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JOHN F. DRINKWATER

The Revolt and Ethnic Origin
of the Usurper Magnentius (350–353),
and the Rebellion of Vetranio (350)*

Magnentius

Magnus Magnentius, a high ranking field officer, was proclaimed Augustus on 18 January, 350, in the Gallic city of Autun, as a replacement for Constans, the wholly discredited western emperor.¹ Although it falls outside the extant portion of Ammianus Marcellinus' *Res Gestae*, we are relatively well informed about this coup d'état. Our principal source is Zosimus, corroborated and supplemented by stray references in the works of the emperor Julian and by a surprisingly full narrative in the so-called *Epitome de Caesaribus*.² There is another long account in Zonaras.³ However, as I will show, even when this appears to be more than a garbled or arbitrarily elaborated version of the *Epitome*/Zosimus-tradition, it is unreliable.⁴

* I am extremely grateful to HUGH ELTON, NICHOLAS HENCK, DAVID HUNT, HARTMUT LEPPIN, WOLF LIEBESCHUETZ, JOHN MOLYNEUX and THOMAS WIEDEMANN for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this paper, and to RAJKO BRATOŽ for kindly supplying me with a copy of ŠAŠEL (cit. n. 86). This version was presented to the Nottingham Classics Workshop. I have to thank all present on that occasion for their very constructive response. – The following abbreviations are used: BARNES = T. D. BARNES, *Athanasius and Constantius*, Cambridge MA – London 1993; BASTIEN = P. BASTIEN, *Le monnayage de Magnence (350–353)*, Wetteren ²1983; BIDEZ = J. BIDEZ, *Amiens, ville natale de l'empereur Magnence*, REA 27, 1925, 312–318; BLECKMANN = B. BLECKMANN, *Constantina, Vetranio und Gallus Caesar*, Chiron 24, 1994, 29–68; HUNT = E. D. HUNT, *The successors of Constantine*, in: *Cambridge Ancient History XIII*, Cambridge 1998, 1–43; KENT = J. P. C. KENT, *Roman Imperial Coinage vol. 8. The Family of Constantine I*, London 1981; KIENAST = D. KIENAST, *Römische Kaisertabelle*, Darmstadt ²1996; PASCHOUD – SZIDAT = F. PASCHOUD – J. SZIDAT (eds.), *Usurpationen in der Spätantike*, Stuttgart 1997; SEECK = O. SEECK, *Geschichte des Untergangs der antiken Welt 4*, Stuttgart ²1922.

¹ For basic nomenclature, chronology and bibliography see KIENAST 319–320.

² Zos. 2.42.2–5; Julian, *Orat.* 2.56D, 2.57D–58A; *Epit.* 41.22–25.

³ Zon. 13.6 (NIEBUHR pp. 31–32).

⁴ For Zonaras' deficiencies in this respect see M. DIMAIO, *History and myth in Zonaras' Epitome Historiarum: the chronographer as editor*, *Byzantine Studies/Études Byzantines* 10, 1983, 25–26.

According to the Epitome and Zosimus, though the plot put a soldier on the imperial throne, it was conceived and supported at the highest levels of Constans' civil administration.⁵ Its leader was Marcellinus, Constans' *comes rei privatae*, and it was backed by Fabius Titianus, praetorian prefect of Gaul.⁶ This reveals the depth of feeling against Constans, the extent of whose unpopularity can be seen in his being branded as a 'tyrant'. Early in 350 the western court was in residence in Autun, where Constans had settled to enjoy the hunting (another, we are told, of the despised obsessions that brought about his downfall). On the night of 17 January, Marcellinus threw a great party, to which he invited a number of senior military figures, including Magnentius, *comes rei militaris* and officer-commanding the palatine legions *Ioviani* and *Herculiani seniores*.⁷ Ostensibly the gathering was to celebrate the birthday of Marcellinus' son, but it was intended for a different purpose. Towards its end, in the early hours of the following morning, Magnentius excused himself on the grounds of answering a call of nature and then reappeared dramatically clad in imperial robes. The revellers immediately proclaimed him Augustus, and this proclamation was subsequently confirmed by the inhabitants of the city of Autun, by those of the wider *civitas* of the Aedui (who, once they heard the news, journeyed to town for this purpose) and by more junior field officers. Constans, in the meantime, lost no time in taking to flight. However, while making for the small settlement of Elne, near the Mediterranean coast not far from the pass between Gaul and Spain, he was overtaken by a small group of picked men commanded by one Gaiso and killed out of hand. Now firmly established, Magnentius was recognised throughout Constans' portion of the Empire, except in Illyricum, where the garrison proclaimed Vetrano emperor.⁸

As will be obvious from the preceding, this is a rich story. It is hardly surprising that modern historians have accepted and reproduced it more or less as it stands. The purpose of the first part of this paper is to suggest both that there is even more to be extracted from it than has been done so far and yet also that certain of its key elements are questionable and perhaps even mistaken. I will concentrate on two aspects: the preparation of Magnentius' revolt and his ethnic background.

Magnentius' revolt was carefully planned. This is obvious from the staging of the 'birthday-party' and, in particular, from the ready availability there of a copy of the imperial dress, that «quintessential symbol of rule» which, as we know

⁵ For more detailed (although, because they give credence to Zonaras, more fanciful) narrative accounts of the incident, see C. JULIAN, *Histoire de la Gaule* 7, Paris 1926, 150–153 and W. ENSSLIN, *Magnentius* 1, *RE* 14.1, 1928, 445–446.

⁶ Marcellinus: *PLRE* 1.546; Titianus: *PLRE* 1.918–919.

⁷ *PLRE* 1.532.

⁸ See below p. 146.

from the rebellions of, for example, Julian (360 – well organised) and Procopius (365 – poorly organised), was indispensable in a usurpation.⁹ However, these were but the central elements in a complex piece of theatre, no doubt directed by the eminence grise of the new régime, the resourceful and determined Marcellinus.¹⁰ We should not overlook the other means of legitimising Magnentius' rule: he was hailed as emperor not just by senior military officers, but also by junior officers and by the civilian population of an important Gallic *civitas*. This last point will stand further investigation.

It is likely that by late 349 Constans' position was so weak that he could have been destroyed at any time. The fact that the conspirators chose to wait until the court was in residence in Autun is therefore significant: both timing and location will have been important for them. With regard to timing, they would be greatly helped if they could be sure that, once they had overthrown Constans, his brother, the eastern emperor Constantius II, would not immediately move against them. This was in fact generally unlikely since, from the beginning of his reign, Constantius had been busy in Mesopotamia combating renewed attacks from Persia.¹¹ In the first half of 350, indeed, he would face a sustained assault by Shahpur II on the key fortress-city of Nisibis.¹² This was a large-scale venture and will have entailed much preparation. It is not impossible that the conspirators, as leading members of the western imperial establishment, already had some inkling of what was in store and that, by the end of 349, they felt fairly confident that they faced no present danger from Constantius. However, I propose that, to be absolutely sure, they decided not to reveal themselves too early, and so waited into the start of 350, by which time news of trouble in the west would reach Constantius at the start of the eastern campaigning-season, when it would be too late for him to commit his forces to anything other than the war with Persia.¹³

As far as location is concerned, the conspiracy would also enjoy increased chance of success if Constans' downfall could be engineered at some distance from the major military areas. He had become distasteful to the troops;¹⁴ however, as later events were to show, the power of the Flavian name remained strong and an emotional appeal by him in extreme circumstances to army sentimentality might have enabled him to recover some of his old popularity and

⁹ C. KELLY, *Emperors, government and bureaucracy*, in: *Cambridge Ancient History* XIII, Cambridge 1998, 144.

¹⁰ E.g. Julian, *Orat.* 2.57D–58D, 59B–C; *Zos.* 2.46.3f.

¹¹ HUNT 11–14; R. C. BLOCKLEY, *Warfare and diplomacy*, in: *Cambridge Ancient History* XIII, Cambridge 1998, 419–421.

¹² Julian, *Orat.* 1.27A–28D; *Zon.* 13.7.1–12.

¹³ So Julian, *Orat.* 1.26B; *Zon.* 13.6.1. Cf. *Amm. Marc.* 23.2.6: Julian began his Persian campaign on 5 March, 363.

¹⁴ *Zos.* 2.47.3.

support.¹⁵ Less important, but still worth noting, is that it would not have harmed the conspirators' cause if Constans could be overthrown while indulging himself in his passion for hunting. On these arguments, many places away from the frontier would have suited the conspirators' needs. However, I would argue that they would have particularly welcomed the chance to involve the city of Autun and bring it over to their side. Though Constans had journeyed there to enjoy country-pursuits, we must not forget that the *civitas*-capital of the Aedui was an extraordinarily sophisticated city. This was because of its school of rhetoric. In existence by the early first century A.D., the school of Autun had survived the perils of the third-century crisis and by the late-third and early-fourth century was again flourishing, attracting first-rate teachers and turning out administrators for the western court and provinces.¹⁶ As a result of the senior positions gained by its professors and students, it exercised influence at court, and appears to have wrung a number of important favours for itself and the Aedui from the second Flavian dynasty.¹⁷ The town would also have retained memories of earlier significant involvement in western politics during the rebellion of Florus and Sacrovir in the first century and, especially, in the revolt against the Gallic Empire in the name of the supposed founder of the Flavian line, Claudius II, in the third.¹⁸ We must picture a lively and cosmopolitan place, that prided itself on having influence on the imperial dynasty and on western government and western society: in modern terms, on being an important opinion-forming community. If Magnentius and his backers could get Autun to support them, this would both help legitimise the coup and further demonstrate Constans' political bankruptcy.

It has been suggested that Autun may have been ready to support Magnentius out of disappointment and resentment at its being eclipsed by Trier, now flourishing as the western sub-capital.¹⁹ Closely related to this line of argument might be thought the proposition that during the fourth century the school of Autun was overtaken in importance by the school of Trier.²⁰ However, neither idea will bear close scrutiny. As far as the schools of rhetoric are concerned, it is clear that if that of Trier grew to any significant degree (and this is now

¹⁵ See below, Vetrano, and Zos. 2.44.3–4, 2.46.3.

¹⁶ See e.g. Pan. Lat. 9 (GALLETIER 5): Eumenius on the restoration of the schools.

¹⁷ See again Pan. Lat. 9 (5), with Pan. Lat. 6 (GALLETIER 7; C. E. V. NIXON – B. S. RODGERS [trans.], *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors. The Panegyrici Latini*, Berkeley CA 1994, 211–253) 23.2 [an anonymous speaker of 309/10 boasts about the success of his pupils] and Pan. Lat. 5 (GALLETIER 8; NIXON – RODGERS, l.c. 254–287) [the Aedui win a remission of taxes in 311].

¹⁸ Tac. Ann. 3.43.1; Pan. Lat. 5(8).4, cf. DRINKWATER, *The Gallic Empire*, Stuttgart 1987, 36.

¹⁹ HUNT 11 (citing a piece published by THÉVENOT in 1932, though the idea is to be found in JULLIAN, l.c. [n. 5] 150 and n. 3).

²⁰ T. J. HAARHOF, *The Schools of Gaul*, Johannesburg ²1958, 48.

disputed) this took place during the second half of the fourth century, under Gratian but very likely at the prompting of Ausonius, well after Magnentius.²¹ With regard to the status of the two cities, Autun could never have realistically entertained any hope of rivalling Trier. Trier had been a major centre of imperial administration since the first century, and a regular seat of emperors – legitimate and illegitimate – from the mid-third.²² Its lofty position, in the west second only to Rome, was acknowledged by the panegyrists.²³ Autun's success lay not in housing the imperial administration but in providing its higher personnel and in shaping its policies. In this it faced competition not from Trier but from other important 'university-cities', such as Toulouse and Bordeaux. However, over these Autun enjoyed an invaluable advantage: the continuing patronage of the imperial house. Constans' very presence among the Aedui (perhaps for the whole of the Christmas season) was a singular honour and must destroy any argument based on Autun's supposed feeling of neglect. Yet there may be something to be won from consideration of the relationship between Autun and Trier. As FLAIG and MARTIN have recently observed, during the late Empire the support of the civil population of the imperial capitals was, both practically and symbolically, very important in the gaining and keeping of imperial power.²⁴ For Magnentius this should, of course, have meant securing the backing of Trier but, as its later revolt against Magnentius' Caesar, Decentius, may show, Trier remained committed to the ruling dynasty:²⁵ having enjoyed sixty years of Flavian patronage it had become a 'company-town'.

Thus Constans could have been despatched at any time, but the conspirators waited until the court was resident in Autun because, amongst other reasons, Autun was the best place to begin a revolt. But this raises another point. It also seems clear that Constans could have been killed immediately after the usurpation, but he was not. Indeed, he was allowed to escape, and to remain on the run for what must have been a significant period of time – perhaps a week or so.²⁶ It is reasonable to wonder why. I would propose that this was

²¹ H. HEINEN, *Trier und das Trevererland in römischer Zeit*, Trier 1985, 349–350.

²² DRINKWATER, *Roman Gaul*, London 1983, 95; id., l.c. (n. 18) 141–142.

²³ Pan. Lat. 10 (GALLETIER 2) 14.3.

²⁴ E. FLAIG, *Für eine Konzeptionalisierung der Usurpation im spätrömischen Reich*, in: PASCHOUD – SZIDAT, 16: Rome; J. MARTIN, *Das Kaisertum in der Spätantike*, in: PASCHOUD – SZIDAT, 54–56: Constantinople.

²⁵ Amm. Marc. 15.6.4.

²⁶ Using T. CORNELL – J. F. MATTHEWS, *Atlas of the Roman World*, London 1982, 128, I estimate the distance from Autun to Elne – along main roads and via Clermont-Ferrand, Rodez and Narbonne – at about 400 statute miles or 660 km. This would have taken an imperial despatch-rider about four days to cover: see DRINKWATER, *Silvanus, Ursicinus and Ammianus: fact or fiction?*, in: C. DEROUX (ed.), *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History VII*, Brussels 1994, 571. Constans and his small party must surely have taken rather longer.

done deliberately in order to allow Magnentius to avoid the charge of regicide and to demonstrate that he was the better man – the fitter emperor.²⁷ On this argument, Constans was permitted to live so that he could display one final weakness – his inability to restore the situation when he still seemed to have a chance – and so that, as a result, he might ultimately take his own life. The odd direction of his escape-route, south-south-west (presumably to Spain²⁸), rather than north (to the armies of Britain and the Rhine), east (to his brother) or due south (down the Rhône valley, to take ship for Italy) suggests that his progress was controlled and directed: that he was the victim in a cat-and-mouse game that never allowed him to reach a position from which he had any real chance of regaining the initiative. Still, even under such circumstances, there remained an element of risk. Constans came dangerously close to his goal, refused to commit suicide and in the end had to be murdered. It is not surprising, therefore, that his captor and killer, Gaiso, was named with Magnentius as one of consuls of 351.²⁹

In attempting to understand the motives for such elaborate planning it is important that we are not influenced by hindsight. Magnentius and his backers did not know that the second half of the fourth century would see several western usurpers, none of whom would ultimately prevail against the ruling dynasty – or rather, as FLAIG has noted, against the strength of the eastern armies.³⁰ In 350, they were playing to win and, presumably, had high hopes of succeeding; and from their point of view, their principal enemy was not Constans, politically a spent force, but recent imperial history.

The size of the task facing the rebels cannot be overstated. Constans had become extremely unpopular and probably deserved to be overthrown, but in challenging him Magnentius challenged a son of the great Constantine I. More than this, the house of Constantius I (293–306), father of Constantine I, had ruled in the west for over half a century and had built up a deep reservoir of support there.³¹ The power of the Flavian name was therefore immense: it can be seen not only during the revolt of Vetrano on the Danube in March 350 (and in its subsequent collapse to Constantius II in December of the same year), but also in that of Nepotianus, grandson of Constantius I and half-nephew of Constantine I, against Magnentius in Rome in June 350, and later in Procopius' rebellion against Valens in 365 and Constantine III's against Honorius

²⁷ On the importance of the first see Themist. Orat. 2.38b. I owe both point and reference to Dr. H. LEPPIN.

²⁸ So JULLIAN, l.c. (n. 5) 151.

²⁹ PLRE 1.380.

³⁰ MARTIN, l.c. (n. 24) 49; FLAIG l.c. (n. 24) 28, 32–33.

³¹ Cf. Eutrop. 10.1.3: *Hic [Constantius] non modo amabilis, sed etiam venerabilis Gallis fuit* – He was not only loved but also revered by the Gauls (trans. H. W. BIRD, Eutropius: Breviarium. Translated Texts for Historians vol. 14, Liverpool 1993).

in 407.³² In addition, in revolting against the Flavian line, Magnentius put himself in opposition to the prevailing imperial system. As his immediate actions were to show, he wanted control only of the west, not of the whole empire; the east could be left to Constantius II. However, this would have amounted to a non-dynastic sharing of imperial power in an empire that had grown used to dynastic rule: again, Magnentius and his supporters appear to have plunged in against the historical tide.

Yet it must have been possible for Magnentius and his supporters to believe that contemporary history could be an ally as well as an enemy. There had been no love lost among the immediate family of Constantine I. Constantine I had killed his wife and one of his sons. His death, in 337, had been followed by a family blood-bath, to the benefit of his three surviving sons; and of these, a quarrel between Constantine II and Constans had led to the former's death at the hands of the latter in 340. Following this, Constans and Constantius II had never enjoyed cordial relations as joint rulers; and Constantius II must have been aware of Constans' emerging faults.³³ Consequently, it cannot have been unthinkable that a new regime might replace the Flavians in the west and, if it showed itself prepared to co-operate with Constantius II in a way that Constans' administration had not, might be recognised by the remaining Flavian emperor. And in this respect, of course, contemporary history also provided the precedent for non-dynastic succession (albeit cemented by marriage) in the Tetrarchy. I would indeed suggest that hopes of reviving and exploiting tetrarchic principles were central to the thinking of those involved in what may be termed the 'Magnentian experiment'. Usurpation had always been part of the imperial system, an accepted means of disposing of an emperor no longer accepted by the political nation.³⁴ It would not make Magnentius a permanent rebel if he could gain recognition as western Augustus from Constantius II;³⁵ and at the start of his reign he made every attempt to gain such recognition.³⁶

³² Vetranio, Nepotianus, Procopius: KIENAST 321–322, 332; cf. DRINKWATER, Julian and the Franks and Valentinian I and the Alamanni: Ammianus on Romano-German relations, *Francia* 24/1, 1997, 11; Constantine III: DRINKWATER, The usurpers Constantine III (407–411) and Jovinus (411–413), *Britannia* 29, 1998, 272.

³³ See e.g. BARNES 63–70, 101.

³⁴ FLAIG, l.c. (n. 24) 19.

³⁵ FLAIG, l.c. (n. 24) 28; J.SZIDAT, Die Usurpation Iulians. Ein Sonderfall?, in: PASCHOUD – SZIDAT 63.

³⁶ KENT 40 (coinage in the name of Constantius), cf. BASTIEN 12–13 (coins, inscriptions, diplomacy); BARNES 101–102. Contrary to BARNES, I see no reason not to interpret Magnentius' marriage to Justina, great-granddaughter of Constantine I, as part of this policy of reconciliation, and to place it in the period before the break with Constantius II. Though Magnentius was soon also to bid for the hand of Constantina (see below p. 152), if it had suited his plans he could easily have divorced Justina on the grounds of non-consummation: for her young age see BASTIEN 17.

Constantius could have justified acceptance of Magnentius if he chose to announce that it was but a reversion to the tetrarchic notion of collegiality. To win the game, all Magnentius needed to do was to show himself a fitting candidate, the best man. There may even have been some idea of projecting him as the new Diocletian. KOLB has recently pointed up the arguments that were offered to prove that Diocletian, an undoubted usurper, was a legitimate emperor.³⁷ A significant number of these points also fit Magnentius: he was chosen by an *Offiziersgremium*; he took the imperial insignia, especially the purple; he was acclaimed by the army – called together on a representational basis; and he then overthrew a tyrant.³⁸

Yet the whole notion of the scrupulous preparation and execution of such plans appears to be vitiated by one of the most certain pieces of knowledge we appear to possess about Magnentius: that he was of the lowest stock. This takes us to the question of his origin:

Magnentius' humble background features strongly in the sources, as can be seen from the following catalogue. (To save space, I cite in full only the most important Julianic reference.)

Themistius, Orat. 3.43a: Γενομένης γὰρ τῆς βαρβαρικῆς ἐκείνης ἐπαναστάσεως καὶ τῆς Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῆς αἰωρουμένης ὥσπερ ἐν κλύδωνι χαλεπῷ καὶ τρικυμία καὶ κινδυνευούσης ἐκπεσεῖν τῆς Κωνσταντίνου διαδοχῆς εἰς ἀλάστορα βάρβαρον καὶ παλαμναῖον . . . (For after that barbaric insurrection had broken out and the Roman Empire was tossed, as it were, amid the breakers of a stormy sea and the house of Constantine was in danger of falling to a damned barbarian and murderer).

Themistius, Orat. 6.80c: ὃς τοῦ μάλιστα ἀνιάσαντος ἐν τῇ τῆς ἐσπέρας ἐπαναστάσει κύριος γεγονὼς μετὰ τῆς φυγῆς τοῦ βαρβάρου ἅμα τῷ λαβεῖν τὴν ἐξουσίαν κατέθετο τὴν ἀπέχθειαν . . . ([Constantius II], after he had overcome the man who had caused him so much trouble through his insurrection in the west and after putting the barbarian to flight, associated the recovery of power with the laying aside of enmity).

Julian, Orat. 1.34A: κτείνας μὲν τὸν αὐτὸς αὐτοῦ δεσπότην ἀνδράποδον γὰρ ἦν τῶν ἐκείνου προγόνων, τῆς ἀπὸ Γερμανῶν λείας λείψανον δυστυχεῖς περισώζομενον (He assassinated his own master. For he had actually been the slave

³⁷ F. KOLB, Die Gestalt des spätantiken Kaisertums unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Tetrarchie, in: PASCHOUD – SZIDAT 35–36.

³⁸ The only differences between Diocletian and Magnentius in this respect are that Magnentius was not portrayed as the avenger of a preceding emperor, and that there is no mention of the divine. However, as MARTIN, l.c. (n. 24) 52 points out, acceptance of a usurper by the army was in itself regarded as a sign of divine favour. As far as specific religious beliefs are concerned, I am sure that Magnentius was a Christian: see below p. 145.

of the murdered emperor's ancestors, a miserable remnant saved from the spoils of Germany).

Julian, Orat. 1.33D, 34D, 42A, 42B; Orat. 2.56C, 56D, 95C.

Aurelius Victor 41.25: *Namque Magnentii, utpote gentis barbarae, diro atrocique ingenio . . . adeo extincta omnia sunt* (For everything was ruined by the cruelty and ferocity of Magnentius, natural in a barbarian).

Epitome de Caesaribus 42.7: *Ortus parentibus barbaris, qui Galliam inhabitant.*

Zosimus 2.54.1: γένος μὲν ἔλκων ἀπὸ βαρβάρων, μετοικήσας δὲ εἰς Λετούς, ἔθνος Γαλατικόν, παιδείας τε τῆς Λατίνων μετασχών (Though of barbarian origin, he had settled among the Leti, a Gallic tribe, and acquired a Latin education).

Zonaras 13.6B: Μαγνέντιος, ὃς ἐκ πατρὸς μὲν γεγέννητο Βρεττανοῦ.

Schol. ad Jul. Orat. 2.95C (text from BIDEZ): ὁ Μαγνέντιος ἐκ Γαλλίων [sic] ὁρμώμενος πόλεως Ἀμβιανοῦ τῆς κελτικῆς ἐπικαλουμένης λέξεως, καὶ πατρὸς μὲν Βρεττανοῦ, μητρὸς δὲ Φράγκης τεχθεῖς (Magnentius, who launched his usurpation from among the Gauls, came from the city of Ambianum [its Gallic name]. Though his father was British, his mother was a Frank).

Without doubt, the most influential interpretation of Magnentius' origins has been that of BIDEZ.³⁹ Basing his case firmly on the last two items in the above list, BIDEZ argued that Magnentius was born on Roman soil and had a Romano-British father, but inherited the low civil status of his Frankish mother because, without the right of *conubium*, her liaison with his father could not be regarded as a lawful marriage. Like his mother, therefore, Magnentius was classed as a peregrine barbarian. BIDEZ's suggestion was immediately accepted by ENSSLIN, and has long been the communis opinio.⁴⁰ However, such a lowly background would normally have ruled anyone out of consideration as a candidate for the purple. It is significant that recently some scholars have voiced unease with the idea. KENT, in particular, hazarded that Magnentius' origins were «obscured by the rhetorical calumnies of his enemies», and made the excellent point that if Magnentius' background really was so discreditable it is very strange that his backers were prepared to draw further attention to it by allowing his mother and brother to become leading figures in the regime.⁴¹

It may be argued that Magnentius' family and career are comparable to those of Silvanus, the Romanised Frankish general who was proclaimed emperor

³⁹ BIDEZ 317.

⁴⁰ See e.g. most recently HUNT 14–15.

⁴¹ KENT 10. Against KENT, I follow M. DIMAIO, Smoke in the wind: Zonaras' use of Philostorgius, Zosimus, John of Antioch, and John of Rhodes in his narrative on the neo-Flavian emperors, Byzantion 58, 1988, 246–247 and KIENAST 320 in regarding Zonaras' second brother of Magnentius as a likely fiction. For Decentius as the brother of Magnentius see B. BLECKMANN, Decentius, Bruder oder Cousin des Magnentius?, Göttinger Forum für Altertumswissenschaft 2, 1999, 85–87.

against Constantius II in Cologne during the summer of 355.⁴² In other words, Magnentius too may have been a member of the Frankish military establishment that we know was very influential in the middle years of the fourth century and, despite his origins, may like Silvanus have been regarded as a plausible and viable usurper. However, this is to ignore the element of planning. From Ammianus' narrative it is clear that Silvanus and his backers were driven to hostility against Constantius with little time to prepare their position and formulate long-term policies; and he was soon suppressed. Those behind Magnentius, on the other hand, would have had ample opportunity to consider the implications of offering a barbarian replacement for Constans and, rightly, to judge these too risky. In addition, as I have set out elsewhere, the case for Silvanus (the usurper) is much weaker than it seems.⁴³ That he could have been accepted as such by contemporaries in 355 may well have resulted from their having been misled about the events of 350. In other words, far from Silvanus' disloyalty to Constantius II serving as confirmation that a barbarian might realistically have been put up for the throne five years earlier, the misrepresentation of his actions as open revolt may have succeeded because of an already successful smearing of Magnentius as a 'German' usurper. These doubts surely justify a fresh look at the evidence.

Even the most cursory glance at what is available reveals an interesting pattern: the later the source, the more detail it offers concerning Magnentius' background, as follows:

- 1) Themistius; Julian; Aurelius Victor: mid-fourth century, more or less contemporary accounts, independent of each other: Magnentius was a barbarian.
- 2) Epitome; Zosimus: early-fifth and early-sixth century respectively, but drawing ultimately on a single late-fourth century source, perhaps Nicomachus Flavianus:⁴⁴ Magnentius, though of barbarian stock, was born and brought up in Gaul.
- 3) Zonaras (normally drawing on the 'Nicomachus Flavianus tradition' – see above – but here clearly elaborating on this and taking in other materi-

⁴² Silvanus: PLRE 1.840–881.

⁴³ DRINKWATER, *l.c.* (n. 26) 574–575.

⁴⁴ F. PASCHOD, Zosime. *Histoire nouvelle* livres i–ii, Paris 1971, 1v (following SEECK and HARTKE); J. SCHLUMBERGER, *Die Epitome de Caesaribus*, Munich 1974, 235, 240; M. FESTY, *Le début et la fin des Annales de Nicomache Flavien*, *Historia* 46, 1997, 466, 471. Research into the sources of the later Greek historians is difficult and has led to a complex and sometimes acerbic debate. Anglophone scholarship has, for example, tended to be suspicious of the importance attached to Nicomachus Flavianus (e.g. J. F. MATTHEWS, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus*, London 1989, 479 n. 7). See most recently BLECKMANN, *l.c.* (n. 41) 87; and M. FESTY, *Pseudo-Aurélius Victor. Abrégé des Césars*, Paris 1999, xv–xx, xxxi–v.

al);⁴⁵ Scholiast: twelfth and thirteenth/fourteenth centuries respectively, drawing on a single source:⁴⁶ Magnentius was a half-breed, with a British father and a Frankish mother.

This phenomenon may be explained as the result of an authentic increase in knowledge about Magnentius. The assumption of this «revelatory» process must underpin BIDEZ' thinking. However, such an interpretation does not explain the clear inconsistencies between the three groups proposed above.

The greatest difficulty is caused by the Epitome and Zosimus. Though neither is perfect, the first being very brief and the second, apparently, slightly garbled, together both strongly suggest that Magnentius was of laetic background. Though the nature of the Gallic *laeti* remains disputed, it seems clear that they began as war-captives settled (or, as in the case of Roman prisoners re-captured from barbarian enemies, re-settled) in Gaul and subjected to various legal disabilities and obligations not imposed on full citizens.⁴⁷ Such a mean condition, as implied or described by the Epitomator and Zosimus, is not wholly out of keeping with the much vaguer invective against Magnentius' breeding found in Themistius, Julian and Aurelius Victor. Indeed, it may even be said to confirm Julian's description of the history of the usurper's family at Orat. 1.34A. However, it sits very awkwardly against the more respectable version of Magnentius' parentage offered by Zonaras and the Scholiast, which forced BIDEZ into special pleading: that Magnentius' mother must have been among prisoners settled near Amiens, presumably on an imperial estate, by Constantius I or Constantine I, and that it was from this settlement that Magnentius could be legitimately termed a *laetus*.⁴⁸

An alternative approach is to doubt the veracity of all these statements. As far as those of Themistius, Julian and Aurelius Victor are concerned, these may be dismissed as the products of court propaganda. Magnentius, despite his best efforts to the contrary, was not accepted as Constantius II's imperial

⁴⁵ B. BLECKMANN, *Die Reichskrise des dritten Jahrhunderts in der spätantiken und byzantinischen Geschichtsschreibung*, Munich 1992, 328–330, 398, 400–401, 411–415; S. RATTI, *Jérôme et Nicomaque Flavien: sur les sources de la Chronique pour les années 357–364*, *Historia* 46, 1997, 490, 504, 508 (both contra DIMAIQ, who had previously argued [l.c. (n. 4) 25–26; l.c. (n. 41) 231, 234 and n. 23, 246] that Zonaras' main source for Magnentius was Philostorgius, though he also drew on other authors, in particular, for the usurpation of 350, Eunapius/Zosimus). That, whatever his main source, Zonaras turned elsewhere for new information on Magnentius' earlier history seems clear from the way in which he sets this material (that Magnentius had a British father, and had served in the *protectores*) – one feels, with some pride – at the beginning of his version of the «Epitome/Zosimus» narrative.

⁴⁶ BIDEZ 315.

⁴⁷ For a recent concise review of the question see NIXON – RODGERS, l.c. (n. 17) 141–143; also E. M. WIGHTMAN, *Gallia Belgica*, London 1985, 253.

⁴⁸ BIDEZ 317–318.

colleague. Constantius from the start determined to stand by the dynasty, destroy Magnentius and vilify his memory. Consequently, just as Magnentius tried to prove himself to be a fitting ruler, Constantius branded him a tyrant and strove to demonise him, living and dead. On this argument, Themistius, Julian and Aurelius Victor should be seen as transmitting the vicious calumny of the court of Constantius II, in which we should expect to find little truth. On the contrary, it may be argued that by the time of Themistius' third oration and Julian's panegyrics of Constantius there were very specific reasons for the victorious establishment's attempting to depict Magnentius, falsely, as a barbarian: certainly, to exculpate the usurper's army from the blame of having followed him (it was compelled to, unlike his own Frankish and Saxon allies: Julian, *Orat.* 1.34D, 2.56C); and, perhaps, to divert criticism from Constantius II for having unleashed the Alamanni on Gaul in order to weaken Magnentius' position there (it was Magnentius who led barbarians into the Roman Empire).⁴⁹ Next, the common source of the Epitomator and Zosimus put forward the idea of Magnentius' laetic background. This, however, should not be interpreted as the result of its possessing greater knowledge than Themistius, Julian or Aurelius Victor, but as an arbitrary elaboration of the hints it found in their (and perhaps similar) accounts, perhaps out of fancy but also perhaps out of a desire to make some sense of events. For the very indistinct background to be found in Themistius, Julian and Aurelius Victor is now made concrete and is placed in a more explicit imperial context.⁵⁰ I would argue that it is a Romanisation of Magnentius – the partial exorcism, as it were, of his demonisation by Constantius II – that we find in Zonaras and the Scholiast. It must have struck ancient historians, as it strikes modern, that given his supposed origins Magnentius was indeed «a surprising

⁴⁹ Julian *Orat.* 1.34D, 2.56C; DRINKWATER, *Francia* 24/1, 1997, 4–5.

⁵⁰ With regard to the vagueness of the earliest source-tradition, it is interesting to observe that Themistius' first extant reference to Magnentius, made in mid-November 355 (2.34a: H. LEPPIN – W. PORTMANN [trans.], *Themistios. Staatsreden*, Stuttgart 1998, 47), condemns him as an unworthy usurper, indeed as a monster, a latter day Typhon/Seth, but makes no specific reference to barbarian origin (ὅτι ψυχὴ κακεργάτις τε καὶ ἐμπληκτος ταύτης ἦν αἰτία τῆς ἀταξίας, ἐπιθεμένη ἄρχειν ὧν οὐ προσήκεν αὐτῇ γένει, καὶ παρωσαμένη τὴν ἔμφορα μοῖραν καὶ τοῦ σπέρματος τοῦ ἀρχικοῦ πάντα χορήματα ἐτάραξε Τυφῶνος δίαιτῃ/a criminal and insane character it was who instigated this disorder. Craving to rule over something for which he was not fitted by breeding and flying in the face of a destiny that logically belonged to the seed of the ruling house he, like Typhon, brought all to chaos). Likewise, on another occasion between this date and early 357 Themistius characterises Magnentius as a «murderer and felon», but not as a barbarian (4.56a: LEPPIN – PORTMANN, l.c. 80–83, and LEPPIN pers. comm.). Finally, Themistius' portrayal of Magnentius in his sixth oration, possibly delivered late in 364, is no stronger or more detailed than that of the third, delivered in spring 357 (LEPPIN – PORTMANN, l.c. 68, 113).

choice».⁵¹ The later accounts, from the Epitomator to the Scholiast, appear to seek to explain this choice by making Magnentius less barbarian and more Roman, and so a more credible candidate. But all these accounts must be treated with the greatest suspicion.⁵²

The question remains as to Magnentius' likely background. I would suggest that this could not have been in any way barbarian. We must assume that Magnentius' backers put up a man whom they expected to be received as an entirely acceptable candidate. However, given what Constantius II's supporters were able to say about the usurper, we must also assume that although Magnentius came of a family that had received some modest patronage from Constantine I, this remained unknown in court and metropolitan circles.⁵³ It is probable that Magnentius rose up in the world entirely through military service. His relatively advanced age (he was about fifty when he became western emperor) suggests that this was a long haul, despite the benefit of early imperial attention. In short, Magnentius' origin, like his usurpation, was probably very similar to that of Diocletian and, indeed, to that of Claudius II, a famous Roman soldier but whose family was so obscure that he could later be claimed as the founder of the Flavian line.⁵⁴

Was Magnentius a Gaul? There is some justification for believing so, though not along the lines advocated by BIDEZ, and later developed by FLEURIOT. An apparently compelling point in BIDEZ' case for the reliability of the Scholiast is his reference to Amiens as the place of Magnentius' birth, since we know from the usurper's mintmark AMB that he established a small and short-lived mint there.⁵⁵ According to BIDEZ, this was to honour his native city.⁵⁶ However, this is not of itself a conclusive argument. Coins of legitimate emperors and usurpers were noted and scrutinised in the fourth century,⁵⁷ and it may well have been that the source of Zonaras and the Scholiast, in its attempt to produce a more «Roman» pedigree for Magnentius, derived his *patria* from a knowledge of his coinage. The Amiens mint probably owed its foundation more to strategic changes in coin-production and -distribution than to the city's being Magnentius' birthplace.⁵⁸ FLEURIOT proposed that Zosimus' *Leto* is derived

⁵¹ BARNES 101.

⁵² Reversing the argument of BIDEZ 317, it could be that Magnentius' «British» origin was fabricated from the activities of Paul the Chain in the island after his fall.

⁵³ Patronage: Zos. 2.46.3.

⁵⁴ E. LIPPOLD, Constantius Caesar, Sieger über die Germanen, Nachfahre des Claudius Gothicus?, Chiron 11, 1981, 347–369.

⁵⁵ KENT 119–124; BASTIEN 34–35.

⁵⁶ BIDEZ 316.

⁵⁷ E.g. Julian, Misopogon 355D; cf. Hist. Aug. Trig. tyr. 31.3 (Victoria).

⁵⁸ BASTIEN 34, 249–250; cf. KENT 119 and D. G. WIGG, Münzumlauf in Nordgallien um die Mitte des 4. Jahrhunderts n. Chr., Berlin 1991, 147, 203–204.

from a misreading or misunderstanding of *Litavii/Letavii*, found in early medieval documents as an alternative name for Bretons, with *Litavia* (in modern Welsh, Llydaw) for *Aremorica/Brittanny*.⁵⁹ Zonaras and the Scholiast were therefore correct in identifying Magnentius' father as a *Bretannos*, but this should be translated as 'Breton' not 'Briton'. Though FLEURIOT is guilty of some serious misrepresentation of BIDEZ' argument (the latter, for instance, always takes *Bretannos* as 'British'),⁶⁰ this is an acute observation, demanding attention. However, I consider his conclusions unlikely. The close relationship between Zosimus and the Epitome at this point suggests that some sort of reference to *laeti* was found in their common source; and so early and so recondite a use and misinterpretation of *Letavii* in, say, Nicomachus Flavianus strikes me as improbable. In addition, to square the accounts of Zosimus, Zonaras and the Scholiast, FLEURIOT has to argue that Magnentius' father was not, as one will at first have supposed, a Breton of Brittany, but one of Picardy, in some way connected to Pliny the Elder's *Britanni* of the Channel coast,⁶¹ «very probably», according to FLEURIOT, living in an area that was also called *Litavia*.⁶² This is to push the evidence too far; the similarity between *Letoi* and *Letavii* is best considered fortuitous.

Rather, one might suppose that the Constantian mud managed to stick so well because those who flung it knew that it would find something to which to attach itself. Even Roman emperors did not as a matter of course decry opponents as barbarians: there had to be something in Magnentius' background that both suggested the accusation and supported its credibility. On this argument, it is not difficult to envisage his coming from one of the several north-eastern Gallic *civitates* (including those of the Arvii [= Nervii?], Bellovaci, Lingones, Treveri, Tricasses or even Ambiani) known to have received prisoners taken during the German wars of Maximian, Constantius I and Constantine I.⁶³ This, and his obscure family, made Magnentius vulnerable to the base charges of Constantius II's supporters.

A later writer, attempting to make sense of the patently false accusation that Magnentius was a pure German, made him a *laetus*, but this tells us nothing of value. The link between Magnentius a native-born barbarian and Magnentius a son, if not a citizen, of Gaul, could be made because the word *laetus* had by now lost most of its original meaning. The technicalities of laetic settlement continue to be debated because the lines distinguishing these people from

⁵⁹ L. FLEURIOT, *Les origines de la Bretagne*, Paris 1980, 53–54; id., *Brittonica*, EC 19, 1982, 262–263; cf. J. MOREAU, *Supplément au dictionnaire de géographie historique de la Gaule et de la France*, Paris 1983, 142.

⁶⁰ See e.g. BIDEZ 317.

⁶¹ NH 4.106.

⁶² FLEURIOT, EC 19, 1982, 263.

⁶³ Pan. Lat. 8 (GALLETIER 4) 21.1; NIXON – RODGERS l.c. (n. 17) 142–144.

others in very similar positions (e.g. the Frank, *acceptus in leges*, and the *barbarus cultor*) were always fine and were soon overlooked by contemporaries. Thus a term originally devised to describe those (fortunate) people who «had been wrenched from their privileged status (presumably by being captured by barbarians) and upon being rescued were restored to their former rights» came to be applied to ordinary German prisoners-of-war settled on land inside the Empire and made liable for military service;⁶⁴ and, as in the case of Ammianus and Zosimus, the «Laeti» could even be considered a resident tribe, German or Gallic, of Gaul.⁶⁵ However, «Magnentius the *laetus*» at least allowed a final generation of writers to give Magnentius a citizen father.

But this was all fiction, and it is salutary to recall that such invention was not unique in Greco-Roman historiography. In the third century, Herodian had portrayed the emperor Maximinus (235–238) as a semi-barbarous «Thracian», probably not even a Roman citizen, even though it is likely that he came from the Moesian military gentry.⁶⁶ This fantasy was compounded towards the end of the fourth century by the author of the *Historia Augusta*, who gave Maximinus a mixed barbarian (Gothic/Alan) parentage.⁶⁷ It is again clear that in the Roman Empire the penalty for political failure was enormous: anyone who did not come from the highest social strata who fell victim to the political establishment was likely to be deprived of his ancestry, as well as his life. Magnentius was also probably deprived of his religion. He is best considered as «nominally a Christian».⁶⁸ Gross misrepresentation of his religion was part of the same «chorus of condemnation after this death, which depicted him as a pagan as well as tyrant».⁶⁹ For example, one of the most influential statements in this respect has been Philostorgius' condemnation of Magnentius and his supporters as dedicated worshippers of «demons». However, this charge was made by a writer who, as a Eunomian, was inclined to favour the Arian Constantius; and it occurs in a particularly partisan and polemical passage that compares the God-fearing Christian emperor very favourably with the «pagan» Magnentius and his cronies. History is again being written under the influence of Constantinian court-propaganda.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ NIXON – RODGERS, l.c. (n. 17) 142–143; WIGHTMAN, l.c. (n. 47) 253.

⁶⁵ Amm. Marc. 16.11.4; 20.8.13; Zos. 2.54.1.

⁶⁶ R. SYME, *Emperors and Biography*, Oxford 1971, 185–190.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 182.

⁶⁸ E. D. HUNT, *Magnentius*, Oxford Classical Dictionary, Oxford ³1996, 912.

⁶⁹ BARNES 102; cf. HUNT 21.

⁷⁰ HE 3.26. For full demonstration and discussion of Magnentius' religious beliefs and their distortion in the literary sources see J. ZIEGLER, *Zur religiösen Haltung der Gegenkaiser im 4. Jahrhundert n. Chr.*, Kallmünz 1970, 53–74.

Vetranio

Dissatisfaction with the sources' treatment of the usurpation of Magnentius excites suspicion about their depiction of the revolt of Vetranio. As in the case of Magnentius, there is a wide range of writings, ranging from the near contemporary to the very late, offering various scraps of information that can be strung together to form a passable story.⁷¹ The canonical interpretation was provided by SEECK,⁷² and may be summarised as follows.

Constantius II could not respond immediately to Magnentius because he was still engaged in the war with Persia. Indeed, it was not until autumn 350 that he was able to set out for the west.⁷³ In the meantime, therefore, Magnentius might have taken over most of the empire, had it not been for the quick thinking of Constantius' eldest sister, the Augusta Constantina.⁷⁴ For it was she who raised up Vetranio specifically to prevent Magnentius from seizing the Danube region. Vetranio, *magister peditum* in Pannonia, was elderly, of humble birth, of no great intellect and indeed poorly educated. On the other hand, he was a competent general and popular with his men. He could therefore be easily foisted as an imperial candidate upon an army that was as hostile to Constans as that in Gaul, and so equally ready to revolt, but which preferred its own man to Magnentius. Vetranio thus became emperor by accident, created by Constantina to keep the political and military initiative in Flavian family hands and to divide the opposition. Constantius, appreciating the favour that his sister had done him, immediately recognised Vetranio as his colleague. In addition, he provided some concrete help to encourage Vetranio to stand up to Magnentius. But this proved insufficient and, just as Constantius began his march west, Vetranio and Magnentius became allies. They jointly demanded of Constantius that he recognise them both and be content with the status of senior emperor. This he refused. Vetranio then reverted to his original partner, and came to meet Constantius dutifully at Serdica. The pair proceeded as colleagues to Naïssus, where Constantius addressed a meeting of both armies and, helped by strategic bribery, was hailed as sole Augustus. Vetranio panicked, stripped himself of the imperial robes and threw himself at Constantius' feet. He was spared and forgiven, and indeed was very well treated, being retired on a large pension.

⁷¹ Principally: Themist. Orat. 2.34b, 2.37a–b, 2.37d–38a, 3.45b–c, 4.56a, 4.61b, 4.62b–c; Julian, Orat. 1.26B–D, 1.27A–D, 1.28B–D, 1.29A–B, 1.30B–D, 1.31A–D, 1.32A; 1.32D–33A, 1.33D, 2.74D, 2.76C–D; Aur. Vic. 41.26–42.3; Eutrop. 10.10.2–11.1; Epit. 41.25; Philostr. HE 3.22, 24; Zos. 2.43.1–44.4; Petr. Patr. fr. 16 (FHG 4, 190); Zon. 13.7.15–26.

⁷² SEECK 92–104.

⁷³ BARNES 220.

⁷⁴ SEECK has 'Constantia', but here as elsewhere I follow modern thinking in calling her Constantina: see PLRE 1.222.

SEECK'S narrative has been used, directly or indirectly, as the basis of all general descriptions of Vetranio's revolt down to the present.⁷⁵ However, in newer specific studies some scholars have shown unease with the communis opinio. Thus KENT observed that: «Though public policy required [Vetranio's abdication] to be portrayed as the triumph of Constantius' personality over the disloyal machinations of a foolish and vacillating old man, this unattractive interpretation need not detain us. It is unlikely that the army of Illyricum regarded him as ridiculous.»⁷⁶

Most recently, BLECKMANN's interest in the appointment and deposition of Gallus as Caesar and, in particular, Constantina's role in these events, has led him to propose a radically new interpretation of the revolt of Vetranio which depicts him, as KENT hinted, as no puppet, but as an authentic military usurper of the old school.⁷⁷ BLECKMANN has in fact demonstrated that serious criticism of the standard version is possible: that, starting from different premises, one can re-arrange the information we have to produce a strikingly different picture of events. In what follows, as will be clear, I have been much encouraged by BLECKMANN's example. On the other hand, because what I say is based on my reconstruction of Magnentius' usurpation, my conclusions are unlike his.

I take as my starting-point the careful planning of Magnentius' revolt, examined above, and the relatively long period of time between his proclamation, on 18 January 350, and that of Vetranio, on 1 March.⁷⁸

Although Magnentius appears first to have moved north, to gain control of Trier, his supporters extended his power very quickly into Italy.⁷⁹ The terminus ante quem for their taking control of the city of Rome is 27 February, the date on which Magnentius' henchman, Fabius Titianus, began his second term of office as City Prefect.⁸⁰ However, this event must have been preceded by much earlier actions in the north and centre of Italy, as the usurper's followers seized other key centres of power in the country and secured the capital. The mint of Aquileia appears very quickly to have produced coins in the name of Magnentius; and indeed, the presence of gold *solidi* in its earliest issues suggests that he himself soon came south to pay this city «a fleeting imperial visit, within the first weeks of

⁷⁵ E.g. W. ENSSLIN, *Vetranio* 1, RE Suppl. 8A, 1958, 1838–1840, passim; E. STEIN, *Histoire du Bas-Empire* 1, Paris ²1959, 139; PASCHOU, l.c. (n. 44) 116, 250–252; A. PIGANIOL, *L'empire chrétien*, Paris ²1972, 94–96; A. DEMANDT, *Die Spätantike. Römische Geschichte von Diocletian bis Justinian, 284–565 n. Chr.*, Munich 1989, 83; HUNT 15–17.

⁷⁶ KENT 12–13.

⁷⁷ BLECKMANN 44, 54.

⁷⁸ For these dates, see again KIENAST 319, 321.

⁷⁹ Trier: BASTIEN 45.

⁸⁰ SEECK 97, 426; PLRE 1.918.

the reign». ⁸¹ Aquileia lay only 250 km as the crow flies from Siscia (the seat of the Pannonian mint) and 500 km from Sirmium (which housed the military headquarters of Illyricum); and detachments of Illyrian cavalry were already involved in Magnentius' rebellion. ⁸² I would therefore argue that, had he wished, Magnentius could very quickly have struck eastwards. ⁸³ That he did not do so suggests that originally he and his 'faction' never planned to take over all the European territory formerly administered by Constans. ⁸⁴ This may be explained in terms of simple prudence. To have prepared the ground for insurrection on the Danube as fully as it had been readied for that on the Rhine would have necessitated the recruitment of the most senior military and civil officials of the prefecture of Illyricum, Vetrano and Vulcacius Rufinus. However, as we shall see below, these were both capable and strong-minded individuals, whose abandonment of the Flavian dynasty could not be taken for granted. They were best left alone. In addition, such a decision is also understandable in the light of Magnentius' early attempt to reach an agreement with Constantius. ⁸⁵ Movement into the Balkans would inevitably have brought his forces (as later it would bring those of Julian) to the Succus pass, where they would have controlled the main highway from Dacia into Thrace and been within easy marching-distance of Constantinople. Though this action would have given Magnentius a strong military advantage, it would surely have been construed by Constantius as a very dangerous challenge, and would hardly have encouraged him to agree to the formal sharing of power that was the object of Magnentius' political policy. On the other hand, Magnentius' conceding the Balkans to Constantius would signal his good intentions in respect of the senior emperor while giving away little in tactical terms: the new frontier was safe while Constantius remained in the east and in the meantime Magnentius was free to consolidate his western defences. Apparently at this stage he felt confident enough to refrain either from exploiting his possession of the routes across the Julian Alps or even, perhaps, from seizing these in the first place. ⁸⁶ In short,

⁸¹ KENT 309; cf. BASTIEN 48–49. BASTIEN (44) assigns these Aquileian coins to the second phase of Magnentius' minting overall, which he dates to the period 27 February–early March 350. I believe that this is too late since, as I argue above, the Magnentians must have waited until they were firmly in charge of northern and central Italy before risking senior men to the capital.

⁸² Zos. 2.42.4.

⁸³ Cf. BLECKMANN 52 nn. 117–118 (concerning the debate as to when Magnentius seized the *claustra Alpium Iuliarum*: cf. below): his remarks here, and those of the scholars he cites, clearly reflect puzzlement at Magnentius' failure to move east of Aquileia when he could so easily have done so.

⁸⁴ *Factio Magnentii*: Eutrop. 10.9.3.

⁸⁵ See above p. 137.

⁸⁶ J. ŠAŠEL, The struggle between Magnentius and Constantius II for Italy and Illyricum, in: id., *Opera selecta*. Situla 30, Ljubljana 1992, 717–718; BASTIEN 239–240; BLECKMANN 51–52.

Magnentius was content to act as a purely western emperor: in 350, as later in 351, he refused to take the initiative against Constantius.⁸⁷ On this argument, in January 350 Magnentius expected the army and administration in Illyricum and the two other eastern dioceses formerly administered by Constans, Dacia and Macedonia, to switch their allegiance to Constantius. It is this expectation that explains the delay before the rebellion of Vetranio, and signifies that the revolt of Vetranio, when it came, was, strictly speaking, against Constantius not Magnentius.

It is likely that the army and administration in the Danubian provinces were as hostile to Constans as those in the west and that they would have welcomed news of his death as guaranteeing a change of leadership. However, once they realised that Magnentius would not take over their region they had either to accept Constantius or elevate their own candidate. The proclamation of Vetranio is therefore significant because it must reflect the depth of feeling in the Balkans against the continued dominance of the Flavian dynasty, and so suggests the implausibility of any early involvement by Constantina, a Flavian and a female to boot: Vetranio, and his senior advisers will have acted by and for themselves. In this respect, it should be noted that the same source-tradition that disparages Vetranio as a puppet also contains remarks of a much more positive nature concerning his career and abilities. Julian, for example, praises Constantius for facing: «a man not by any means to be despised, as many people think, but one who had won distinction in many campaigns, who was full of years, who had the reputation of experience gained over a long career, and had for a considerable period been in command of the legions there present.»⁸⁸

A more accurate assessment of the man is, I suggest, that while he was a capable soldier, his low birth and lack of political acumen and ambition made him no threat to the house of Constantine. His loyalty to the dynasty was rewarded with continued employment and high rank. As, in his fifties and early-sixties, he neared the end of his career, he provided a safe pair of hands into which Constans could put a key region of his empire. Indeed, Constans' use of Vetranio may be regarded as a shrewd response to the difficult question regarding the devolution of power that was soon to present itself to Constantius, and which he was to fail to answer in his use of Gallus, Silvanus, Ursicinus and Julian.⁸⁹

In late January and early-to-mid February 350, therefore, Vetranio was probably inclined to follow Constantius. I would propose that it was during this period that, still acting in his capacity of senior general, he declared his loyalty

⁸⁷ 351: SEECK 109; ŠAŠEL, l.c. (n. 86) 719–721.

⁸⁸ Julian, *Orat.* 1.32D–33A (trans. WRIGHT).

⁸⁹ Cf. DRINKWATER, l.c. (n. 26) 576.

to and appealed for aid from the eastern emperor against Magnentius.⁹⁰ This explains the delay between Magnentius' proclamation and his own. The best solution as far as Vetranio was concerned would have been Constantius' speedy appearance on the Danube to take charge of the situation. Again, however, timing was crucial. Constantius could not come immediately because of the great Persian attack that would result in the four-month siege of Nisibis;⁹¹ and once this was known Vetranio had to choose between accepting the anti-Flavian sentiment of his troops or being destroyed by it. It is significant that he was eventually proclaimed on 1 March, at the opening of the eastern campaigning-season and therefore on a date by which all must have realised that Constantius would not budge from the east.⁹²

The chief inference to be drawn from this reconstruction is that Vetranio's was a typical military rebellion, resembling many that occurred in the past, especially during the third-century 'crisis'. Everyone concerned would have been obliged to take it very seriously. In particular, Vetranio and his senior supporters could not have known that eventually they would all be forgiven and spared by Constantius.⁹³ As far as they were concerned, though they might claim to have acted under duress, they must have expected to be regarded as rebels by Constantius and, if captured, together with their families, to pay the usual price for treachery. Indeed, Vetranio's revolt put Constantius in an even worse position than that of Magnentius. Since, in addition to Siscia, Vetranio controlled the mint at Thessalonica, he must soon have taken charge of the dioceses of Dacia and Macedonia.⁹⁴ He therefore held the military heartland of the empire, not to mention the Flavian family's city of origin, Naïssus, and must surely have commanded the Succus pass. Thus it was probably fear of Vetranio's advance and not, as is usually thought, political machinations in favour of Magnentius, that caused panic in Constantinople:⁹⁵ while Constantius was busy directing the Roman response to the Persian attack on Nisibis, his own capital was under direct threat from a usurper. With regard to Magnentius, in the short term the revolt of Vetranio must have been more welcome than displeasing. It made diplomacy more complex, but it created a useful buffer-state between himself and Constantius. Even more promising, however, was the fact that it put the empire under a working triarchy, two of

⁹⁰ This is my interpretation of Julian's words at *Orat.* 1.26C–D, i.e. that his report of Vetranio's protestations of loyalty and of the early help given to him by Constantius refers to the time after Magnentius' usurpation but before Vetranio's.

⁹¹ See above p. 133.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ For Constantius' pardoning of Vetranio's lieutenants see Julian, *Orat.* 1.32A.

⁹⁴ The Thessalonica mint: KENT 44, 398.

⁹⁵ *Themist.* *Orat.* 4.56a with, for example, PIGANIOL, l.c. (n. 75) 96 and n. 3, and LEPPIN – PORTMANN, l.c. (n. 50) 91 and n. 57.

the three members of which were not Flavians, and so increased the pressure on Constantius to accept the ending of his dynasty's monopoly of political power.

By spring 350, indeed, Constantius' position was extremely vulnerable. As Vetranio could not know that he would be pardoned, so Constantius could not know that he would in the end enjoy spectacular success against his internal enemies.⁹⁶ Not yet thirty-one, and having so far won no «glamorous victories» in the long-drawn-out conflict in Mesopotamia,⁹⁷ he faced rivals who were significantly older and more experienced than himself.⁹⁸ The last reigning male of a dynasty that within just thirteen years after the death of its greatest representative had come close to contriving its own annihilation, to many Constantius, like Dalmatius, Hannibalianus, Constantine II and Constans before, must have seemed doomed. Against this background, later reports by Themistius and Julian of Constantius' advisers urging him to accept the situation and so at least avoid civil war ring very true.⁹⁹ To contemporaries, the continuation and confirmation of the *de facto* triarchy of Constantius, Vetranio and Magnentius must have seemed entirely possible.¹⁰⁰

What, therefore, are we to make of the story of Constantina's participation in the revolt of Vetranio? BLECKMANN, accepting that she played a leading role in the elevation of Vetranio, but rightly refusing to accept the latter as a straw man, proposes that the two came together very quickly after the rebellion of Magnentius on more or less equal terms for mutual advantage.¹⁰¹ He argues that Constantina, an extraordinarily able and ambitious woman, sought to gain personal political influence by supporting Vetranio, and that Vetranio hoped that association with one of the foremost members of the Flavian clan would help legitimise his coup. The pact between the two would be sealed by marriage. On this argument, Constantina did what she did not to help her brother, but rather to ensure that she played a major role in the restructuring of the Constantinian succession necessitated by the murder of Constans; and, indeed, through her Vetranio could assert a claim to power equal to that of Constantius (as demonstrated by his production of coins with the legend *hoc signo victor eris*, which harked back to Constantine I's renowned victory at the Milvian Bridge).¹⁰² Though these are interesting and attractive propositions, I do not find them convincing. They overlook the attitude of the Illyrian

⁹⁶ So Eutrop. 10.15.2 and Amm. Marc. 16.10.2, 21.16.15.

⁹⁷ HUNT 13.

⁹⁸ Cf. the speech of Nunechius to Constantius, as reported by Petr. Patr. fr. 16.

⁹⁹ Themist. Orat. 4.62b; Julian, Orat. 1.41D.

¹⁰⁰ So also BLECKMANN 49.

¹⁰¹ For what follows, see BLECKMANN 42–47.

¹⁰² BLECKMANN 47; KENT 44, 344.

troops proposed above, ignore the time difference between the two usurpations and, most of all, fail to account for the fact that, as far as we know, there was no marriage between Vetranio and Constantina – indeed, at a later date we find Magnentius seeking the latter's hand.¹⁰³ If Constantina had been so politically adept and so involved in the rise of Vetranio as BLECKMANN proposes, then she must have realised that once her protégé had become emperor her hold over him would weaken. Therefore, if she had intended to secure her political power by marriage, surely she would have had the wit to insist on this as an immediate condition of her collaboration, either just before or at the same time as the usurpation?¹⁰⁴ As for the *hoc signo victor eris* coins, though BLECKMANN is correct in refusing to follow KENT in seeing these as «the clearest possible indication of Vetranio's loyalty to Constantius»,¹⁰⁵ these are best interpreted as Vetranio's deliberate breaking of the Flavian link with the Deity. As part of the first change of imperial dynasty since Constantine it was important for God's guarantee of power to be attached to the ruling emperor, not to a particular individual or family. As the divine sign was given to Constantine I as a general, its potency was now claimed by the general, Vetranio.¹⁰⁶

Instead I propose that we take into account the wider context of these events. Constantius, though he may from the start have wished to destroy both usurpers, will at first have been compelled to treat with them, if only to buy himself time to strengthen his position. A *fil rouge* of the otherwise difficult source-tradition is, indeed, diplomacy, as all three rulers explored the opportunities and limits of the post-Flavian, tripartite empire.¹⁰⁷ The two «junior» rulers must, of course, seek the approval and recognition of their «senior» colleague; but there would also have to have been extensive practical, almost day-to-day, co-operation in respect of, for example, the issuing and honouring of travel-warrants, and the protection of adjacent external frontiers (for example, between Raetia and Noricum, and Dacia and Moesia). It is here that I would place Constantina's initiative: as, following Vetranio's revolt (and perhaps from Constantinople, and perhaps with the help of Vetranio's powerful praetorian

¹⁰³ Petr. Patr. fr. 16.

¹⁰⁴ BLECKMANN's (55) explanation – that Constantina was waiting for «die definitive Etablierung Vetranios» – strikes me as being out of character with this uncommonly strong-willed woman.

¹⁰⁵ RIC 8.344–345.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. BLECKMANN 48. Constantius' reluctance to deploy the legend himself following his recovery of the west, as noted by BLECKMANN (*ibid.*), might be taken as a reflection of the emperor's realisation that it might no longer be seen as a family-claim.

¹⁰⁷ E.g. Themist. Orat. 4.62c, with LEPPIN – PORTMANN, l.c. (n. 50) 99 n. 100; Julian, Orat. 1.30B; Zos. 2.44.1–2; Petr. Patr. fr. 16; Zon. 13.7.17–18. See generally PASCHOUD, l.c. (n. 44) 251.

prefect, Vulcacius Rufinus),¹⁰⁸ she attempted to broker a peace between him and Constantius that would give her brother the upper hand.

This last point is of particular importance. Our main authority for Constantina as Vetranio's *auxtrix imperii* is Philostorgius.¹⁰⁹ One might therefore be tempted to dismiss the affair as yet another instance of this author's inclination to favour Constantius:¹¹⁰ in other words, to regard it as an invention, in the event very successful, to diminish the historical importance of Vetranio by making him both a woman's creature and explaining, and so excusing, Constantius' early willingness to do business with him. However, it appears that such an explanation is unlikely. Philostorgius states very precisely that Constantina «appointed Vetranio (sic) Caesar».¹¹¹ He is generally interested in and reliable concerning imperial office and insignia;¹¹² and this particular statement occurs in a run of fragments of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* where, in the context of both the usurpation of Vetranio and the promotion and downfall of Gallus, Philostorgius distinguishes very carefully between the different status of *Caesar* and *Augustus*. In this respect, he makes much of Constantina's rank of *Augusta*, bestowed upon her by her father, Constantine I, of which she was acutely aware, which empowered her to promote Vetranio, and which later caused her to become enraged over the disrespectful treatment of her husband, Gallus, by Constantius' officials. Philostorgius' unique engagement with the position of Constantina Augusta suggests that he was not inventing or indulging in anachronism, but presenting a matter of historical fact, based on reliable information, that he thought of great significance and which we must take seriously.¹¹³ I propose that it shows that Constantius was prepared openly to recognise Vetranio as his Caesar, but not as fellow-Augustus. This would be in his interest, because the arrangement would make him clearly the senior colleague. It would also suit Vetranio because it would return Illyricum to its «proper» alle-

¹⁰⁸ Constantinople: BLECKMANN (43) arguing from Constantius II's alleged involvement in the death of Constantina's first husband, Hannibalianus in 337, supposes personal enmity between brother and sister which led, among other things, to Constantina's choosing to live in the territory of Constans. This is generally, however, to take too «bourgeois» a view of family relationships among the imperial aristocracy; and, as far as I am aware, we know nothing of Constantina's place of domicile in 350. Rufinus: see below pp. 155–56..

¹⁰⁹ HE 3.22. Other, less detailed, references are to be found in Theoph. Conf. 44 and Chron. Pasch. 539, 5–8 (see BLECKMANN 43 n. 69).

¹¹⁰ See above p. 145.

¹¹¹ Οὐδετερανιὸνά τινα . . . καθίστησι Καίσαρα.

¹¹² BLECKMANN 37.

¹¹³ Thus BLECKMANN 36–38, 40–42. BLECKMANN then, uncharacteristically (but in common with most commentators), ignores the implications of Vetranio's limited appointment as «Caesar», relegating the issue to a short and indecisive footnote (59 n. 158).

giance without civil war and without his paying the price of treason. However, it is clear that the compromise did not work. Neither the coins of Vetranio nor those of Constantius show the former as Caesar, suggesting that the idea must have been very quickly rejected. One can only suppose that the main agent in this was the Illyrian army, which still refused to be drawn back into the Flavian fold. This would have forced Vetranio to continue as Augustus, and Constantius to refuse to acknowledge him in this position. (Though it has been thought significant that on his coins Vetranio is almost always depicted as wearing a laurel-wreath crown, frequently associated with the office of Caesar, it should be noted that only a very short time afterwards Gallus and Julian in this capacity usually appear bare-headed.)¹¹⁴

As a result, for much of the rest of his short reign Vetranio will have been compelled to continue the three-way diplomacy already touched upon. As the coins show, he and Magnentius recognised Constantius but not each other; and Constantius continued to ignore the claims of both. Despite the much weakened position of the Flavian family, the key issue remained, clearly, the attitude of the senior emperor: without his agreement on the size and shape of a new imperial hierarchy, the triarchy could not be formally established. Vetranio will have looked mainly to Constantius, with whom he would not want to fight and from whom he could continue to expect support against Magnentius if necessary.¹¹⁵ On the other hand, he would have to deal with Magnentius, with whom it would have been imprudent to quarrel and from whose continued efforts to persuade Constantius to accept the new political landscape he might well benefit.¹¹⁶

This delicate balance was upset by Constantius' decision not to adopt the policy of appeasement advocated by certain of his advisers, but to avenge Constantians by moving against Magnentius. Such a campaign would take him through the Balkans, and would therefore also necessitate his either finally accepting or deposing Vetranio. Magnentius and Vetranio must have become increasingly concerned about the threat posed by Constantius as he disengaged from the Persian war. However, it will not have become certain until he crossed the

¹¹⁴ PIGANOL, l.c. (n. 75) 96; KENT 344, 367–370, 413–444 (Vetranio) and ad locc. (Gallus and Julian).

¹¹⁵ As expressed, I believe, by Julian, Orat. 1.30C. This was perhaps the context of «the agreements and assurances» (ὁμολογιῶν . . . καὶ πίστεων) which, according to Julian (Orat. 2.76C), Vetranio gave to Constantius – most likely, I would suggest, that he would not move into Thrace and on to Constantinople. Such an agreement might indeed (contra BLECKMANN 45 n. 82) have been in Julian's mind when he referred, even more obscurely (Orat. 1.30B), to Constantius' «sending out the legions that were garrisoning Paeonia against the Scythians» to help Vetranio. Constantius could well have made a virtue out of a necessity and permitted the troops in Moesia to take orders from Sirmium. Cf. ENSSLIN, l.c. (n. 75) 1839 and ŠAŠEL, l.c. (n. 86) 720.

¹¹⁶ Cf. BLECKMANN 50.

Bosporus and led his army west of Constantinople. I suggest that it was then that Magnentius, able to work on Vetranio's fear, organised the joint, very high level embassy (its principals included, on Vetranio's side, a praetorian prefect, Vulcacius Rufinus,¹¹⁷ and on Magnentius' a *magister militum*, Marcellinus¹¹⁸ and a leading Roman senator, Nunechius¹¹⁹) which negotiated with Constantius at Heraclea/Perinthus.¹²⁰ It was probably also the context in which Vetranio enraged Constantius by putting his garrison on the Succus pass on a war-footing.¹²¹ For this was the usurpers' last chance to make the triarchy work; the embassy's failure resulted, as Vetranio had anticipated, in open conflict. Again, however, at this crucial stage of his expedition, with most of the empire in the hands of his enemies, and with entry to the highroad across the Balkans closed to him, Constantius must have seemed the weakest party.¹²² This raises the question of Vetranio's capitulation at Naïssus, which was so soon to follow. If, as has been argued above, Vetranio was no foolish puppet-emperor, why did he allow Constantius with at least part of his forces through Succus, and why did he allow the emperor to address the combined armies (and this on 25 December, the anniversary of the accession of Constans)¹²³ and persuade them to accept himself alone? The latter was, indeed, a truly astonishing achievement, unparalleled in Roman imperial history and fully deserving the attention given to it by Constantius' panegyrists. The effortless manner of its execution and the generous treatment of Vetranio and his supporters that followed suggest that it must have been well choreographed, with the connivance of at least some powerful members of the 'defeated' faction. Their secrets were well hidden, and how this all came about we shall never know. All explanations, both ancient and modern, are very much matters of opinion and involve speculation to such a degree that they run the risk of being characterised as 'novel writing'. However, the attempt has to be made.

BLECKMANN must be right in saying that a turning-point was reached at the Heraclea/Perinthus conference, which took place only a few weeks before Vetranio's capitulation.¹²⁴ I also agree that a leading figure in the secret negotiations there was Vetranio's praetorian prefect, the able and extremely well-connected Vulcacius Rufinus, who must from the start have had a major role in

¹¹⁷ PLRE 1.782–783.

¹¹⁸ PLRE 1.546.

¹¹⁹ PLRE 1.645.

¹²⁰ The timing: Julian, *Orat.* 1.30C; the embassy: Petr. *Patr.* fr. 16; Zon. 13.7.18–22.

¹²¹ Philostr. 3.24; ENSSLIN l.c. (n. 75) 1839.

¹²² Constantius' unusual ability later to deploy significant naval forces against Magnentius (Julian, *Orat.* 1.40C, 2.74) hints that, typically, he had prepared an alternative strategy.

¹²³ SEECK 103.

¹²⁴ BLECKMANN 50 and n. 111.

the usurpation.¹²⁵ BLECKMANN proposes that Rufinus ostensibly did a deal with Constantius whereby the latter appeared to recognise Vetranio. However, this was only a ploy to put Vetranio off-guard and undermine his alliance with Magnentius. The reality was that Rufinus and Constantius together devised a treacherous plan to overthrow Vetranio. As their scheme was put into operation, and Constantius and his forces swept into Dacia, it was Rufinus who ensured their safe passage through the Succus pass, and who bribed the Illyrian troops to hail Constantius as sole emperor at Naïssus. Vetranio, faced by the sudden inexplicable arrival of his 'colleague', was forced unwillingly first into agreeing a joint campaign against Magnentius and then into abdication. He saved himself only by his final co-operation in his own humiliation, which allowed the history of his reign to be re-written from the Flavian viewpoint. Rufinus' reward for his services was, of course, a pardon and the continuation of his illustrious public career. However, he also asked for and eventually obtained the promotion of his sister's child, Gallus, as Caesar, and Gallus' marriage to Constantina.

This is an absorbing and far from implausible reading of events which, if accepted, has widespread consequences for our understanding of the unhappy relationship between Constantius and Gallus. On the other hand it is very complex and does not take into account Constantius' infamous caution:¹²⁶ even with Rufinus' help he could not have been certain as to how a hostile Vetranio and his men might react in the field and so would have been taking an enormous risk in advancing deep into Dacia with, as Julian tells us, inferior forces.¹²⁷ I would prefer a simpler interpretation, but one in line with BLECKMANN's point that the Heraclea agreement must have resulted in the outward acceptance of Vetranio by Constantius and compatible with his proposal that Rufinus, as the key figure in the negotiations, may have struck a personal deal with Constantius in return for his help. In my view, for all his recent show of hostility, Vetranio was an unwilling emperor and in his heart remained loyal to Constantius. He was ready to yield if a way could be found of doing so. The difficulty lay in finding one that would not provoke the hostility of his troops, who would not react well if they thought that they had revolted for nothing: that they were being duped by those who commanded them.¹²⁸ The solution was first to engineer a situation where Constantius appeared to back down, and finally confirm Vetranio's status as fellow-Augustus, thus justifying the Illyrian army's rebellion and choice of leader. Under Rufinus' guidance, but with the connivance of Vetranio, this is what happened in Heraclea and then, dramati-

¹²⁵ For this and what follows see BLECKMANN 54–59.

¹²⁶ See e.g. SEECK 109.

¹²⁷ Julian, *Orat.* 1.31A–B.

¹²⁸ Cf. H. W. BIRD, *Sextus Aurelius Victor. Translated Texts for Historians* vol. 17, Liverpool 1994, 77.

cally, on the border of Thrace and Dacia. Constantius, though senior emperor, demonstrated respect for Vetranio by coming to meet him in his own territory at Serdica. It was on this basis that he was allowed entry over the Succus pass with a reduced force.¹²⁹ From Serdica, the pair proceeded to Naïssus for formal conference, in the manner of the tetrarchs of old. The distance between the two cities is about 140 km as the crow flies. Their journey will therefore have taken at least a week, during which time Constantius must have treated, and allowed others to treat, Vetranio without reserve as his imperial brother.¹³⁰ Once arrived in Naïssus, both Augusti appeared before the combined army. In the story as we have it, much is made of Vetranio's divesting himself of imperial insignia at the end of the gathering. However, the implication of these details is, again, that at the beginning of the assembly Constantius suffered Vetranio to appear as his partner. As Julian twice specifically says, Constantius mounted the tribunal «with him who for the moment was your colleague in empire».¹³¹ This points up the great consequence of Vetranio's submission, the second element in the plan. His surrender was contrived, and he was involved in the plot. By this time important elements in his army had been bribed to desert him. But what occurred could be interpreted by all concerned as the authentic resignation of a reigning Augustus, not the tossing aside of an imperial doll. Both sides will have been gratified. As Eutropius put it, Vetranio was both raised up by the *consensus* of his troops and formally deposed by it.¹³² The Illyrian army could feel that, far from being cheated, it had exercised its will for a second time. And Constantius' authority as sole Augustus was surely

¹²⁹ I do not follow BLECKMANN (53 n. 126) against the communis opinio that Vetranio met Constantius in Serdica, i.e. I do not accept that the pair confronted each other for the first time as emperors at Naïssus. In terms of military tactics it is unlikely, however one interprets the Heraclea-agreement, that Vetranio would have chosen to remain in Sirmium, far from the centre of events in Thrace and the Daco-Thracian border. And as far as the sources are concerned, I believe that an extreme eastern location for Vetranio can be derived from Julian's remarks at Orat. 2.76D: Vetranio «came to meet the emperor on the borders of the country» (καὶ ἐπὶ τοῖς ὁρίοις ἀπὸ τῆς χώρας). Julian's subsequent sudden shift from events at this location to those at Naïssus is explicable in terms of the rhetorical, rather than historical, imperatives of his text. The same explanation holds good for Julian's presentation of this as a potentially hostile encounter: to inflate Constantius' achievement in winning over Vetranio's forces at Naïssus. Zonaras (13.7.23) is surely more (though not completely) accurate in describing Vetranio's greeting Constantius as his superior (ὡς δεσπότη). And again, in practical terms it was not in Constantius' nature even to risk a major battle on unequal terms in unfriendly territory.

¹³⁰ I calculate the likely speed of the joint imperial retinue from H. ELTON, *Warfare in Roman Europe, A.D. 350–425*, Oxford 1996, 245.

¹³¹ Julian, Orat. 1.31B, 2.76D: μετὰ τοῦ τέως συνάρχοντος.

¹³² Eutrop. 10.10.2, 11.1.

enhanced by the voluntary retirement of his colleague. Vetranio and his followers were rewarded not for simply being «overthrown», but for their active participation in a scrupulously planned formal abdication.

The question remains as to why Vetranio came to be remembered as, again to borrow KENT's phrase, «a foolish and vacillating old man». In removing him so theatrically from the political scene Constantius had gained a remarkable success. On the other hand, one might well wonder why he and his court did not make even more of this by projecting Vetranio as a real and redoubtable enemy, instead of disparaging him as someone who was merely «masquerading as emperor». ¹³³ This charge is evident in the main sources. It also provided the peg on which to hang the variant tradition of Constantina's elevating Vetranio to help her brother – another hint of which is possibly to be found in Themistius' claim that Constantius protected Vetranio because of «what he had done for the common good». ¹³⁴

BLECKMANN's explanation of this treatment is that it was applied immediately on Vetranio's abdication in order to exonerate those who had been his main backers, in particular the Illyrian troops and Constantina. ¹³⁵ Vetranio was portrayed as such a nonentity that he was not even designated a «tyrant»: therefore those who had supported him could hardly be considered treacherous. ¹³⁶ BLECKMANN's hypothesis is attractive, and the effect he ascribes to this distortion of Vetranio's character and reign may well have been important later, as Constantius led the Danubian army against Magnentius. However, as is to be expected from my reconstruction of Vetranio's abdication, I cannot believe that this is a complete explanation. In the first place, as I have proposed above, any immediate suggestion that they had followed «Vetranio the fool» would surely have caused great resentment among the Illyrian troops. This explains Constantius' apparent recognition of, and Vetranio's apparent abdication as, a legitimate and respectable imperial colleague. A less positive appreciation of their former ruler, put into circulation at a somewhat later date, could be adopted by the soldiers as time progressed, and after they had won success under Constantius. But if the subsequent defamation of Vetranio, made possible by the substantial favours granted to him by Constantius, was not in the first place intended for the Danubian forces then what was its purpose? One explanation could be that it was directed at the inhabitants of Constantinople, to persuade them that, despite their fears, Vetranio had never been a threat to the city and that they

¹³³ Julian, Orat. 2.77C: ὁ τῆς βασιλείας ὑποκριτής.

¹³⁴ Orat. 4.62c: διὰ τὴν ἐς τὰ κοινὰ ἀρετήν.

¹³⁵ BLECKMANN 54.

¹³⁶ Julian, Orat. 1.30B and 1.33C–D (where Magnentius is characterised as the sole *tyrannos*), with BLECKMANN 45.

had never been abandoned by Constantius. But this sounds too parochial, and much more likely is a motive that is directly related to the imperial establishment's demonisation of Magnentius. Magnentius had revolted by deposing and murdering a leading member of the Flavian dynasty and aimed to break that dynasty's monopoly of imperial power. Constantius fought to restore the honour and secure the rule of the house of Constantine. In his view, no outsider could, or even should, aspire unbidden to the family throne. Magnentius was therefore condemned as unworthy through the exaggeration of his obscure origins. This was not possible for Vetranio, so he was portrayed as unworthy by virtue of his advanced age, simplicity and indecisiveness – a dismissal that has been far too easily accepted since:¹³⁷ another victory for Constantian court-propaganda.

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¹³⁷ So SEECK 104.

