

Emperor Julian and the City of Rome

Nephew of the Latin-speaking Constantine who modeled his “Roman revolution” after Augustus (Van Dam), the emperor Julian (*r.* 361-363) is often considered a Hellenized anomaly within his dynasty. He was received in the East as a Greek philosopher-king, while Ammianus records his reception in the West as a foreign upstart by the Roman Senate (21.10.7-8), and by the army as a bookish *Graeculus* (17.9.3). Modern scholarship has tended to assume that Julian himself, a native hellenophone trained in Greek rhetoric, emphasized his Greekness, looking upon the Romans with little interest, if not contempt (e.g. Weiss; Beard, North, & Price; den Hengst). A careful survey of Julian’s writings, however, reveals quite different feelings toward Rome and *Romanitas* in his self-fashioning as a Roman emperor committed to his role—not a divine, Hellenic sage and philosopher-king, but a merely human, philosophical amateur (O’Meara), first and foremost a soldier defending an empire providentially destined to eternally rule the *oikoumenē*. The Romans, to him, are not only a thoroughly Greek people, but the superior example of a Greek civilization (Jul. *Or.* 4.153a). Displaying a keen interest in Roman myth and history, when speaking of Greeks and Romans separately, he consistently identifies as not Greek, but Roman.

This paper focuses on the emperor’s views of, and relationship to, the city of Rome as the *locus* of his underappreciated *Romanitas* outlined above. Though he never had the opportunity to visit the city before or during his imperial career as Caesar (355-361) and Augustus (361-363), it is evident from his writings that Julian honored it from a distance, consistently placing “our city” above even Athens and his birthplace of Constantinople. He demonstrates a deep reading of Greek sources on Rome’s founding, early history, and religion as established by Romulus and

Numa, kings whose careers he takes as a composite model to emulate (Classen), just as Octavian Augustus had done. In practice, Julian strove to increase the involvement of the Roman Senate in the government of the Empire, collaborating with pagan champions like the senator Praetextatus (Amm. Marc. 22.7.6). Julian's affection for his uncle's Constantine's city, on the other hand, is demonstrably overstated. Shifting the focus from Christian Constantinople back to pagan Rome was part of Julian's political, cultural, and religious program of restoring the empire as a new founder of Rome.

Works Cited

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