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11 December 2002

Behind the Times:

The Life of Julian the Apostate

One of the most legendary figures in the history of the late Roman Empire is that of Julian the Apostate. Although he died in his early thirties and was Emperor for a scant year and a half, his life enjoys a documentation rivaling that of other historical celebrities such as Diocletian, Constantine, and Theodosius the Great. It was neither the length nor the quality of his reign that kept him in the history books, but, as his sobriquet implies, his unorthodox religiosity. Following his agitated passage through life reveals an emperor unlike any other in the Roman Empire: Julian was not a soldier, nor a magistrate, but a philosopher, versed in the mysteries of Neoplatonism. As he became Emperor, his loyal devotion to Hellenism, coupled with his personal stubbornness and arrogance, degraded into megalomania and led him to the valleys of Ctesiphon, where he met his death in June of 363. His unique lifestyle and mystical personality was both the source of his notoriety and the cause of his downfall.

Fame cannot exist without an audience, however, and Julian's external environment was volatile with political turmoil, court intrigue, and philosophical feuds. Born into this world of shifting alliances, Julian had a unique childhood and education that dramatically shaped every aspect of his later reign. The political circumstances that killed his family and drove him into exile as a boy must therefore be carefully examined as a major shaping influence on his future career. His subsequent devotion to philosophy was a result of this exile, and the impact that it had on his life is equally considerable. For this reason, no analysis of his life would be complete without a study of those philosophers and mystics whom he admired and sought to emulate later in his life.

Macellum

To begin, then, with the story of Julian, it is necessary to recreate the momentous events that preceded his birth and set the stage for his life. In 324, the celebrated Constantine the Great defeated his Eastern rival Licinius at Chrysopolis and set himself up as the sole ruler of the Roman Empire. Constantine was the first Christian Emperor of Rome, and as can be expected, he ruled an empire in a period of great religious transition, dispensing money and honor to Christians while the old pagan aristocracy looked on with displeasure. In honor of himself and his newfound faith, Constantine founded the city of Constantinople, a capital for Christianity, the new Rome. When he died in 337, he left his Empire primarily to his three sons,¹ Constantius II, Constantine II, and Constans. Fearing future insurrection, Constantius began his rule by ordering the deaths of his many uncles and cousins, including Constantine's half-brother Julianus Constantius, the father of Julian. Only Julian and his brother Gallus were spared from the massacre, due to their youth (Julian was only a child of six when this happened).

As has happened so many times before and since, the three brothers then turned upon each other. Constantius II was the first to die, killed by his younger brother Constans as he invaded Italy in 340. A ten-year truce followed, until it was interrupted by the overthrow and murder of Constans in Italy by the officer Magnentius. Constantius II leaped upon this chance to invade the West and avenge his brother's death, and recalled Gallus to Constantinople to make him Caesar of the Eastern lands. He then marched west, and in the battle of Mursa in 351, defeated Magnentius. By 353, he had crushed all remaining opposition and was the sole ruler of the Empire.

Thus it was that the Empire was restored under the rule of Julian's uncle Constantius II, and the political landscape of Julian's childhood established. Constantius II was a capable and practical man, a seasoned veteran and determined campaigner. His brother's murder may have shaken him deeply, however, for throughout his reign he was known for his paranoia and

¹ Diana Bowder, *The Age of Constantine and Julian*, (London: 1978), p. 43. Constantine's nephews Dalmatius and Hannibalianus also received small portions of the Empire to rule, but they were negligible players in the struggle of succession.

brutality. The Roman historian Ammianus wrote of him: “if he discovered any ground, however false or slight, for suspecting an attempt upon the throne he showed in endless investigations, regardless of right or wrong, a cruelty which easily surpassed that of Caligula and Domitian and Commodus... [he] employed excessive torture to give an appearance of authenticity to circumstances which were invented or at best uncertain.”² Through his cruelty and suspicion, Constantius was a critical influence on Julian’s life.

Turning to Julian, then, is to see a lonely boy who saw his entire family dead by his sixth birthday, with the exception of his half-brother Gallus. Born in 331,³ he lived in Constantinople until 337, when his family was killed and he and Gallus sent to Nicomedia in Bythnia, where they were raised as Christians and kept out of trouble. Like any childhood, these were very influential years of Julian's life. It was here that his beloved tutor, Mardonius, introduced the young Julian to the classics of Homer, Plato, and Aristotle, along with his regular Christian education. While the boy did well in his Christian instruction, he became enamored with the texts of the great Greek philosophers. Deprived of a family and raised in exile, Julian quickly found solace in philosophy and concentrated all of his affection on a single person. When he was taken away at the age of twelve, he lost a dear friend, and much of the remainder of his personal life, Bowersock speculated, was spent searching for another Mardonius.⁴

In 344 Julian was taken from Nicomedia to Macellum in Asia Minor, where he spent the remainder of his youth. In many ways, these were the worst years of his life, and also the most influential. In his *Letter to the Athenians*, Julian emphasized the loneliness of his imprisonment:

How shall I describe the six years we spent there? For we lived as though on the estate of a stranger, and were watched as though we were in some Persian garrison . . . so that we lived shut off from every liberal study and from all free intercourse, in a glittering servitude.⁵

Cut off from all meaningful contact with friends and family, he read voraciously, devouring the

² Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire*, trans. Walter Hamilton, (London: 1986), 16.8, p. 231.

³ G. W. Bowersock, *Julian the Apostate*, (Cambridge: 1978), p. 22. This date is in question. Bowder dates his birth to 332 (*Age of Constantine*, p. 90).

⁴ Bowersock, *Julian*, p. 24.

⁵ Julian, *Letter to the Senate and People of Athens*, trans. Wilmer Cave Wright in *The Works of the Emperor Julian*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1953), vol. 2, p. 251.

ancient texts of Plato and Aristotle. Although he had been raised a Christian, he had a sharp eye for criticism and, having found a more plausible view of the world in the pagan classics, ultimately rejected the faith. On the surface, however, he made no apparent change in his behavior, and continued to practice Christian worship. The wheels had been set in motion. In his future career as a soldier and emperor, he fancied himself to be a modern philosopher-king of Plato's world, the enlightened man who would bring the world back to the truths of Hellenistic thought.

Now that he had grown up to be a young man, Julian had developed very distinct physical characteristics with attributes that were as often praised for their strength as were derided for their brutish appearance: a large, thick neck, a prominent nose, weak legs, and flashing eyes. In his behavior, he resembled many famous eccentrics, known for their high intelligence and emotional instability. His eyes constantly darted back and forth, he walked with a nervous and uneven gait, and he had a high, uncontrollable laugh. When Gallus was recalled to Constantinople in 350, Julian left with him. He returned to the capital a lonely intellectual and deeply serious scholar, unable to deal well with people on an individual basis. Those that did manage to touch him personally inevitably left a great impression on him, either inspiring zealous loyalty or vindictive hatred. Indeed, his impressionability would prove crucial in his life as he reentered society and encountered the philosophic movement called Neoplatonism.

The religious world of fourth century Rome was a mystical hodgepodge of cults, small deities, and rituals. The old Greco-Roman pantheon was antiquated; the sacrifices and rituals were performed only for tradition's sake. The cults of Isis, Cybele, Hecate, and Mithras were the most popular of the new religious scene, on which Manichaeism, Gnosticism, and Christianity played an important and equally cult-like role. Philosophers of this age were deeply influenced by this culture of mysticism and secrecy, and in the third century, the sophists Plotinus, Porphyry, and Iamblichus revisited the works of Plato and Pythagoras in the context of these cults. What emerged was a philosophy that sought spiritual epiphany through pure thought, using reason to discern the absolute values of existence. It centered around the belief in a One being, from which

all perfection emanated.⁶ Everything physical was thus imbued with a spark of the divine; gods and goddesses existed, but only as meta-physical manifestations of the One. It was a very abstract philosophy that could easily incorporate mystical practices into its regimen.

While Plotinus and Porphyry were strictly philosophers and scoffed at the idea that ritual or magic could bring a disciple any closer to intellectual purity, Iamblichus (c. 250-c. 325) of Antioch became notorious for his use of magic, divination, telekinesis, and theurgy, creating a “strange amalgam of rigid dialectic and enthusiastic ritualism.”⁷ Iamblichus’ treatise On the Pythagorean Life provides many examples of the supernatural and mystic aspects of his Neoplatonism. He opened his work with an invocation of a god, for the “beauty and grandeur” of philosophy “surpass the human capacity to grasp it all at once: only by approaching quietly, little by little, under the guidance of a benevolent god, can one appropriate a little.”⁸ Later, in his description of Pythagoras, whom he regarded as the perfect philosopher, he reveals the supernatural powers that one could gain through the exercise of divine reason:

It seemed as if he alone could hear and understand the universal harmony and music of the spheres and of the stars which move within them, uttering a song more complete and satisfying than any human melody, composed of subtly varied sounds of motion and speeds and sizes and positions, organized in a logical and harmonious relation to each other, and achieving a melodious circuit of subtle and exceptional beauty.⁹

Iamblichus had only recently died with Julian returned to Constantinople, and the intellectual circles were still buzzing over him, either in praise or scorn. It would have only been a matter of time before Julian picked up on his ideas. An impatient man who was easily swayed by fast, decisive results, it was “precisely this mixture of religious mysticism and philosophy that appealed to Julian’s tastes,”¹⁰ and they would soon come to dramatically affect his life.

Julian was given free reign to study in the East, provided he stayed away from politics and the army. He therefore passed through Nicomedia, Pergamum, and Ephesus, taking up many

⁶ Robert Browning, The Emperor Julian, (Berkeley, 1976), p. 40.

⁷ Browning, Julian, p. 55.

⁸ Iamblichus, On the Pythagorean Life, trans. Gillian Clark, (Liverpool, 1989), 1, p. 1.

⁹ Iamblichus, Life, 15, p. 27. Other useful, if less poetic, examples exist throughout the text. In chapter 13 (page 24), he is able to educate and converse with animals; chapter 25 (page 50) speaks of his use of music to cure disease; chapter 16 (page 30) describes his “supernatural power” to restore the “divine spark” in souls.

¹⁰ Wilmer Cave Wright, The Emperor Julian’s Relation to the New Sophistic and Neo-Platonism (New York, 1980), p. 43.

different masters of rhetoric and philosophy along the way, the most notable of whom was Libanius of Antioch, a pagan sophist who became one of Julian's staunchest allies in the future. A deeply spiritual and religious man, Julian found himself drawn to the miraculous thought of Iamblichus, rather than the practical logic of his contemporaries. Against the advice of the masters in Pergamum, he went to Ephesus to study with Maximus, the great mystic of the Neoplatonists, who, as it was said, could make the statue of Hecate herself smile, and the torches in her hands blaze with fire.¹¹ Julian could not have been happier when his new mentor agreed to initiate him in the secret rites of Neoplatonism in 351.

Without a doubt, this was a turning point in Julian's life that would soon have repercussions throughout the Roman Empire. For the first time, Julian had found his niche: the philosophers of the school of Iamblichus. It was a small group, comprised of a mere handful of people, but to Julian, it was the finest society he could have. The man who had found no pleasure as a member of the aristocracy or the royal family found himself fulfilled in the company of the spiritual and philosophical elite. What he had joined, as Athanassiadi-Fowden explains, "was not simply an art or science which could be studied and mastered by any reasonably intelligent human being; it was a god-sent gift, an innate virtue of the prophetic soul."¹² A mystical person from the beginning, Julian was now convinced that he had discovered the true path to enlightenment. The Neoplatonic One had singled him out for greatness. In a letter he wrote to the cynic Heraclius, Julian recounted an allegory of himself that revealed his belief in his own divine inspiration.

And when, thus reared, he had become a youth . . . he learned the numerous disasters that had befallen his kinsmen and his cousins, and had all but hurled himself into Tartarus . . . Hermes, who had an affinity for him, appeared to him in the guise of a youth of his own age, and greeting him kindly said, "Follow me, and I will guide thee by an easier and smoother road as soon as thou hast surmounted this winding and rugged place where thou seest all men stumbling and obliged to go back again."¹³

As can be clearly seen from this passage, which was incidentally written to refute the criticisms

¹¹ Browning, *Julian*, p. 56.

¹² Polymnia Athanassiadi-Fowden, *Julian and Hellenism: An Intellectual Biography*, (Oxford, 1981), p. 31.

¹³ Julian, *To the Cynic Heraclios*, vol. 2, p. 139.

of his fellow philosopher Heraclius, Julian (the youth) was divinely inspired to lead his followers down a smoother and easier road that was invisible to the common folk, or, to extend the meaning of the allegory, to bring his followers to the true faith.

At home, he continued to be a practicing Christian, and in this way began to lead two lives, one as secret pagan, and the other as a public Christian. The stage was now set for action, for Julian was convinced that he would be the one to restore the glorious paganism and Hellenic philosophy he loved to the Empire. As a conclusion to this section, Browning described Julian's new life that is appropriately ominous: "He [Julian] was living a double life, a stimulating and exciting experience for a time, but one that in the long run dulls a man's ability to distinguish illusion and reality."¹⁴

Antioch

It is now necessary to return to the narrative, and bring Julian through the events that led him to become the sole Emperor of Rome. Julian might have well happily lived the rest of his days as a philosopher but for his uncle Constantius II's cruelty. In 354, Constantius became convinced that Gallus was plotting to overthrow him, and had him sent to Milan. Gallus, who might have thought this was simply a misunderstanding that could be cleared up, arrived and was executed. Julian himself was soon arrested and taken to Constantinople, but was eventually released given permission to study in Athens.

Julian was truly happy in Athens, the city of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and Libanius insists that he would have spent the rest of his days there if he could,¹⁵ but he was unexpectedly recalled to the Capitol and made Caesar of the West, for the Empire was beset by both Germans in the West and Persians in the East. It is clear that Julian was not really expected to have any actual control, but merely act as the Emperor's representative, for he himself writes, "I was sent not as commander of the garrisons there but rather as a subordinate of the generals there

¹⁴ Browning, *Julian*, p. 59.

¹⁵ Libanius, *Oration 18: Funeral Oration Over Julian*, trans. A. F. Norman in *Libanius: Selected Works*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1969), vol. 1, p. 299.

stationed.”¹⁶ Nonetheless, he rose admirably to the situation and fought the Alamanni, Franks, and other German tribes successfully, obtaining his troops’ trust and loyalty. At the battle of Strasbourg in 357, he routed a force of 13,000 Alamanni and captured two of their chieftains,¹⁷ who were sent back to Constantinople for public display.

In 360, Julian was proclaimed Augustus by his legions. In his *Letter to the Athenians*, Julian explained that this was instigated by the army: “Then from there through an opening in the wall I prayed to Zeus. And when the shouting grew still louder and all was in a tumult in the palace I entreated the god to give me a sign; and thereupon he showed me a sign and bade me yield and not oppose myself to the will of the army.”¹⁸ Whether this is the case, or, as some have argued, Julian himself initiated the revolt, is an open question, but in either case it shows that he was willing to take this new course. He marched south to challenge his uncle, drumming up support for his cause along the way.

It was at this time that fortune favored Julian in a most opportune way. Constantius, Ammianus wrote, determined to first end the threat in Persia and then crush his nephew “like a hunted animal at the very beginning of his enterprise.”¹⁹ Upon completion of his Persian campaign, he turned west, and was marching to confront his adversary when he suddenly died of a fever. Ammianus suggested that it might have been due to overexertion, and implicitly reprimanded the emperor for his foolhardy drive west, too late in the fall.²⁰ For Julian, this was the ultimate proof that he was destined to be the one true Emperor, and he made his way in triumph to Constantinople, where he abandoned all pretenses of Christianity and began public sacrifices in honor of his coronation. This event marked an important change in Julian’s career, in both obvious and more subtle ways. While he was, of course, the Emperor now, he also displayed, for the first time, an attitude of invulnerability. Caution was thrown to the winds, as can be seen in his administration of the city of Constantinople.

¹⁶ Julian, *Letter to the Athenians*, vol. 2, p. 267.

¹⁷ Bowerstock, *Julian*, pp. 41-42.

¹⁸ Julian, *Letter to the Athenians*, vol. 2, p. 283.

¹⁹ Ammianus, *Empire*, 21.7, p. 216.

²⁰ Ammianus, *Empire*, 21.15, p. 229.

In Constantinople, Julian began to realize his dream of a revitalized pagan Empire. He believed that this required a renewal of paganism and Hellenism, and, more importantly, they had to exist together. He never accepted the possibility that Hellenism could be incorporated into Christianity; to him this was merely a bastardization of the truth. To tackle Christianity, Julian opened his reign with an edict of toleration, welcoming back the Orthodox Christians that had been driven away by the Arian Constantius.²¹ This edict, however, was clearly not meant to foster goodwill among pagans and Christians, but to wipe out Christianity as a whole, for Julian believed (as Ammianus phrased it) that “no wild beasts are such dangerous enemies to man as Christians are to one another.”²² When given the liberty to return to his homeland, Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, did his utmost to rally both camps of Christians to unify against Julian, to the Emperor’s ire. The Emperor responded by having Athanasius expelled.²³ In what was perhaps his most insidious blow against the Christians, which even Ammianus condemned,²⁴ Julian ordered that all teachers of rhetoric and philosophy must be pagan,²⁵ thus placing intellectual power firmly in the hands of pagans. It was his hope that Christianity would be nothing more than a yokel’s faith within a generation.

Julian’s edicts and letters were crammed full with Hellenistic sentiment, and these make it clear that he was deeply concerned that the culture of the ancients he had come to love was in danger of being overrun. In his letters to the Alexandrians, Athenians, Argyves, and Antiochenes, he continually conjured images of their glorious pre-Christian past.²⁶ The Alexandrians in particular received many a letter reprimanding them for their shameful ways, and in one of Julian’s most powerful phrases he wrote, “I am overwhelmed with shame, I affirm it by the gods, O men of Alexandria, to think that even a single Alexandrian can admit that he is a Galilaeen.”²⁷ His self-perceived struggle to keep the Greeks as they were five hundred years ago is seen as well

²¹ Ammianus, *Empire*, 22.5, p. 239.

²² Ammianus, *Empire*, 22.5, p. 239.

²³ Julian, *Letter 24*, vol. 3, p. 77.

²⁴ Ammianus, *Empire*, 25.4, p. 298.

²⁵ Julian, *Letter 36*, vol. 3, p. 117.

²⁶ Julian, 35 (Argyves), 10, 26, and 58 (Alexandrians), *Letter to the Athenians* and the *Misopogon*.

²⁷ Julian, *Letter 47*, vol. 3, p. 145.

in his furious damning of Athanasius: “Infamous man! He has had the audacity to baptise Greek women of rank during my reign!”²⁸ The mildly amusing aspect of Julian’s edicts and letters is that he was basically fighting to preserve a culture that had already disappeared. As a boy, he had fallen in love with the stories and books of ancient, classical Greece. He could not have been more disappointed than to see his visions dashed by reality, and as headstrong as he was, he never accepted the fact that his centers of Hellenism were thoroughly Christian, and there was nothing he could do about it.

When Julian moved to Antioch in preparation of a Persian campaign, he was already a fervent admirer of the city, through reading descriptions about its rich traditions of paganism and philosophy. His own celebrated Libanius hailed from the city, as well as the founder of his movement of Neoplatonism, Iamblichus. He wrote that he harbored much more than respect for the city, but had plans of making it the grandest city in the Empire, modeled after his ideals in every way.²⁹ Upon arrival, however, he started off on the wrong foot and went downhill from there. Antioch was a thriving center of secular trade and commerce; the theater, chariot races, and lavish parties were the expected entertainment. For man of Julian’s asceticism, this was unacceptable. He complained that “Antioch had done less than a poverty-stricken backwood village to honour the god, that the members of the council thought nothing of spending vast sums on dinner parties and orgies, but could not find the price of a single chicken for Apollo on his annual feast day.”³⁰ Julian’s constant criticism of the city made him no friends. The Christians had already regarded him as an enemy, and the pagans of the city had no desire to proselytize or become ascetics. Their relationship rapidly turned into a hatred, and many of the cleverer Antiochenes were quick to make fun of his beard, ascetic habits, his lack of sexual desire, and puritanism in general.

Julian responded to this criticism in the only form he knew how. He wrote a satire he called the *Misogopon*, or The Beard-Hater, which was meant to be a witty exposé of the

²⁸ Julian, *Letter 46*, vol. 3, p. 143.

²⁹ Julian, *Misogopon*, vol. 2, p. 503.

³⁰ Browning, *Julian*, p. 181.

hypocrisy of the Antiochenes, but often degenerated into petulant cries of indignancy and outrage: “Why, I repeat, in Heaven’s name, am I treated with ingratitude?”³¹ In his anger, Julian assumed the voice of an Antiochene in bitter mockery of himself, revealing all that he despised of the Antiochenes in the process.

No, you ought to feel grateful to those who out of kindness of heart admonish you wittily in anapaestic verse to shave your cheeks smooth, and then, beginning with yourself, first to show to this laughter-loving people all sorts of fine spectacles, mimes, dancers, shameless women, boys who in their beauty emulate women, and men who have not only their jaws shaved smooth but their whole bodies too . . . not, by Zeus, the sacred ones at which one is bound to behave with sobriety.³²

In another part of the *Misopogon* Julian “excused” the Antiochenes for their behavior because they are descendants of Antiochus, an allegedly soft and effeminate man who lusted after his step-mother.³³ It is apparent that Julian, like many other puritans in history, despised the easy-going, morally loose climate of Antioch, and his displeasure was especially bitter because his expectations for the city had been so high. He vented this disappointment near the end of his tirade:

Before I came here I used to praise you in the strongest possible terms, without waiting to have actual experience of you, nor did I consider how we should feel towards one another; nay, since I thought that you were sons of Greeks, and I myself, though my family is Thracian, am a Greek in my habits, I supposed that we should regard one another with the greatest possible affection.³⁴

This, as Browning hinted at in his book, is evidence of Julian’s failure to distinguish ideas from reality. In his mind, Greeks were thoughtful, moderate, and humble students of philosophy. History, though, had passed him by; “the Hellenism of the city,” Bowersock notes, “was a perfectly genuine form of Hellenism, but it was not his; and that made all the difference.”³⁵ It would be a safe guess to say that Julian had come to the city expecting to be validated and praised; instead, he was met with laughter and incredulity, and this frankly hurt his feelings to such an extent that all he could only lash out in blind rage and frustration, retreating to the haven

³¹ Julian, *Misopogon*, vol. 2, p. 509.

³² Julian, *Misopogon*, vol. 2, p. 443.

³³ Julian, *Misopogon*, vol. 2, pp. 447-449.

³⁴ Julian, *Misopogon*, vol. 2, p. 501.

³⁵ Bowersock, *Julian*, p. 101.

of written discourse, where he had spent so much time, to nurse his wounds. As the man with the sacred duty to restore pagan worship to the Empire, Julian was finding himself increasingly frustrated by everyone around him, and this was to prove his undoing.

As Julian brought the *Misopogon* to its close, he wrote in his childish way, “But since the length of my beard is displeasing to you, and my unkempt locks . . . I willingly go away and leave your city to you.” He departed Antioch in March of 363, leaving a cruel governor to preside over the city. As Julian left, Libanius and a crowd of his followers trailed after him, begging for his clemency, for Libanius was certainly aware that his fellow citizens had incurred an inevitable disaster upon them that they could not have anticipated. Fortunately for the Antiochenes, Julian never returned to punish them for their insolence.

The Persian campaign was in every way opposite to Julian’s exploits in Gaul. Julian’s army in Gaul was small and loyal, while this army was huge (between eighty and ninety thousand men),³⁶ and many of the soldiers still had sympathies with the late Constantius. His enemies were not German tribesmen, but Persians, and it is clear that he did not make allowances for either the size of the Persian territory nor their technological and strategic strengths. Perhaps the most important change, however, was that Julian believed that his life was protected by divine will. It gave him a stubbornness that bordered on the “pathological,” to use Browning’s expression. With his confidence in himself so high, his attention to overall strategy was very poor, causing him to rush into Persia without a firm strategy, refuse an initial peace offer from Shah Shapur, the King of Persia, and ignore the advice of his associates.

The details of the campaign are worth a paper in their own right. The story of the Persian victory over the superior Roman army is long and intricate, with disastrous decisions, foreboding omens, heat and starvation, and bloody battles of attrition. At the town of Phrygia, near to the Persian capitol Ctesiphon, Julian was mortally wounded by a cavalry spear, cast from an unknown soldier. He died hours later in his tent, as his heroes Maximus and his fellow philosophers Priscus and Oribasus looked on.

³⁶ Bowerstock, Julian, p. 108.

Julian's life is a tragic story to read. He grew up without a family, exiled away from all significant outside contact. His search for social inclusion and spiritual fulfillment was satisfied by his initiation into the circle of Neoplatonist philosophers, but once he had found his calling, he was whisked away into the world of Imperial politics. Unfortunately, his childhood and adolescence had left him completely unable to deal with many of the problems of his new career, and his fierce devotion to principle only caused him further alienation and frustration. It seems that Julian would have been happiest if he had been born in Athens or Antioch, perhaps around 100 BC, without a drop of royal blood in his veins. As it was, the times had passed him by, and the unfortunate circumstances of his birth thrust him into a life that he could not live in the manner of his choosing. When he died, few people mourned his passing. Only his philosopher-friends, most notably Libanius, made any public orations in his memory. These philosophers were a fitting end to the story, for they were probably the only people that understood him.

Upon inspection of Julian's life, however, the causes of his failure to reconvert the Empire are obvious, and are a telling insight into both Julian and the people of the East Empire that he tried so hard to befriend. It is clear that Julian lived the difficult life of a religious mystic. From the beginning, he was unable to identify with the needs and desires of ordinary people, and as he became overconfident and impatient, he began to use his power to force his own personal habits and desires upon his subjects, thus incurring their anger. Perhaps most importantly, the populace of the Eastern Roman Empire of the fourth century was uninterested in someone like Julian. Times were good, the economy was relatively sound, and, most importantly, nobody seemed to really miss paganism. Even the pagan sophists of Antioch, who ought to have been among Julian's strongest supporters, could not understand nor sympathize with his religious zeal. Julian attempted, arguably harder than anyone else in history, to turn back the clock of his world. The fact that he was so fiercely resisted proves that his society had entered a new age and was not willing to revert back. Much to Julian's chagrin, the days of classic Hellenism had passed him by, never to return.

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