

The Greek Past and the Roman Present in the Writings of the Emperor Julian: Hellenism, Romanitas, and Christianity

This paper examines the writings of the Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate, ruling from 361-363 AD, in order to explore his understanding of the relationship between Greek culture and Roman power, especially in the context of the rapid growth of Christianity. In particular, I will show that Julian constructed a hybrid identity that incorporated many elements of both Greek and Roman traditions, and believed that this Greco-Roman synthesis was divinely ordained.

Much has been written regarding Julian, covering his life, writings, philosophy, religious beliefs, and military activities, which Tougher (2007) summarizes excellently. Athanassiadi-Fowden (1981) offers a very detailed biography of Julian's intellectual development over his life, Elm (2012) traces his intellectual battles with the Church Father Gregory of Nazianzus to demonstrate how the two men influenced each other, and Kaldellis (2007) examines his life in the context of the transformations of Greek identity in Late Antiquity. Furthermore, Kaegi (1964) also analyzes Julian's relationship with and understanding of both Greek and Roman history.

Building off these scholarly works, I will explore in detail Julian's conception of history and how it interacts with elements of his broader worldview, such as his Neo-Platonic religious system and the political policies he pursued during his reign. Although I will cite from many of Julian's writings, my primary focus will be on a select few.

The first text I will examine is *The Caesars*, a satirical dialogue in which Julian portrays an argument between Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great concerning who was the more virtuous man, which allows him to express the tensions of being a Roman man who is thoroughly enamored with Hellenism (319d-325c). According to Julian himself, one of the

primary benefits of historical study was the moral instruction it offered younger men (124b-c). By comparing Caesar, Alexander, and others in this dialogue, Julian is attempting to determine the nature of the virtues that underlie their careers. Then I will analyze Julian's first *Oration*, a panegyric written to his cousin, the Emperor Constantius II. In it, Julian explores the complexity of ethnic and national identification in the later Roman Empire, such as his own situation: he was a native Greek-speaker who knew Latin poorly, yet was also the Roman Emperor and consistently identifies himself as a Roman. He explicitly states that many different nations within the Empire have a claim to being Constantius' *patris*, but decides that Rome is ultimately his true fatherland (5b-6c). The final work I will examine is the *Against the Galileans*, a polemic against Christianity that survives only fragmentarily. In it, Julian expresses his disdain for Christianity and explains why he believes that Roman rule over the Greek East was divinely ordained, and thus why Christianity is such a threat to all of Classical Civilization. He explicitly states that Romans and Greeks are *syggeneis* and articulates much more thoroughly his unique hybrid Greco-Roman identity (200a). Much of the rest of this work deflates Christianity's pretensions to universalism and constructs a religious system wherein the Hebrew God was merely the national god of the Hebrew people and the sun-god Helios is instead the true universal god of all peoples. This structure in turn mirrors the Roman Emperor's universal rule over the *oikoumene*, itself composed of various ethnic groups headed by their individual governors; this relationship between the divine and the worldly is of key importance to Julian (Elm 2012).

By examining these works, a composite picture of Julian's worldview and his relationship with the past will emerge, one which challenges many received narratives about the role of Christianity in the process of shifting identities during Late Antiquity. According to

Kaldellis (2007), the adoption of a Roman identity by the Greek-speakers of the eastern Empire is often reduced in secondary scholarship simply to their conversion to Christianity, if it is even considered at all. Julian, and many others like him, complicates this picture greatly and provides a fascinating case study which can help historians and classicists understand the complex social, intellectual, ideological, and spiritual changes occurring in Late Antiquity.

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