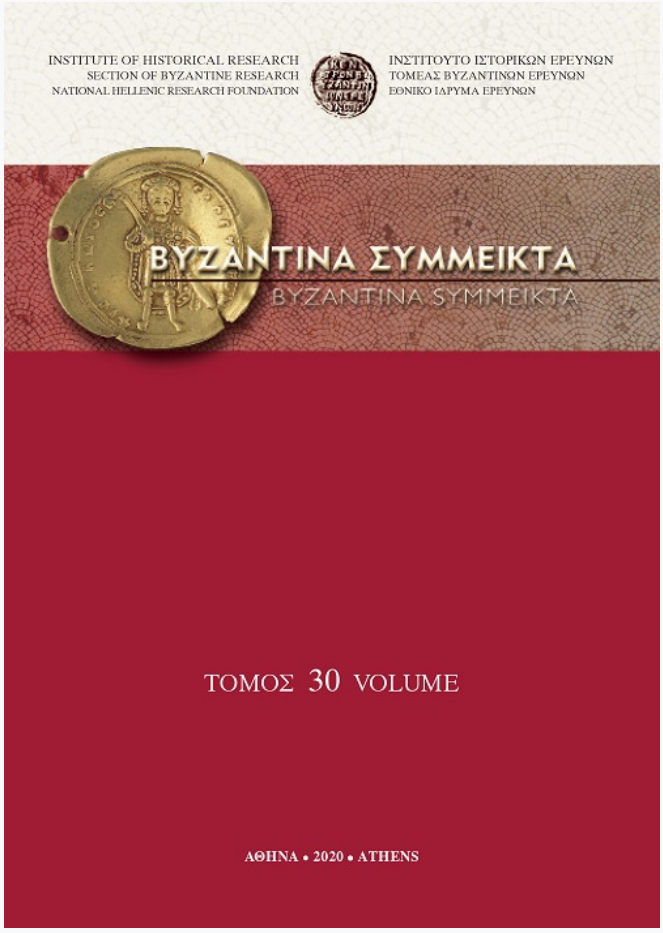
ePublishing

ΕΘΝΙΚΟ ΚΕΝΤΡΟ ΤΕΚΜΗΡΙΩΣΗΣ
EKT
NATIONAL DOCUMENTATION CENTRE

Byzantina Symmeikta

Vol 30

BYZANTINA SYMMEIKTA 30



Book Review: A.OMISSI, Emperors and Usurpers in the Later Roman Empire: Civil War Panegyric, and the Construction of Legitimacy, Oxford 2018

Michael Edward STEWART

doi: 10.12681/byzsym.23040

Copyright © 2020, Michael Edward Stewart

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0.

To cite this article:

STEWART, M. E. (2020). Book Review: A.OMISSI, Emperors and Usurpers in the Later Roman Empire: Civil War Panegyric, and the Construction of Legitimacy, Oxford 2018. *Byzantina Symmeikta*, *30*, 379–385. https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.23040

https://epublishing.ekt.gr | **e-Publisher:** EKT | **Downloaded at:** 12/10/2024 11:56:01

A. Omissi, *Emperors and Usurpers in the Later Roman Empire: Civil War Panegyric, and the Construction of Legitimacy*, Oxford, 2018, pp. 348. ISBN 978-0-19-882482-4

Averil Cameron once described panegyric as "the most artificial of all classical genres to modern taste"[1]. Living in the age of Donald Trump –where "alternative facts" have become commonplace– most current historians would likely agree with this assessment. Flexible "truths" were certainly a key tool in any panegyrist's arsenal. Like the modern Presidential Press Secretary, it was part of the ancient orator's task to reiterate, shape, and massage imperial messaging to an emperor's subjects[2]. Though it was always easier to trumpet an emperor's actual virtues and deeds, in certain cases, an orator needed to espouse exaggerated –and sometimes– fabricated virtues. A skilled rhetorician could mould reality to such a degree, that even a feeble emperor, like Honorius (r. 395-423), could be recast as a mighty warrior[3]. Little wonder then that most modern historians have not relied on panegyrics as their primary means of unpicking truths about emperors, their rivals, or specific political events in the late Roman Empire. So it might surprise some, that Adrastos Omissi (henceforth AO) in this provocative and engagingly-written study unapologetically and deftly wields panegyrics as his preferred methodological tool by which to study both usurpation as a concept and to recover something of the shadowy "usurpers" themselves.

---

1. Av. Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, London, 1985, 25.

2. Panegyric was not, however, a one-way system of communication; the speaker could also direct messaging from the people to the emperor, conveying what ways he was expected to behave. On the extent to which late antique panegyric was a court-controlled media, see C. Edwards, Panegyric and the Discourse of Praise in Late Antiquity, *JRS* 109 (2019), 291-304.

3. Claudian, *Panegyric on the Third Consulship of Honorius Caesar*, ed. trans. J. Henderson [Loeb Classical Library 135], Cambridge, MA. 1922.

AO opens by seeking answers to two primary questions. First, why had usurpation become such a central feature in the later Roman Empire? Next, how does (or did) one differentiate a usurper from a legitimate emperor? AO's answer to the first question is two-fold. First, a failure by the Romans to ever establish firm rules about imperial ascension and legitimization led to the development of a myriad of pathways to the purple. Though dynastic connections never ceased being a factor in the imperial succession, from the emperor Nero's death in 68 CE, familial connections were no longer a prerequisite for those who desired the throne. So too in time, was it the army –and not the Roman senators– who played the primary role in making and unmaking emperors. Moreover, an emperor now could be raised anywhere. And, in the chaotic third century, this increasingly meant being named as emperor on the fringes of the Empire, rather than in or around the city of Rome. As AO avers, 'Emperors were "elected", were "created", were "made", and were "declared" (p. 24).

The second and third centuries saw further developments in the imperial system that broadened the spectrum of who could become an emperor: non-Europeans, non-senators, and the low-born could all aspire to the purple. All this meant that there was a larger pool of candidates who could challenge the emperor –especially if that ruler lost the support of key members of the military or if a charismatic general emerged. As AO argues, these developments help us understand why from Diocletian's foundation of the Tetrarchy in 284 and Theodosius I's death in 395, most of the Romans' bloodiest battles were not against foreign enemies, but among fellow Romans vying for supremacy. AO also links this age of incessant usurpations and civil wars to the emperor's absolute authority. As he explains (p. 16), "He (the emperor) was unimpeachable and unquestionable and the only way to oppose an emperor, therefore, was to kill him." Under such conditions, usurpation and violence thus became a viable tool for political change.

So, in this chaotic and violent world, what were the differences between a legitimate emperor and a usurper? AO's definition (p. 34) of a usurper is succinct but provocative, and thus deserves to be quoted in full: "... an emperor ought to be considered a usurper if he is declared while another emperor is still ruling without the express consent of that ruler; the second is that someone ought to be considered a usurper if they take power in the wake of an imperial assassination and can be demonstrated to have been involved in that assassination–to kill an emperor and to take power, is to be a usurper".

Such a broad definition of usurpation allows AO to categorise emperors like Constantine, Theodosius I, and Valentinian II as usurpers. Yet, modern consensus would consider these men as "legitimate" emperors. T. D. Barnes, for instance, contended that Constantine had "Long been groomed for the throne", positing that "Constantine could only be called a usurper on the most tendentious of conditions." Indeed, AO's position on usurpation has received recent push-back[4]. In a recent (largely positive) review, Raymond van Dam complains that, "When almost all emperors can be classified as "usurpers," or when Omissi himself concedes that the application of the term is "somewhat controversial" (251), the concept loses its interpretive value"[5].

Nevertheless, even if one does not agree with his inclusion of certain emperors as usurpers, there is still much to be gleaned about this topic from this book. As AO establishes in Chapter 2, and throughout the remainder of the study, a close reading of both what the panegyrics said and more importantly what they left unsaid offers convincing evidence that one should consider the possibility that emperors like Constantine, Valentinian II, and Theodosius could be understood –at the very least from the viewpoint of their rivals– as usurpers. Here AO makes the further important point that we should not see an impenetrable divide between panegyric and history; panegyric bleeds into the history by Ammianus, just as history and a myriad of other literary genres like mythology seeps into panegyric.

As the reader of this monograph comes to appreciate, the adage, 'to the victor the spoils', certainly applied to those who competed for the imperial office in the third and fourth centuries. When a new emperor took the reins of government in the wake of an imperial assassination or disputed accession, one of the first steps he took was to demonise –or in some instances erase– the former regime or his defeated rival(s). During such transitions, public intellectuals needed to quickly choose a side –and in some instances abandon old allies– if they wanted to avoid becoming irrelevant. Attacking the emperor or general they had previously lauded during a regime change had been a common practice for Roman literati like the fourth-century Greek rhetorician Libanius, who exalted the emperor Constantius II when

4. T. D. Barnes, *Constantine & Eusebius*, Cambridge, MA., 1981, 28.

5. R. van Dam, Review of *Emperors and Usurpers in the Later Roman Empire: Civil wars, Panegyric, and the Construction of Legitimacy*, by Adrastos Omissi, Classical World, 113. 1, (2019), 105-106. Cf. the similar views of M. Hebblewhite, Review: A. Omissi, *Emperors and Usurpers in the Later Roman Empire:Civil war Panegyric, and the Construction of Legitimacy*, JRS 109 (2019),430-433.

he ruled, but castigated him "as a monster in every speech he delivered under Julian and after" (p. 49). This helps us understand the difficulty we have in recovering the truth about the losing sides in these struggles for the throne. Sometimes the only way we can get a glimpse of these individuals is through the distorted lens of panegyrics.

To shed this needed light on these conflicts between imperial rivals, Chapters 4-9 guides the reader on a reign by reign exploration of these internecine conflicts, which as AO (p. 303) explains, saw 28 of the 41 individuals "who claimed the title of Augustus between 284 and 395," die violent deaths at the hands of fellow Romans[6].

In a short Chapter 4, AO examines the well-covered ground of Diocletian's bloody rise from military strongman to admired founder of the Tetrarchy. Here, through a reading of the rhetoric found in contemporary panegyric, AO reveals (p. 79) how "words were used as weapons in the civil wars of the Roman Empire".

The study gathers momentum in Chapter 5, which covers Constantine's journey from the Tetrarchy's bad-boy to undisputed sole emperor. The Gallic orations of the *Panegyrici Latini* CE (289–389) offer a rich lode of information by which to examine the different phases of Constantine's slow but steady rise to hegemony. AO makes the wise point that many historian's rely on hindsight and depend too heavily upon Constantinian propaganda for this tale. AO places those who take a positivist approach to Constantine's biography on alert, by demonstrating that sometimes it is what is not said in the panegyrics that is more important to flesh out, than what appears on the page.

Chapter 6 examines the bloody aftermath of Constantine's death in 337, where the first Christian emperor's sons died one after the other until by 350 only Constantius was left standing. In AO's reading of the sources, Constantius II comes across as an opportunistic pragmatist whose proximity to Constantine when he died in 337 allowed him to get the jump on his brothers and other relatives. Though the bloody reputation of the House of Constantine has long been understood, for me it highlighted the comparative lack of bloodshed in imperial succession in the fifth and sixth century East Roman Empire.

Chapters 7, on the rise and brief reign of Julian –a rare relative who survived Constantius' bloody purge in June 337– is the strongest in the study. AO benefits from the abundance of source material available, which offer him the rare

6. This pre-400 periodization might make some wonder why the book was included in the Oxford Studies on Byzantium, since AO (to my mind rightly) prefers term late Roman to Byzantine.

opportunity to learn about the opposing sides in the rivalry between Julian and his older cousin Constantius II. As the last "pagan" emperor, Julian was also fortunate to have later influential Greek and Roman intellectuals like Ammianus Marcellinus and Libanius to claim him as a martyr. Moreover, many of the surviving sources were written by Julian himself, therefore offering AO a precise telescope into events and Julian's thought-world at important stages of his career when he moved from junior partner –nervously flattering his superior, Constantius II– to rebel, trying to explain to his fellow Romans why "his troops" proclaimed him emperor in Paris in 360, and, after Constantius II's sudden death while trying to put down his "usurping" cousin – the lengths Julian needed to go in order to coax the Eastern upper-crust to accept his authority.

AO's deft use of two panegyrics Julian dedicated to his Constantius II are particularly instructive. Instead of being mere flowery and useless slop as some historians' have judged, AO's careful reading of these speeches allow him to penetrate Julian's mindset at various stages of his political career. The first panegyric was likely composed around 356, shortly after Julian arrived in Gaul, a time when the recently appointed Caesar (November, 355) was just finding his stride as a military leader. The oration, as read by AO, suggest a young Caesar moving cautiously in a perilous world, understandable, since Constantius had executed Julian's older brother Gallus in 354, after Gallus' disastrous term as Caesar in the East. Julian here plays the typical passive role of a junior partner. AO strives to demonstrate that Julian stuck closely to the advice provided in Menander Rhetor's *βασιλικὸς λόγος* (third or fourth century CE). Julian therefore produced a non-threatening run-of-the-mill speech that never strays far from the stock-imperial virtues expected in such rhetorical fluff. What some scholars have detected as calculated insincerity, in AO's opinion, is better interpreted as the work of a young man cautiously navigating a perilous political minefield. The second panegyric composed in the wake of Julian's somewhat unexpected military triumphs in Gaul, suggests a young Caesar becoming increasingly comfortable in his own skin. AO indeed senses simmering tensions concealed behind the web of praise, which outwardly preached harmonious accord between Julian and Constantius II. Though ostensibly a depiction of Constantius II's virtues, AO argues what we get instead, is a scarcely hidden lauding of Julian's own personal assets as a successful military leader. Moreover, he believes that many within the contemporary audience would have been able to see beneath the thin membrane of the flowery rhetoric and grasp which ideal Roman they were expected to admire–Julian and not Constantius. Here, I was left pondering just how deeply

a modern historian can dig into the subtext of either speech without blurring the lines between their views and that of the orator. Why ignore the subtext in the first speech and embrace it in the second one? Put slightly differently, does one's knowledge of what was going on when Julian composed these speeches, unduly influence the way or how deeply we read beneath the surface of any given speech? Moreover, in ancient literature, text and author were two related but often distinct identities; chameleon-like, the author needed to adapt his persona to the edicts of his chosen rhetorical form[7]. In a strict genre like panegyric, this makes uncovering Julian's "true" views or intent more difficult than AO sometimes suggests.

The next few chapters offer more of the same, with close readings of panegyrics allowing AO to provide interesting observations (though it is sometimes unclear how revolutionary these conclusions are) on a range of emperors and usurpers who took over the Empire after Julian died on campaign against the Persians in 363. A discussion of Jovian's (r. 363-364) fraught accession in 363, is followed by a detailed analysis and informative discussion of the usurpation of Procopius (365-366) against Valentinian I (r. 364-375) and Valens (r. 364-378). Here AO reveals the lengths to which the House of Valentinian went to purge both the memory as well as the supporters of Julian. Though some might disagree with his suggestion (p. 234) that the violence of these purges were exaggerated by sources hostile to Valens, AO fruitfully interrogates the opposing views supplied by the Julianophile, Ammianus, with the panegyrics produced by the seminal late Roman court-propagandist and imperial sycophant, the Hellenic philosopher Themistius.

The final chapter on Theodosius (r. 379-395) contains fruitful discussions on Theodosius' ascension (which AO describes as a usurpation), Theodosius' ideological success in marginalising the emperor Valentinian II (r. 375-392) to the point of erasure, and his ideological and military defeat of a potent western rival Magnus Maximus (r. 383-388).

The shackles of AO's chosen methodological tool of panegyric regrettably leads to an inchoate vision of usurpation in the reign of Theodosius. Though we have no complete panegyrics, one would have hoped for more on Theodosius' defeat in 394 of the Western "usurper" Eugenius (r. 392-94). Interaction with Alan Cameron's thorough rejection of the notion found in later Roman sources that Eugenius' war with Theodosius I represented a pagan revival undertaken on the behalf of an

7. On which see M. Stewart, *Masculinity, Identity, and Power Politics in the Age of Justinian: A Study of Procopius*, Amsterdam, 2020, 31-32, 56-68.

increasingly persecuted pagan senatorial elite in the West, would have allowed AO to flesh out more of his conclusions, especially considering the bleed of panegyric into our sources concerning this civil war found in the writings of contemporaries like Ambrose and slightly later ecclesiastical historians like Socrates and Sozomenus[8]. This merging of genres in panegyric and other literary forms would only increase in the fifth and sixth centuries[9]. Eugenius indeed faced a typical memory sanction as the one who came out on the losing end of the civil war. Our sources emphasised the bloodless and miraculous nature of Theodosius I's victory at Frigidus against the supposed pagan elements of Eugenius' forces[10]. It was only natural that these Christian sources, depending on Old Testament precedents (Joshua 6:20) as well as fourth-century trends in Christian hagiography and panegyric, would highlight the pivotal role that the "hand of God" played in the triumph of the "orthodox" and "pious" Theodosius, while marginalising both the numbers and the military qualities of his soldiers. Such a view probably had imperial approval. For Theodosius I and his heirs, a hard-fought contest between two rival Christian emperors heading evenly matched Roman armies of a similar religious makeup was perhaps better explained as a bloodless and providential triumph over a numerically superior Western army intent on usurpation and re-establishing pagan worship. Though, in his Conclusion, AO begins to touch on events and the shift in literary genres in the fifth century, finishing his study with Theodosius' death in Milan in 395 was appropriate. I believe the boundaries between the fourth and fifth centuries, particularly when seen from both from a literary and a political standpoint, to be even greater than AO posits in his conclusion.

Yet these, and other criticisms above, should be taken as only minor complaints, and in part, should be taken as evidence of the stimulating nature of this book. One can only hope that AO acts on his promise to turn his pen to the fifth century and beyond.

Michael Edward Stewart
University of Queensland
Australia

8. Al. Cameron, *Last Pagans of Rome*, Oxford, 2011.

9. See, e.g., J. Elsner, 'The Rhetoric of Buildings in the *De Aedificiis* of Procopius', in L. James (ed.), *Art and Text in Byzantine Culture*, Cambridge 2007, 33-57.

10. S. McCormack, Latin Prose Panegyrics, In *Empire and Aftermath: Silver Latin II*, ed. T. A. Dorey, London, 1975, 143-205, mainly 169-72.