

## **Ammianus and Constantius. Image and Reality**

### **Abstract**

In this paper Ammianus' view on Constantius is compared to both other ancient sources and the findings of modern scholarship. In particular attention is paid to Ammianus' verdict on Constantius' cultural accomplishments (21.16.4). The pronouncements of Ammianus and others in this respect should be tested, it is argued, by the emperor's own writings (regrettably, a collection of these and other documents illustrating Constantius' reign is lacking).

I have often felt rather sorry for Constantius II. This son of Constantine the Great was no doubt a far lesser figure than his famous father or his notorious cousin Julian, but so were Caligula and Nero when compared with Augustus, yet they have found modern biographers while Constantius still has to do without one. Admittedly, it is justifiable to call the first half of the fourth century A.D. the *Age of Constantine and Julian*, after the protagonists on the historical scene.<sup>1</sup> The attention paid to these two emperors, which has resulted in a number of biographies,<sup>2</sup> can therefore easily be understood. It would be unwise, however, to neglect Constantius and it is a pity that modern scholarship has failed to produce a monograph devoted to his life and times<sup>3</sup> – for that of course is

<sup>1</sup> Bowder, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Piganiol, 1932; Vogt, 1960<sup>2</sup>; Jones, 1962<sup>2</sup>; MacMullen, 1969; Bidez, 1930; Browning, 1976; Bowersock, 1978; Athanassiadi-Fowden, 1981.

what a good biography ought to be, not just an isolated βίος of a single person or, worse, his *vie romancée*, but a *vita* firmly set within the context of the history of his times.

I do not assert that scholarly work on Constantius is totally lacking. On the contrary, "after long neglect ... Constantius has recently attracted renewed attention from historians".<sup>4</sup> Hopefully in the near future this renewed attention will result in the appearance of a specimen of "that perhaps most difficult genre of historiography",<sup>5</sup> biography, for, while preparing our commentaries on Ammianus,<sup>6</sup> we became more and more aware of the need for a good modern Life of the Apostate's cousin.<sup>7</sup> It would seem that the time is ripe for such a biography. Not only would it fill a lacuna, but it would also do justice to the efforts of those scholars in the past decades who attempted to revise historical opinion about the emperor's personality and the character of his reign.

Today's reputation of Constantius is much better than it used to be. Although in the past the emperor had occasionally found a few kind words (Ranke called him "eine grosse Gestalt" and Mommsen "besser als die meisten Herrscher dieses öden Jahrhunderts"),<sup>8</sup> scholars have more often been negative.<sup>9</sup> The emperor's conduct of foreign wars in particular has been criticized,<sup>10</sup> in the wake of Ammianus of course, but also of Eutropius and the *Epitome*, all of whom contrast Constantius' successes in civil wars

<sup>3</sup> The articles of Seeck, 1901 and Moreau, 1959 (for Constantius' youth and education to be supplemented with Blum, 1969 and Arce, 1979), valuable though they are, cannot be regarded as such.

<sup>4</sup> N. McLynn, *CR* 40 (1990) 392.

<sup>5</sup> J. Romein, *De Biografie*, Amsterdam 1946, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Den Boeft-den Hengst-Teitler, 1987 and 1991. Several observations in this article have sprung from the discussions during the preparation of our commentaries.

<sup>7</sup> This need is felt by others too. Cf. J.F. Drinkwater, *CR* 41 (1991) 257.

<sup>8</sup> Cited by Demandt, 1989, 93.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. e.g. Piganiol-Chastagnol, 1972<sup>2</sup>, 101 ff.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. e.g. Seeck, 1922<sup>4</sup>, 29 and 292.

with his failures against foreign enemies *-felix bellis civilibus, externis lacrimabilis*, in the words of the *Epitome* (42.18), whose *brevitas* I for once prefer to Ammianus' verbosity (21.16.15 *Ut autem in externis bellis hic princeps fuit saucius et afflictus, ita prospere succedentibus pugnis civilibus tumidus et intestinis ulceribus rei publicae sanie perfusus horrenda*, cf. 14.10.16, 14.11.8 and 21.13.7). Recent investigations,<sup>11</sup> however, have shown that the image of Constantius as timid, irresolute and unsuccessful in warfare should be substantially qualified. In 1972, speaking of Constantius' military abilities, Szidat remarked that, until then, despite a few isolated corrections on details, "das alte Bild im wesentlichen erhalten und massgebend [geblieben war]".<sup>12</sup> Things have changed since 1972, witness the studies just mentioned.

In other spheres too Constantius sometimes scores higher nowadays than he used to do. Although Klein in his study on Constantius II and the Christian church explicitly denies that he aims at an "Ehrenrettung" of the emperor,<sup>13</sup> he nevertheless comes very close to it and the tone of the articles in the fine volume of the *Entretiens de la Fondation Hardt* entitled *L'Eglise et l'empire au IVe siècle*, is, though less jubilant, yet not unsympathetic.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the conclusions of Vogler, who deals thoroughly with the imperial administration during Constantius' reign, are definitely less severe than those of most earlier scholars on this topic,<sup>15</sup> while Mudd, covering approximately the same ground as Vogler, is even rather positive.<sup>16</sup> As to taxation and oppression, Edgar Pack, with reference to Ammianus' complaint about the excessive taxation under

Constantius and the abuse of power of his officials when dealing with the provincials (21.16.17), remarks: "...dass das allgemein negative Urteil über die steuerliche Rücksichtslosigkeit und die Provinzen zerstörende Wirkung der Konstantius-Bürokratie in der Form, wie es uns bisher begegnet ist und wie es Ammian in seiner abschliessenden Charakteristik musterhaft zusammenfasst, keinesfalls berechtigt ist".<sup>17</sup> I shall end this short and incomplete, but, I think, representative anthology with another quotation: "His leading traits were an unswerving devotion to duty and determination, not to say obstinacy, in pursuing his objectives, and he had proved to be a very capable and efficient, if unimaginative, ruler".<sup>18</sup> To summarize: it is no exaggeration to say that scholarly opinion of Constantius has never been so unanimously benevolent as today.

A modern biography of Constantius is lacking and there is also no ancient *vita* of this emperor. Apart from some summary characterizations in the fourth-century minor historians and in Zonaras we only have Ammianus to make up for this deficiency, for, as is well-known, Ammianus devotes much space to elements of "Kaiserbiographie" in his *Res Gestae*, not only in the substantial elogia of Constantius, Julian (25.4), Valentinian (30.7-9) and Valens (31.14.1-7), but throughout his narrative as well.<sup>19</sup> Constantius' virtues and vices, his *bona* and *vitia*, are set forth in the last chapter of book 21 (*Bonorum igitur vitiorumque eius differentia vere servata praecipua prima conveniet expediri*, 21.16.1), but the chapter is not divided up proportionally. The text devoted to the *vitia* (§§ 8-18) is more than twice as long as the one describing the *bona* (§§ 1-7). In itself this is already significant. Ammianus' final judgement on Constantius, as passed in 21.16, is unfavourable, which does not come as a surprise to a reader of the previous books. As a matter of fact, to see

<sup>11</sup>Rosen, 1970, 21 ff.; Szidat, 1972; Warmington, 1977; Leedom, 1978, 141-145; Wirth, 1980/1981; Lightfoot, 1981; Blockley, 1989.

<sup>12</sup>Szidat, 1972, 712.

<sup>13</sup>Klein, 1977, xiv.

<sup>14</sup>Dihle (ed.), 1989.

<sup>15</sup>Vogler, 1979.

<sup>16</sup>Mudd, 1984, 269: "All in all, Constantius appears to have been a conscientious ruler, concerned with promoting internal stability and effective government".

<sup>17</sup>Pack, 1986, 103.

<sup>18</sup>Bowder, 1978, 47-48.

<sup>19</sup>Cf. Samberger, 1969; Pauw, 1972, 1977 and 1979. See also the pertinent remarks of Matthews, 1989, 238 ff., 459 ff.

that Ammianus' overall picture in the elogium is in accordance with the negative portrait sketched in the earlier books, causes less surprise than the fact that something positive is said at all. Most of the *vitia* the reader comes across in the elogium are already known to him, but of Constantius' *bona* none was mentioned previously.

Some scholars have taken offence at this unbalance in Ammianus' method of character portrayal and accuse him of bias and distortion.<sup>20</sup> Others argue more subtly. Neri, for instance, proposes to see in the *bona* which Ammianus attributes to Constantius no *bona* at all, but vices in disguise.<sup>21</sup> We should, he argues, recognize Ammianus' irony in the positive part of Constantius' elogium and we should detect in this part all kinds of hidden polemics.

This is a very attractive suggestion, but perhaps not totally fair to Ammianus, who, in the opening phrase of chapter 16, states that he will preserve the difference between Constantius' virtues and vices, 'in accordance with the truth', *vere*. I prefer to take this *vere* at face value and assume that Ammianus, whose dislike of Constantius (due to his "Valenserlebnis"?)<sup>22</sup> is beyond dispute, nevertheless was fair enough to admit that even a character who was the complete opposite of his hero Julian had some virtues, not many, but some. We should bear in mind that Ammianus did not shrink from the reverse, that is, criticism of Julian (25.4.16 ff.), either.

An example may perhaps be helpful for a proper evaluation of Ammianus' handling of these matters. In 21.16.4 Ammianus speaks, among Constantius' *bona*, of his

<sup>20</sup>For instance Mooney, 1955; cf. Pauw, 1972, 98 ff., who, in my view correctly, holds against Mooney that the elogia and the biographical elements in the rest of the narrative should be considered supplementary, not in opposition to each other.

<sup>21</sup>Neri, 1984, 3-19.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. Rosen, 1970, 244: "Man hat vermutet, Tacitus' 'Domitianerlebnis' habe seine Darstellung des Tiberius beeinflusst. Die Vermutung ist nicht unwidersprochen geblieben. Mit grösserer Gewissheit kann man bei Ammian von einem 'Valenserlebnis' sprechen".

cultural accomplishments. The text reads thus: *doctrinarum diligens affectator, sed, cum a rhetorice per ingenium desereretur obtunsum, ad versificandum transgressus nihil operae pretium fecit*. The passage as a whole is not very flattering of course. Note especially the word *obtunsum*, 'dull'. At first sight it may even seem out of place in the positive part of Constantius' record. Yet the first three words can, or rather should, be interpreted in a favourable sense.

Much depends on the correct assessment of the word *affectator*, which, admittedly, often occurs in an unfavourable context just like the verb from which it is derived. However, even a quick reading of the relevant pages of the *TLL* leaves one fully aware of the fact that a negative connotation is by no means necessary. *Affectare* is a *vox media*, meaning no more than "cum studio expetere" (*TLL* I 1181.43) and *mutatis mutandis* the same goes for the noun. A *doctrinarum diligens affectator* therefore is a man who diligently aims at accomplishment in what Ammianus elsewhere, more fully, calls the *doctrinae liberales*.<sup>23</sup> Constantius is called a *doctrinarum diligens affectator*, "he was industrious and had aspirations to learning",<sup>24</sup> and that is said to his credit.

I had better make myself perfectly clear. There can be no doubt that Ammianus had a low opinion of the emperor's learning and of his oratorical and poetical talents. He does not conceal this, nor does he conceal that Constantius at least strove to make the best of it. It is, admittedly, not much of a compliment, but that is the very reason why we should accept it as genuine like the rest of the *bona*. With due respect to Neri I think that the virtues Ammianus sums up in sections 1-7 of the elogium (for instance that he despised the pursuit of mere popularity, § 1, or that he always had the well-being and safety of his soldiers in mind, § 3)<sup>25</sup> were real virtues in the eyes of the author.

I have dwelt at some length on Constan-

<sup>23</sup>Cf. 14.6.1, 15.2.7, 28.1.6; the adjective is also lacking in 27.3.3, 30.4.5 and 31.16.9.

<sup>24</sup>Hamilton and Wallace-Hadrill, 1986, 230.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. Neri, 1984, 9-10.

tius' intellectual capacities not only because I needed an example to clarify my point concerning Ammianus' catalogue of the emperor's *bona*, but also because attention to this particular topic enables us to compare Ammianus' verdict with that of others. Next I propose to consider therefore some similarities and differences between Ammianus and other sources, focusing once again my attention on 21.16.4, the passage on the *doctrinae (liberales)*.

Information about an emperor's learning and literary skills was quite normal in a "Kaiserbiographie", as is shown in Suetonius' *Lives* and in the *Historia Augusta*,<sup>26</sup> although in the *Life* of the two Gallieni the author dryly remarks (11.9): *aliud in imperatore quaeritur, aliud in oratore vel poeta flagitatur*. Ammianus too dwells on this subject in the necrologies of the emperors who appear in the *Res Gestae*. He was, as we have seen, not very complimentary about Constantius, nor was he impressed by Jovian, whom he calls *mediocriter eruditus* (25.10.15), nor by Valens, who was *subagrestis ingenii nec bellicis nec liberalibus studiis eruditus* (31.14.5). Valentinian did better (30.9.4), but only Julian was above and beyond all praise (25.4.5, 16.5.6-7).

As to the other sources on Constantius, Aurelius Victor is, in contrast with Ammianus, remarkably positive: *litterarum ad elegantiam prudens atque orandi genere leni iocundoque* (*Caes.* 42.23). He even remarks (42.1) that the emperor at one time forced a usurper, Veteranio, to abdicate 'thanks to his eloquence' (*facundiae vi*). That is rather different from Ammianus' *ingenium obtusum*! However, since Victor finished his history when Constantius was still alive,<sup>27</sup> his testimony should be taken with rather a large pinch of salt. There is all the more reason to be skeptical about the reliability of

<sup>26</sup> Cf. e.g. Suet., *Tib.* 70, *Cal.* 53.1, *Tit.* 3.2, *Dom.* 20; *HA H* 14.8, *V* 2.7, *Gd.* 3.2-3.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Dufraigne, 1975, xvi: "...comme les *Caesares*, étant donné leur genre littéraire, ont dû être composés assez rapidement, on ne se trompera pas beaucoup en situant cette rédaction entre la fin de l'année 359 et le mois de septembre 360".

Julian's passing comments in his panegyrics in honour of Constantius,<sup>28</sup> and those of Libanius<sup>29</sup> and Themistius,<sup>30</sup> while the laudatory remark of the Christian Gregory of Nazianzen (*Or.* 4.34),<sup>31</sup> when seen in its context (viz. an invective against Julian the Apostate), also loses much of its lustre. It was perhaps the same wish to contrast the Christian Constantius with the heathen Julian which affected the opinion of Zonaras (or his source). At any rate Zonaras' verdict on Constantius' ability to write poetry was more lenient than that of Ammianus: *λέγεται...καὶ λόγοις ὀμιληκῆναι, ὡς ἔπος δύνασθαι συντιθέναι* (13.11.30). The pagan author of the *Epitome de Caesaribus* on the other hand echoes Ammianus: *facundiae cupidus; quam cum assequi tarditate ingenii non posset, aliis invidebat* (42.18).<sup>32</sup>

The most interesting aspect of the texts just mentioned is that they show something of the 'image' which Constantius had acquired as a cultivated man. Yet, all of these texts, Ammianus' included, are secondary sources, providing us with opinions, not with primary evidence. To judge someone's cultural accomplishments on the basis of opinions only, is hazardous, as we all know. Before we can assign a place in the Hall of Fame of Literary Artists to the emperor Nero, we need more evidence than the pronouncement 'what an artist perishes in me' (*qualis artifex pereo*, Suet. *Ner.* 49.1), and before we can estimate at its true value the pronouncements of Ammianus and others on Constantius' cultural level, we should try

<sup>28</sup> *Jul.*, *Or.* 1.1 ...καὶ τὰς τυραννίδας ὅπως ἀνήρηκας, τῆς μὲν λόγῳ καὶ πειθοῖ τοὺς δορυφόρους ἀποστήσας; *Or.* 1.11 c; *Or.* 2(3).77 a.

<sup>29</sup> *Lib. Or.* 1.81 μετὰ γὰρ τὴν τῶν τυράννων κατὰ λυσιν, ὧν τὸν μὲν λόγῳ, τὸν δὲ χειρὶ Κωνσταντίου ἔπαυσε. Cf. in general *Or.* 59.

<sup>30</sup> *Them. Or.* 2.37 a ἐξαρκεῖ δὲ αὐτῷ πολλάκις ὁ λόγος ἀντὶ τῶν ὄπλων and in general Themistius' first four orations, with Wirth, 1979.

<sup>31</sup> *Greg. Naz., Or.* 4.34 ὁ τὸ βαρβαρικὸν ἀνακαθαίρων κύκλῳ καὶ τοὺς οἴκοι τυράννου χειροῦμενος, τοὺς μὲν τοῖς λόγοις, τοὺς δὲ τοῖς ὄπλοις.  
<sup>32</sup> Cf. for the characterization of Constantius in the *Epitome* Schlumberger, 1974, 209-210.

to test them by Constantius' own writings. This, as far as I know, still has to be done.

It is significant of the way in which Constantius II has been treated by modern historians that a collection of his writings does not exist. His cousin Julian's speeches, letters and poems are conveniently collected both in the *Loeb Classical Library*<sup>33</sup> and in the *Collection des Universités de France*,<sup>34</sup> not to mention separate editions of his works. For Constantius' father we have the survey of Dörries, the translation and commentary of Constantine's letters and speeches by Kraft and the collections of documents by Von Soden, Opitz, Maier and Silli.<sup>35</sup> For Constantius, however, something similar is lacking. Admittedly, a collection of his "Selbstzeugnisse" would make up a rather thin volume, for most of his writings are lost, including, alas, the booklet *quem Constantius ut privignum ad studia mittens manu sua scripserat* (16.5.3). But we are in the possession of some of his writings,<sup>36</sup> authentic writings, not the speeches put into his mouth by Ammianus (14.10.11-15; 15.8.5-14; 17.13.26-33; 21.13.10-15) or the letter to Sapor found in Ammianus' seventeenth (17.5.10-14) book (for their wording I hold Ammianus responsible, not Constantius).<sup>37</sup>

Among Constantius' writings pride of place in my opinion belongs to a Latin inscription of 36 lines,<sup>38</sup> discovered at Ephesus in 1956, which contains a copy of an imperial letter in honour of a man called Philippus,

<sup>33</sup> Wright, 1913-1923.

<sup>34</sup> Bidez, Rochefort and Lacombrade, Paris 1924-1964.

<sup>35</sup> Dörries, 1954; Kraft, 1955, 160-272; Von Soden, 1913; Opitz, 1935; Maier, 1987; Silli, 1987.

<sup>36</sup> The following can be seen as a correction of and an addendum to Den Boeft-Den Hengst-Teitler, 1991 ad 21.16.4 *nilhil operae pretium fecit*.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. for the problem of the historicity and authenticity of the speeches in Ammianus e.g. Pighi, 1936, 29 ff.; Pighi, 1936a, 59 ff.; Naudé, 1956, 99-118 and Szidat, 1977, 165-168.

<sup>38</sup> H. Wankel, *Die Inschriften von Ephesos*, Teil I a, Nr. 1-47 (Texte), Bonn 1979, Nr. 41 on p. 258-263 (Inschriften Griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien, Band 11.1). Cf. Swift-Oliver, 1962.

almost certainly to be identified with the former *notarius* Flavius Philippus (*PLRE* I, Philippus 7), who, inter alia, rose to the consulship in 348 and who was PPO (Orientis) from 344-351. The document is of the greatest importance to anyone who wants to form an opinion of Constantius' literary skills.

Also in Latin are two letters on ecclesiastical affairs, one written in 355 and addressed to bishop Eusebius of Vercellae,<sup>39</sup> and the other sent to the Italian bishops assembled at the council of Rimini in 359.<sup>40</sup> Each letter is approximately of the same length as the inscription from Ephesus.

We possess a Greek translation of a letter of Constantius which was read in the senate of Constantinople on September 1st, 355 on behalf of Themistius. The letter is some seven Teubner-pages long.<sup>41</sup> It is an *oratio* in the sense in which Ammianus uses that word in 21.10.7 of Julian's letter to the senate of Rome, sent from Naissus in 361 (*orationem...scripserat ad senatum*). The text as we have it, is in Greek, but Libanius, in a letter to Themistius (*Ep.* 434), speaks of a Latin copy he had read. "I needed an interpreter", Libanius writes, "to understand what it said; but I enjoyed its content very much" (ἄ δὲ δι' ἐρμηνέως ὅ τι εἶη μαθόντες ὑπερχαίρομεν).

These examples must suffice. Surely more documents can be collected (I have in mind particularly the quotations in Athanasius and the church historians), but it is not my intention to present a complete list now.<sup>42</sup> My sole objective in citing these examples was to point out some neglected evidence, which may help to answer part of the question whether or not Constantius' image cor-

<sup>39</sup> V. Bulhart, *Eusebii Vercellensis Episcopi quae supersunt*, Turnhout 1957, 120-121 (CCSL 9).

<sup>40</sup> A. Feder, *S. Hilarii episcopi Pictavensis opera*, pars quarta, Vienna-Leipzig 1916, 93-94 (CSEL 65).

<sup>41</sup> H. Schenkl, G. Downey and A.F. Norman, *Themistii Orationes quae supersunt*, III, Leipzig 1974, 121-128.

<sup>42</sup> Since Brennan, 1986 is not available to me, I do not know if such a list is given there.

responds to reality. I do not feel in a position to give an answer yet, for some preliminary questions have to be answered first, questions for instance concerning authenticity and literary style as well as the part played by interpreters who translated Latin documents into Greek. Another, more fundamental, problem is that of ghost-writing. Nero had his Seneca. Did most of the late Roman emperors find their Senecas in the *quaestores sacri palatii*, as Honoré has suggested with regard to the Theodosian Code?<sup>43</sup> Difficult questions, no doubt, but not

without importance, I think. Whatever the final answer – and it would not be a disappointment to me if after all Ammianus was proved right; I do not aim at an “Ehrenrettung” of Constantius, I only want to base my verdict on all the available evidence – a collection of Constantius’ writings, together perhaps with other documents illustrating his reign, following the example of the source books of Ehrenberg-Jones, Smallwood and others,<sup>44</sup> would in my opinion fill a gap.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup>Honoré, 1986. Cf. Harries, 1988.

<sup>44</sup>Ehrenberg-Jones, 1955<sup>2</sup>, Smallwood, 1967.

<sup>45</sup>It is a pleasure to acknowledge the help of Drs. K.J.F. van de Wetering, who corrected my English.