism in Magnentius' propaganda. Contrary to what Barnes suggests in his personal communication to me, I do not think that Bastien's study has been superseded by Ziegler, especially in matters that concern numismatics.

calls him 'a pagan sympathizer', falling short of describing him as a fully fledged pagan.⁷¹ Julian's summary of Magnentius' reign provides a good explanation for these confused impressions. As pointed out above, this devout pagan, who went the whole way in his pagan restoration regarded Magnentius as an unfulfilled promise. His personal beliefs must remain a mystery, but it still seems to be true that the soldiers who fought for him at Mursa appear to have believed him to be a pagan and to have staked their hopes upon him for this reason. Even if he was a Christian at heart, his case would not be different from that of Eugenius, who was demonstrably Christian, but whose usurpation was to serve, a few decades later, as a rallying point for pagan opposition to Theodosius in its last attempt to effect a pagan restoration.

A long time would pass before the Roman army might be counted upon to enforce an anti-pagan policy.⁷²

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⁷¹ Averil Cameron, *The Later Roman Empire, AD 284-430*, Cambridge, Mass., 74; cf. also Bianchi, 'Magnentius' (n. 8), 376.

⁷² See Rubin, 'La Méditerranée' (n. 65) for further discussion. See also Z. Rubin, *The Conversion of Europe to Christianity*, Tel Aviv, 1991, 70-82 (in Hebrew).