

REVIEW

JOVIAN RECONSIDERED

Jan Willem Drijvers, *The Forgotten Reign of the Emperor Jovian (363–364): History and Fiction*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. 248. Hardback, \$99/£64. ISBN 978-0-19760-070-2.

The reigns of late antique emperors need not have been lengthy in order to command the recurring attention of modern scholars. The immediate predecessor of this book's subject was sole Augustus for fewer than nineteen months, yet no-one can ignore the constant stream of recent monographs devoted to Julian the Apostate (361–3 CE), the last pagan emperor, whose death on campaign—leaving the Roman army leaderless in Persian territory—formed the dramatic backdrop to Jovian's even briefer reign.¹ Jovian has fared less well; if not quite forgotten, then at least overshadowed by both Julian and his eastern successor Valens.² Jan Willem Drijvers has given us the first book-length study of Jovian in more than fifty years, and argues for his more consequential role in ensuring continuity of Constantinian models of emperorship between Constantius II (died 361) and the Pannonian brothers Valentinian and Valens who succeeded him. Whereas Jovian's reign has often been viewed as an interlude before the accession of the Pannonians, Drijvers argues that Jovian represented a return to a familiar pattern, casting Julian instead as a momentary interruption.

Yet this is really a book of two halves and two quite different Jovians. The first (Part I, 'History') offers the exhaustive historical assessment drawing largely on contemporary sources that allows Drijvers to evaluate Jovian's reign in comparison to that of his fellow fourth-century emperors. The second (entitled 'Fiction') leaves the world of Greek and Latin texts and fourth-century laws, coins, and inscriptions (a world familiar to most readers of monographs on Roman emperors) for an enigmatic Syriac Christian work of (probably) the sixth century. The *Julian Romance* deploys Jovian as a positive foil for its

¹ K. Bringmann, *Kaiser Julian* (Darmstadt, 2004); S. Tougher, *Julian the Apostate* (Edinburgh, 2007); S. Elm, *Sons of Hellenism, Fathers of the Church* (Berkeley, 2012); H. Teitler, *The Last Pagan Emperor* (Oxford, 2017); D. Greenwood, *Julian and Christianity* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2021).

² See N. Lenski, *Failure of Empire* (Berkeley, 2002) for Valens. A study of Valens' brother, the western Augustus Valentinian, is still a *desideratum*.

eponymous anti-hero. Defined by Drijvers as ‘a work of fiction’ with a ‘historical core’, the *Romance* offers a fascinating case study of the early reception of Jovian by Syriac-speaking Christian communities in Mesopotamia within a century of the emperor’s death. Although it may give the book’s structure the feel of a diptych, the juxtaposition of the *Romance* with the more traditional source-critical narrative of Part I enables Drijvers to examine the internal dynamics of the *Romance*’s narrative and story-world against the narratives generated in closer temporal and linguistic proximity to Jovian and his short-lived court.

The Introduction situates Drijvers’ study of Jovian within recent scholarly approaches to imperial leadership that have emphasised the crucial role of medial texts and images that sustain an emperor in power. A survey of the main sources for Jovian’s reign follows, together with an overview of modern scholarship, which has tended to view the emperor as a mediocrity or failure, due mostly to the brevity of his reign (cut short after only eight months by his death by natural causes) or a negative comparison to Julian. Drijvers sets out to evaluate Jovian on his own terms. As one of the four members of the *quadriga Batavorum*, the team of Dutch scholars who have recently completed the monumental commentary project on Ammianus, Drijvers is well placed to read the most detailed and in many ways most insightful extant narrative of Jovian’s reign. Indeed, a great triumph of the book is Drijvers’ rescuing of Jovian from Ammianus’ depiction as a mediocre figure who blithely gave away large swathes of Roman territory to save his own skin.

Chapters 1 to 5 chart in swift order Jovian’s accession in Persia in the immediate aftermath of Julian’s death on 26 June 363 (Chapter 1); the treaty that Jovian struck with Shapur in order to allow the new emperor to extricate himself and the Roman army from Persia (Chapter 2); and then what can be gleaned about Jovian’s nascent policies in ruling the empire both in terms of general administration (Chapter 3) and his religious policies (Chapter 4). A brief survey of the circumstances of his death (asphyxiated by fumes in a hastily redecorated hostel in Bithynia: Chapter 5) concludes the first part.

A rather more adept emperor emerges from Part I than hitherto appreciated. The survey of Jovian’s family connections and the prestige of his previous role as Julian’s *primicerius domesticorum* reveals him as a more natural and worthy candidate for the imperial throne than Ammianus would have us believe. Both Constantius I and Diocletian had held similar positions as senior *protectores*. The terms of the peace treaty, far from being the abject surrender that Ammianus and others make out, only allowed Shapur to regain territories that had been lost by his predecessor Narses in 298/9, and even then not all of them. The surrender of Nisibis, defended successfully against Persian attack on three occasions by Constantius II, was undoubtedly a serious blow, but Drijvers judges the deal overall a success, not least in securing relative peace between Rome and Persia until the sixth century.

The brevity of Jovian's reign allows Drijvers to be exhaustive in his examination of the extant evidence within relatively short and succinct chapters (a feat impossible for an Augustus or a Constantine). Drijvers, then, has provided scholars with an indispensable guide to the epigraphic and numismatic record of the period, and the prosopography of Jovian's officials (many of whom he kept in positions they had held under Julian). Sometimes Drijvers' thoroughness can lean towards compendiousness, however. The catalogue-like survey in Chapter 3.2 of Jovian's laws provides some important reinterpretations (and reattributions) of individual edicts and rescripts that will be indispensable for anyone working on legislation in the 360s and 370s. But this material might better have been consigned to an appendix, not least since Drijvers whittles down seventeen items that have previously been ascribed to Jovian to a mere six genuine ones. On the whole, however, Jovian appears as a competent figure, who did the best he could in a difficult situation in Persia, and whose few months in power showed signs of a tolerant approach towards Christian factions and pagans alike.

Part II represents a significant change of gear. The Syriac *Julian Romance* is a composite work of Christian polemic aimed against Julian the Apostate. It was likely compiled in the early sixth century in Edessa, though its three constituent sections may have evolved in oral form over the preceding 150 years, and have originated as separate works: first, a celebration of Constantine and his sons; second, the so-called 'Eusebius Narrative', a fictionalised story of Julian's encounter with an otherwise unknown bishop Eusebius of Rome, in which Julian tries and fails to make the bishop renounce Christianity; and third (the main focus of Drijvers' Part II) the 'Jovian Narrative', which follows Julian's interactions with Christian communities in the eastern half of the empire and his invasion of Persia. Jovian's role is magnified far beyond anything we find in the Greek or Latin accounts, even in the contemporary fifth-century Greek ecclesiastical historians. The purpose of this semi-fictionalised Jovian is to act as the model of a Christian emperor to contrast with Julian the pagan persecutor.

Drijvers has been a pioneer in studying the *Julian Romance* and especially in bringing it to the attention of scholars working on Late Roman political history and Greek and Latin literature.³ Part 2 of this book is a culmination of this work, and provides a great service to those (like this reviewer) who do not read Syriac, especially as Sokoloff's recent English translation of the *Romance*

³ E.g., J. W. Drijvers, 'The Syriac Julian Romance: Aspects of the Jewish-Christian Controversy in Late Antiquity', in H. L. J. Vanstiphout et al., edd, *All Those Nations ... Cultural Encounters within and with the Near East: Studies Presented to Han Drijvers at the Occasion of his Sixty-fifth Birthday* (Groningen, 1999) 31–42; 'The Emperor Jovian as New Constantine in the Syriac Julian Romance', *Studia Patristica* 45 (2010) 229–33; 'Ammianus, Jovian and the Syriac *Julian Romance*', *Journal of Late Antiquity* 4 (2011) 280–97.

offers no introduction to its literary qualities nor does it place it within Syriac literary traditions.⁴ Drijvers' method is largely comparative, tracing the way in which the character of Jovian is deployed within the narrative against other figures such as Julian, Shapur, and Shapur's high-priest Arimihr (readers more familiar with Ammianus or Socrates of Constantinople will be surprised to find the *Romance's* Jovian actively converting Arimihr to Christianity). Drijvers also traces some of the local preoccupations of the text, including the promotion of Edessa as a key Christian city, and hostility to Jews. The *Romance* is long (more than 6,000 lines of Syriac text), and in offering analytic summary of its main sections, Drijvers has done an immeasurable service in tracing the contours of its narrative, its main themes, and how it creates a new Jovian distinct from but rooted in the 'historical' Jovian of Part 1.

Drijvers gestures towards the compositional context of this remarkable work. As the product of a Syriac tradition stemming back to Ephrem of Nisibis' hymns of the 360s, in which the bishop condemned Julian for precipitating the surrender of his home city to the Persians, the *Romance* is the end-point of an oral tradition that reworked stories of Jovian and Julian in order to explore the 'anxiety' (132) posed by the continued presence of non-Christians in Syriac communities in the sixth century, as well as the question of how to be Roman in the Mesopotamian borderlands. A typical reader of this volume may already have been familiar with the work of Ephrem, if even in translation, but I suspect for many, Syriac narrative literature may be relatively unfamiliar. My appetite was certainly whetted, and I would have welcomed more discussion of the *Romance's* position within traditions of Syriac historiographical writing and related genres. Drijvers frequently labels the *Romance* as 'fiction' or 'historical fiction', but with its pretence to record the life of a Roman emperor, and its pseudonymous authorship (by one 'Apolloris', who purports to be Jovian's chamberlain), it shares some features with another enigmatic work that is likely to be more familiar to the typical reader of this volume—the *Historia Augusta*. I was left curious about how obviously 'fictionalised' the *Romance* would have appeared to early Syriac readers; and how its narrative drew on contemporary historiographical or perhaps hagiographic discourse; in other words, how it constructs or plays with a discourse of historical 'truth', and why Jovian was a suitable subject for manipulation.

That quibble aside, Drijvers has given us the definitive guide to Jovian's reign, an important survey of its Syriac reception, and a crucial reinterpretation of Jovian's place with the roster of late Roman emperors.

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⁴ M. Sokoloff, *The Julian Romance* (Piscataway, N.J., 2016).