

Gabriel Chrisman

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HIST 388

**Zosimus: Similarities and Differences in the Portrayal of Constantine and Julian, and their Bearing on the Traditional Roman Values of the *New History***

In Zosimus' pagan *Historia Nova*, one of the heroic figures is, predictably, the pagan emperor Julian. His short lived attempt to return the Empire to traditional religious practices is not explicitly discussed in the text, as Zosimus tells us that Julian's "deeds henceforth until the end of his life have been described by historians and poets in weighty volumes...Anyone who wishes to understand all of these can read his own speeches and letters, from which appreciation of his deeds...may be gained."<sup>1</sup> Knowledge of Julian's religious program, and many other particulars of his life, were assumed in Zosimus' audience. What he intended to lay out in his history, therefore, was a focus on events "which others have thought fit to omit."<sup>2</sup> Surprisingly, there are many parallels in this account between Zosimus' depiction of Julian, and his portrayal of Constantine – an iconic Christian figure whom I would initially assume Zosimus, as a religiously motivated writer, would not want to associate with one of his few pagan heroes. These parallels, and also the important differences in his depictions of the two emperors, reveal evidence of the influence of the early Christian histories on the perceptions and methods of later historians. They also clarify Zosimus' position regarding what specifically he felt was laudable and heroic

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<sup>1</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, trans. Ronald T. Ridley. Canberra: University of Sidney, 1982, reprinted 2006. p. 49-50.

<sup>2</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 50.

in the behavior of these two emperors – and what was not. His values contrasted sharply with those of the Christian historians, but accorded closely with those of classical Rome. They were not primarily religious: he valued military prowess, devotion to the empire, and respect for tradition above all else.

There are many coincidental similarities between the careers of Constantine and Julian. Both were acclaimed emperor in the northwestern provinces at a similar age, and then crossed the Alps en route to a confrontation with their major rival. A certain amount of parallelism is therefore unavoidable, but the similarities between these two accounts go beyond mere coincidence. The most telling event is the description of the vision ascribed to Julian before his encounter with Constantius II. Zosimus tells us that Julian had a dream of “the Sun,”<sup>3</sup> who made a specific astrological prediction regarding the death and defeat of Constantius II: “When Jupiter reaches the edge of noble Aquarius, and Saturn comes to Virgo’s twenty-fifth degree, then emperor Constantius, king of Asia, will reach the hateful, painful end of sweet life.”<sup>4</sup> This dream, involving the Sun and predicting the downfall of the opposing emperor in religious terms, is strongly reminiscent of Eusebius’ account of the vision of Constantine before the battle of the Milvian Bridge – especially the account in the *Vita Constantini*, in which the vision is related using explicit solar imagery.<sup>5</sup> While this account is not included in Zosimus’ text, it is highly likely that Eusebius was among his sources as a commonly circulated history at the time, and the story must have been familiar to him. The inclusion of this similar dream represents a reinforcement of the coincidental similarity of these two figures in the eyes of Zosimus – just as

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<sup>3</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 54.

<sup>4</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> “He saw with his own eyes...resting over the sun, a cross-shaped trophy formed from light...” Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, p. 81.

Constantine conquered by the will of God in Eusebius' history, Julian will be represented conquering by the will of the gods in Zosimus'. Likewise, his usage of the Eusebian trope is indicative of the success and wide circulation of this imagery.

Both Constantine and Julian challenged emperors that were described as having become tyrannical. In Constantine's case, Maxentius' "treatment of the inhabitants of Italy, and even of Rome itself, was cruel and violent."<sup>6</sup> For Julian, his opponent Constantius II was described as "terribly depressed with jealousy,"<sup>7</sup> and in a "fit of rage and arrogance."<sup>8</sup> These characterizations make it clear that Constantius II was behaving in a way that did not benefit the imperial office. In Zosimus' traditionalist Roman view, these definitions of the opposing emperors made civil war licit in both cases, and cast both Constantine and Julian as the legitimate parties in the conflict.

Besides these key links created by Zosimus, others are also evident in the text. Both emperors are portrayed by Zosimus as militarily successful and tactically brilliant; Constantine often received unexpected praise in military matters from the pagan historian. In one of his battles with Licinius, "Constantine won convincingly; for he attacked the enemy vigorously and wrought such slaughter that scarcely thirty thousand out of one hundred thirty thousand escaped. As soon as this was known to the Byzantines, they threw open their gates to welcome Constantine...."<sup>9</sup> In warfare against the barbarians, Constantine's positive image is even clearer: "crossing the Danube himself, [he] attacked the barbarians as they fled to a thick wood on a hill. Many were killed, including Rausimodus himself, but he also took many alive and spared the rest who

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<sup>6</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 54.

<sup>8</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 54.

<sup>9</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 35.

sought mercy.”<sup>10</sup> Julian is accorded similar praise: in action against the German barbarians “he did not await their attack but crossed the Rhine...A fierce battle ensued in which innumerable barbarians fell while Caesar [Julian] pursued those who fled to the Hercynian woods, wreaking great slaughter and taking Vadomarius, the son of the barbarian’s general, prisoner.”<sup>11</sup> The similarity between these two accounts of battle with the barbarians is striking, and while Julian never actually had to fight a battle against a rival emperor, the praise he is granted for his other military encounters with the Persians is similar to that accorded Constantine: “the emperor, who was very wise in all things and had considerable military experience, decided to order the fifteen hundred men...to attack the enemy from behind and create a diversion and in this way allow the rest free passage...”<sup>12</sup> His entry into Constantinople is also described in much the same terms as Constantine’s: “When he came to Byzantium, everyone received him with joyful acclamations, calling him fellow citizen and darling...”<sup>13</sup> Both emperors’ success in battle is described as the result of their superior skill, and not as mere luck or coincidence. It is clear that military leadership was a key element in Zosimus’ evaluation of historical figures, and his praise for both Constantine and Julian in these matters creates another connection between these two men.

Characterizations of the emperors’ speed both in traversing the Empire with their military, and their bold and decisive movements in battle represent another minor point of similarity. Constantine’s actions are described as shockingly quick: in a battle with Licinius, Constantine crossed a river with a small contingent of cavalry, and “many fled headlong, while others stood

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<sup>10</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 50-51.

<sup>12</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 59.

<sup>13</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 56.

gaping, amazed at the suddenness of it all, and the unexpectedness of his crossing.”<sup>14</sup> Julian received similar comments: “when they understood that it was Julian, all were amazed and compared the event to an apparition.”<sup>15</sup> For both emperors, this speed and decisive action was an element of their military skill and leadership. This minor parallel provides another link joining the two leaders.

All of these similarities serve to link the successes of Constantine, which are recognized even by Zosimus, with the career of Julian. In exalting Julian in the same manner as Constantine had been praised, the Constantinian aura of success was linked to Julian’s reign. However, Zosimus did not want to imply similarities in other matters. His praise of Julian is more complete than the recognition that he gave to Constantine’s successes. The differences between the two emperors are therefore also elaborated in the *Historia Nova*. In the distinctions he drew between the two ‘heroic’ figures, combined with the similarities, we can gain insight into Zosimus’ own leanings and his intentions in writing his historical account.

Zosimus’ accounts of the emperors’ reactions to their new office were very different. According to Zosimus, Constantine had always wanted the position: “it was already perfectly clear to many people how much he wanted to be emperor....”<sup>16</sup> After his acclamation, “his image was exhibited at Rome as was customary...”<sup>17</sup> In contrast, Zosimus’ account of Julian’s early reign cast him as a reluctant emperor. After his unexpected acclamation he was “indeed distressed at what had happened...[and] sent ambassadors saying that his elevation had been con-

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<sup>14</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 34.

<sup>15</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 55.

<sup>16</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 29.

trary to his own wishes and judgement....”<sup>18</sup> His extreme reluctance is further exemplified in his worries about the ensuing civil war: he did not wish to “gain a reputation...for being ungrateful”<sup>19</sup> in fighting against the emperor who had appointed him as Caesar. The contrast reminds the reader that Zosimus only praised Constantine reluctantly, and the distinction also demonstrates his Roman traditionalist roots. The idealized reluctance of leaders was a trope dating back to republican Rome, and its introduction in descriptions of Julian marks him as a truly heroic figure for Zosimus. Perhaps even more than his paganism, this traditionalist aspect of Zosimus’ character informs his depictions of the emperors in the *Historia Nova*. Julian’s religion, by contrast, receives only the barest notice, “he openly showed his religious opinions by declaring outright in the hearing of all that he would rather entrust himself and his life to the gods than to Constantius’ assurances.”<sup>20</sup> While Julian’s religious leanings certainly had something to do with Zosimus’ admiration of him, this admiration is represented almost entirely in Roman traditionalist terms. Far more praise is directed at other aspects of his reign.

Reinforcing this traditionalist view of Julian are the descriptions of his comparatively egalitarian interactions with his soldiers. He “at one moment visited the tribunes and centurions, at another mixed with the common soldiers.”<sup>21</sup> He is often described as literally leading the way for his armies. In crossing a channel designed by the Persians to impede their advance, “Nevertheless, with the emperor at its head, the army followed, wet to the knees, considering it shameful not to follow his example.”<sup>22</sup> There are many occasions in the text where Julian is depicted

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<sup>18</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 54.

<sup>19</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 54.

<sup>20</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 54.

<sup>21</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 65.

<sup>22</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 60.

“encouraging the troops.”<sup>23</sup> Constantine’s relations with the army are never described in these terms. The closest relations described in the text are more detached interactions such as: “he marshaled his troops and ordered them to be ready for battle at dawn.”<sup>24</sup> While he certainly appeared in roles of direct leadership, even at the front of his army, he did not associate with his soldiers in the way that Zosimus’ Julian did. The images of Julian as an egalitarian soldier/emperor certainly owe something to Zosimus’ traditionalist leanings, and to the early Roman conceptions of the citizen-soldier.

The accounts of Julian’s reign also focus to a much greater degree on the specifics of military encounters. This may only reflect the nature of the sources available to Zosimus for the two different time periods, but it may also represent another attempt to improve the image of Julian compared to that of Constantine. Military prowess was clearly an important element of greatness to Zosimus, and he takes many pages in describing in detail the military exploits of Julian’s short reign. Constantine is only accorded praise of any sort when he is involved in war, whether with other emperors, or with the barbarians. His wars also receive less attention to detail. Once “at peace, he devoted his life to pleasure.”<sup>25</sup> Julian, on the other hand, was constantly at war. This also fits into a view of Zosimus as a Roman traditionalist: the duty of Roman leaders was to ‘war down the proud’ and not to have time for decadent pleasures. The end of Constantine’s reign, characterized by several years of peace, militated against him in Zosimus’ estimation. The deaths of the two emperors in the *Historia Nova* also reveal which he found to be the more heroic – Julian died “at the very height of the battle,”<sup>26</sup> defending the empire against the external

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<sup>23</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 65.

<sup>24</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 32.

<sup>25</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 38.

<sup>26</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 65.

threat of the Persians, while Constantine “died from a disease,”<sup>27</sup> after spending the last years of his life on activities which “gave the barbarians unhindered access to the Roman empire.”<sup>28</sup> Julian was performing his military duty as a Roman emperor to the last, while Constantine was depicted not only shirking this duty, but actively damaging the empire through his actions. His planned Persian campaign was not mentioned.

In the *Historia Nova*, Zosimus presents us with a description of many of the emperors of the Roman empire. However, few are accorded any praise in his account. It is important to note that the two men who truly receive commendations in this history are opposites in religious matters – though praise was given to Constantine only before he was a practicing Christian. A close reading has demonstrated, however, that while religious orientation may have informed Zosimus’ choice of heroes to some degree, it was not the sole determining factor. His negative portrayals of many of the pagan emperors, even those vehement enough in their paganism to persecute the Christians, belie a simple religious motivation for his writing. His representations of Constantine and Julian lead me to believe that in referring to Zosimus as a ‘pagan historian,’ we are missing much of his point. Respect for traditional polytheist religious practices was simply an element of his values – it did not define them. His account is better described as a traditionalist Roman history, in which classical Roman values of prudence, devotion to the empire, respect for tradition, and defense from the barbarian outsiders are the key virtues. Irrespective of Constantine’s religious policies, his early career was worthy of praise in these terms. These values contrast sharply with the virtues most highly praised by the new Christian historians – personal piety, devotion to the Christian God, and deference to the leaders of the Christian Church.

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<sup>27</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 41.

<sup>28</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, p. 39.



In placing Zosimus in this way, our reading of his characterizations of Constantine and Julian makes more sense. The praise Zosimus gave to Constantine was given for his support of traditional values – this was most evident in his battles to preserve the empire from the barbarians. The accepted Christian histories also had an influence on his portrayal, as I'm sure that he had few negative sources to draw on. In the largely Christian environment of the Eastern Empire in the year 500 AD, Constantine was a universally recognized hero, and even a detractor such as Zosimus could not avoid making use of elements of this representation. The universality of this perception is evident in Zosimus' efforts to link his hero, Julian, to Constantine. Once the basic connection is made, Zosimus then expands on his description of Julian to show his greater devotion to the values that Zosimus held most dear – the virtues of classical Rome.