

A Textual Analysis of the Causes, Process and Consequences of Julian's Persian Expedition

Chengyu Jia ^{1,*}

¹ Shenzhen Foreign Language School, Shenzhen, China

*Email: risefromashes@126.com

ABSTRACT

After inheriting the throne, polytheist Julian consolidated his rule by adjusting a series of incorrect policies in law and administration. Although these policy adjustments concentrated upon Julian's short period of ruling the Roman Empire, they provided sufficient reasons and foreshadowing for his expedition to Persia. Roman Emperor Julian launched a war against the Persian Empire in 363. The purpose was to establish authority, provide legitimacy for his pagan revival, meet personal ambitions, acquire territory and divert domestic criticism of him. This paper mainly summarizes and analyzes the causes, processes, and consequences of this expedition through the method of text analysis. It divides the process of the expedition into three stages: the preparation of Antioch, the march to the city of Ctesiphon, and the defeat and escape of the Roman army under the siege of Ctesiphon. This paper attributes the failure of the war to the possible shortage of supplies and Julian's reckless attempt to destroy ships. The expedition had a far-reaching impact on the political situation in Rome and Persia at that time, such as the ceding of Roman territory to Persia, the gradual disappearance of the influence of paganism, and the division of Roman and Persian occupation of the Kingdom of Armenia. This paper will provide a clear interpretation framework for those who expect to understand this history.

Keywords: Rome empire, Julian, Persian expedition, Imperial Control.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the year 331, one of the most controversial Emperors in Roman history, Julian, was born in Constantinople. In his youth, Julian was trained as a Christian, but he later broke with Christianity and embraced the old pagan faith which some of his teachers professed. This old Hellenic religion claimed his loyalty and had a special appeal for him. In 337, the peace brought by Constantine the Great immediately disappeared after his death. The empire fell apart again due to a succession problem. Julian's cousin Constantius II took the throne and decided to wipe out Julian's family. However, he spared several members including Julian and ruled the Roman empire with two members of the family together. The decision was not sensible because they soon fought against each other for the throne in the empire. Constantius II won again, and this time, he appointed Julian's brother Galus to Caesar (which was the vice emperor of Rome) in 351. Galus was executed by the emperor in 354 for his brutal rule. At this time, Rome was still threatened by the Persians, which yearned for Mesopotamia. He needed help from relatives of his blood. So, in 355, Julian was named "Caesar of the West"

by Constantius Augustus. In a series of acts to govern and quell insurgencies. He improved his reputation. Quickly, his fame shocked Constantius II. He was feared to lose power and be avenged by Julian, so he called Julian to come to the East with his army on the ground of the troops in the East needed support. He attempted to first pull away from the troops around him, and then arrest him and put him in prison. Julian and his army in Gaul considered the same situation, thus they decided to set a rebellion and crowned Julian as Emperor of Rome in Paris. Another civil war was about to happen right away, but unexpectedly, Constantius II fell ill and died, and in his last orders, he could only recognize Julian as the heir to the throne. He was feared of Constantius Augustus for some reason before he knew the news that Augustus has died; hence he stayed in Dacia and asked the opinion of augur. The result of the prophecy is favorable for him, but he still was troubled with many fears. When the news of Constantius II's death and the decision to let Julian inherit his power came to his ears. He was relieved and arrived at Constantinople on December 11th. After the sudden death of Constantius II, the elder brother and the legitimate emperor of the Rome Empire, Julian acceded to the throne peacefully and

became the undoubted ruler of the empire. Surprisingly, Julianus Augustus openly and freely professed the worship of the gods, which he had previously practiced secretly, and set the bishops of the Christians at odds [1]. After a sequence of legislative and administrative reforms, Julian was able to accumulate renown among the people. All he did was for one goal, the revival of polytheism, which was once brilliant in the Roman Empire. However, Christianity had developed in the Rome empire for hundreds of years, Julian's approach seemed to be unpractical and could lead to bloody conflict. He needed something to appease the people and convince them that he was a respectable Roman ruler. Also, made people think that his polytheism blessed the Romans and guided them to endless victory and glory. Therefore, an expedition to Persia was planned successfully and was about to begin.

This essay will describe and analyze the reasons, processes, and consequences of Julian's expedition to Persia. It will contain a significant amount of narrative content, as well as descriptions of some of the marches, to recreate the course of Julian's Persian expedition and analyze the impact of the character's actions.

2. THE EXPEDITION TO PERSIA

2.1. The reason of starting the expedition

The reason why Julian started this war is still controversial among scholars. One view was that Julian hold the idea for reviving the polytheism and Hellenism of the Roman Empire. There was some evidence to support this view, one of which was the description of Ammianus Marcellinus. He recorded that Julian used various ways to legitimize his position and attempted to revive pagan and Greek culture. He made public his polytheism, which was his first step in reviving that. He ordered the official to amend the law and dealt with military affairs. Then he spent the winter in Antioch, dealing with local political affairs [1].

Antioch's period has always been regarded as the period when Julian trained the army to fight against the Persians, but in fact, this period was more accompanied by Julian's revival tendency and action towards pagan beliefs and Greek culture. Glanville Downey believed that Julian came to Antioch to sympathize with his plan, but that was not enough. He chose this city for more specific reasons. First, it was the center of Greek education and the residence of libanius, the defender of the old culture. The young prince Julian was deeply impressed by libanius' speech in Nicomedia. Second, the population there was mixed and unstable, which was considered to be influenced by all kinds of entertainment and converted to the different religions easily. Finally, if these cities could be transformed into centers of polytheism and Greek culture. The people of Constantinople and Alexandria would also be affected

one by one. Such a special place, no matter how loyal the people there were to Christianity, seemed to provide a unique field for the re-transformation of the Greek faith [2]. Julian arrived at Antioch with a Welcome. However, it took only about three months, from his arrival in the Syrian capital in July for what had been initially friendly relations between the emperor and its citizens, to come under severe and almost intolerable strain [3]. One of the most important conflicts was the sudden burning of the temple of the Daphnaean Apollo. The emperor showed great anger because he thought it was built by Christians, so he closed the cathedral in Antioch in return. At last, before the war, on a predetermined Festival, he ascended Mount Casiu and sacrificed to Jupiter [1]. Although his attempt seemed to have failed and strengthened Antioch's prejudice against paganism and Hellenism, all his actions showed that the most important reason for his expedition to Persia was to legalize himself in order to revive paganism and Hellenism and divert domestic criticism of him.

The second reason was related to his letter, which was his ambition to rule Persia and successfully conquer Macedonia. At the end of 356, Julian was still the commander of Gaul. He wrote a letter praising the emperor Constantius. In his letter, he first described the history of Persia, with special emphasis on the great conquest of the Macedonian empire. In his words, he showed his determination to rule the Persian region [4]. The author Fredo David explained the letter in two separate paragraphs. In the first paragraph, he explained that Julian believed that the Romans were the heirs of the kingdom of Macedonia through a large number of conquest and legal inheritance. In the second part, he suggested Julian emphasize that the emperor's effective actions made up for the mistakes made by the army and revealed the invincible character of Roman warriors [3]. Through this letter, we could strongly see that Julian's desire to impose a Roman rule on Persian territory, just as Alexander the Great had once done.

The last reason might be related to the political situation and history between Persia and Rome at that time. Shayegan M. Rahim showed Julian's rule against the Persian rival Shapur II. He was the youngest son of the former Emperor Omar Mazd II. According to different accounts, Shapur II seemed to have three brothers. Adur Nasser seemed to inherit his father but was soon deposed. The second, Ohrmazd, was imprisoned, but he escaped and sought asylum in Rome. The third person whose name is unknown is blind. He has no right to succeed. So Shapur inherited the Persian Empire at a very young age and experienced a long power struggle. Sabuhr Sagán sah ruled the country by the Governing Council 325 years ago. After that, Shapur took office and led a successful war against Arab tribes. He has long prepared for the battle against Rome. After Constantine refused to accept the peace negotiations on the provisions of the Nisibis treaty, Shapur II invaded

Armenia and Mesopotamia and successfully occupied the province, possibly because Constantine died in 337 and the empire fell into a succession crisis again [5]. Therefore, when we turned to Julian's point of view, he must eager to recapture the territory lost by his ancestors and turn Armenia into a vassal state of Rome again. Defeating such a formidable opponent would also enhance his authority. At the same time, he could deal with the Persian threat once and for all to restore peace in Rome again.

2.2. The course of expedition

Most of the accounts in this paragraph were taken from the masterpiece of Ammianus Marcellinus, but some other accounts of historians or military officers, such as Zosimus and Lucillianus, were also inserted in the long narrative.

Although multiple disasters did influence the emperor deeply in Antioch, he still didn't give up his duty. He needed to prepare for the long-run battle. He wished to lower the price of commodities in the city, but it was considered impossible. There seemed to be ominous signs before the expedition, including the earthquake in Constantinople. Julian was also advised not to invade Persia, but to adopt a defensive strategy. However, Julian stuck with the decision to march. The Roman army received the support of the Armenians, who yearned for the independence of Persian rule. Emperor quickly marched his army through Mesopotamia and crossed the Euphrates River by boat.

While Julian was searching for supplies at Batnae, Persian horsemen suddenly harassed the Roman army. The Persians' actions alarmed Julian, causing him to hit upon a brilliant plan in a flash. He instructed Procopius and Sebastian, Duke of Egypt, to stay on one side of the Tigris River with 30000 people for the time being to ensure the safety of the rear. He also ordered them to meet the army of the king of Armenia. As for himself, would lead 60000 soldiers, trying to pretend to cross the Tigris River, then followed the river south, trying to break into the heart of Persia. Julian met with the prince of Saracen at an outpost, where he also received supplies from the Roman fleet. Then the emperor marched towards Cercusium and soon crossed the Abora river.

Julian's army arrived in Zaitha, where they saw the tomb of emperor Gordianus and a lion. The emperor then made an exciting speech to boost the morale of his troops and spur them on. In his speech, he revealed the glorious history of the Roman conquest. Julian believed that the war needed to be ended as soon as possible, partly due to supply problems and partly due to tensions on the northern front. He shortened his short night break and carefully led his troops to avoid being attacked by the Persians because he was not familiar with the terrain of Mesopotamia. Soon after March, Julian arrived in Dura.

The emperor ordered Count Lucillianus to lead thousands of soldiers to Fort Anatha, a fortress surrounded by the Euphrates River. The count surrounded the city with ships and successfully sealed off the island. The emperor then arrived and, after persuading the city owner to surrender, conquered the important city without bloodshed. The Romans then burned the fort and transferred the residents to Syria. The Roman army was resupplied and strengthened, and Julian ordered them to move on.

They soon reached another fortress called Thilutha. It was in the middle of the river, reinforced by the natural landscape, and seemed to be indestructible. The inhabitants did not want to surrender for fear of becoming Roman vassals.

They could not capture the city by force, so they chose to move forward, and the same scene took place in the fortress of Achaiachala. The Romans continued to march on the city of Baraxmalcha, which was sparsely populated but rich in grain and white salt. They robbed it and other towns. After two days' rest, they accidentally met the Persian scouts. The Romans repelled them with shields and reached a grand canal. The rivers that flowed through Babylon nourished the fields as well as cities and played a defensive role. The emperor led his army across the river, but some of them were killed by water and enemy arrows. They reached pirisabora, a large city with a large population surrounded by rivers. After his inspection, the emperor began to simulate the siege and tried again to make the soldiers in the city surrender. But this time he wasn't so lucky. The people of the city rejected the request. The Roman army then began to siege truly. The defenders resisted tenaciously and abused the surrendered Lord. When the Romans used powerful siege engines and destroyed the walls, Persian defenders occupied the adjacent fort, which was located on the top of the mountain and protected by the natural landscape, and its walls were stronger than those outside. Siege was continuing. Both sides had victories and losses. Julian then ordered the construction of a more magnificent siege device called Helepolis. The defenders were shocked to see such a huge weapon and finally surrendered. The Romans won again. They found a lot of weapons and supplies in the fort, took what they needed, and burned the rest together with the place. After they left this place, another pair of Persian cavalries attacked and the emperor drove them away. Julian promised to distribute some loot, but the quantity was too small. Then he gave a speech that would help stabilize the army. They started marching again. The Romans found a lot of fertile land along the way. They got a lot of food.

They arrived at Maiozamalcha, where the emperor was attacked by Persian cavalry while exploring the area, but managed to escape. Although the city was well defended, he did not move on, because he thought it would be dangerous to go any further, and he would

leave a hidden problem behind him whom he feared. So, the army began a siege. The Romans surrounded the city, killed some of those who tried to escape and tried to break into the fort with difficulty. Julian showed his military talent by dividing his army into different parts and surrounding the city. The battle was fierce. On the one side, the Romans bravely rushed to the wall to break it; on the other side, the Persians stubbornly adhered to their walls and tried their best to avoid and resist deadly attacks. Julian was clever. He thought of digging tunnels to attack the city. In a night raid, the Roman army killed all the guards and made their way into the crucial city. A great and populous city, destroyed by Roman strength and valor, was reduced to dust and ruins overnight. The Romans then took and burned a stronghold. They were just a stone's throw from Ctesiphon. As they moved on, they discovered a man-made canal, the Naarmalcha, and Julian decided with his fleet to occupy both sides of the river. After another hard fight, the Roman army was able to control the river and hold its ground. A great battle was about to begin, which was described by historians as the Battle of Ctesiphon. The battle took place between the Persian cavalry and the Roman Legion. The Roman shields successfully held out the Persian cavalry. After many victories, the Romans were clearly in high morale, so the Romans successfully defeated the Persian army, and they retreated to the city of Ctesiphon.

As long as the emperor conquered Ctesiphon, the Pearl of the Persian Empire, the Persia Empire would collapse and then become another Roman province. Julian was driven by his great ambition. He ordered his entourage to burn all the ships, implying this was the fight to win or die. The Persians in turn adopted a scorched earth policy and began to harass the Roman army. The support of other troops had arrived, but because of transportation difficulties, the emperor's troops could not receive supplies, and the reinforcements could not cross the river also, so they had to continually siege the city. Winter was drawing to a close. The emperor and his army had to retreat due to upcoming severe weather. They could not return by the way they had come, where all the food and crops had been destroyed. They had to go back to Assyria.

The Roman army grew increasingly tired from the almost unbearable heat and repeated attacks. They fought off many Persian attacks and retreated with difficulty. The Romans were overwhelmed by the constant intrusion of Persian elephants and cavalry. Supplies were running low, and the soldiers were suffering from unbearable hunger. During one attack, the Persians appeared from behind the Roman army, and the emperor, before he could put on his armor, went to investigate. Arriving at the battlefield, he bravely charged into the crowd and tried to make it clear to his men that the enemy was fleeing in confusion. But in the twinkling of an eye, a cavalry lance went through his ribs and into the lower lobe of his liver. He was seriously injured and taken back

to camp for treatment. Lying in bed, Julian Augustus gave his last speech, and soon after, the last polytheist emperor of the Roman Empire, Flavius Claudius Julianus, died peacefully at the age of thirty-two in silence. In desperation, the army elected a commander as emperor, Jovian, the son of a famous count.

The Persians were still attacking Rome, and the Romans were retreating to their land. On July 1st they made it to the city of Dura, and they had to swim across the terrible Tigris River. Many of them couldn't even swim, and a lot of people died in this retreat. Lots of people committed suicide because they could not stand the hunger.

Finally, the Persians seemed tired of war and proposed a peace treaty to Rome. At first, the emperor did not want to acknowledge such an agreement, but when his troops threatened him, saying that if Procopius learned of Julian's death, he would declare himself emperor without any opposition. Eventually, Jovian yielded, ceding five Roman provinces, and giving up the Armenian region altogether in return for allowing the Roman army to withdraw. The Romans, after crossing the river Tigris and suffering a continued and great scarcity of food, which they endured with fortitude, at length arrived in Mesopotamia. Jovian Augustus set in order, so far as possible, the affairs of Illyricum and Gaul. There was disappointment and bitterness throughout the empire, and the Romano-Persian War was eventually over [1].

2.3. The consequences of expedition

The failure of the expedition had a profound impact on the frontier of Rome and Persia, as well as on the religious policy of the Roman Empire and the fate of the Armenia region.

First, after the death of the emperor Julian, the Roman army hastily selected the new Augustus Jovian from its ranks. Due to a variety of factors, including the fear that his throne would be taken away by other generals, the emperor accepted a peace treaty with the Persians. Rome guaranteed a peaceful withdrawal from Persia. Jovian desired to sign a peace treaty with Persia that would last for a good while (in fact, the peace between Rome and Persia lasted roughly until 502). He handed over the city of Nisibis and other five provinces to the Persian Empire, together with the city of Sinhal and 16 strongholds. According to Ammianus Marcellinus, in order to prevent any party from violating the treaty, Persia and Rome also exchanged hostages [1]. Another historian Lee, A. D argued that it showed Rome and Persia at that time recognized each other's status because the exchange of hostages carried connotations of equality that fit with other features of Roman-Persian relations dating back to the fourth century [6].

Back to the territorial treaty. The author Bullough Vern L believed that in the long-term struggle between Rome and Persia, no country could completely control another country, which was facilitated by their common borders and cultural differences. That's why Jovian willingly gave up so much of Rome's territory. However, the decision of the cession of the territories by Jovian was a kind of compromise peace that was not accepted by nations, especially those accustomed to victory. Jovian's ability to hold the line largely depended on his Christian faith. Most of the Roman soldiers were originally Christians, and many were reluctant to serve the last polytheistic emperor, Julian. Jovian was praised rather than condemned for his devout Christian faith. It kept him on the throne. At the same time, although Jovian did cede several important provinces to Persia, other important cities, including Amida, Martyropolis, Edessa, Constantia, and Resaina remained Roman. The Roman Empire even reestablished a powerful frontier later, notwithstanding some penetration of Persian culture had been close to zero. Jovian knew that neither Persia nor Rome could win without destroying the other completely, so he used the peace treaty to remove Rome and Persia from one area of conflict so that they could devote more attention to domestic affairs and the defense of other borders [7]. Unfortunately, he died too young to carry out his imperial affairs.

Another consequence would be the revival and re-dominance of Christianity. Accounts by Ammianus Marcellinus and other historians of the same period described Jovian as a very devout Christian. There's a story in Socrates Scholasticus about Jovian, who was elected emperor and did not want to accept the imperial throne hence he didn't think they would accept a "Pagan" Christian emperor. Until he found himself surrounded by soldiers who also believed in Christianity, he was crowned as an emperor without protest. Although Socrates's records might have had the purpose of explicitly praising Christianity, we could see still Jovian's strong Christian faith [8]. In his short reign, according to the records of the famous historian Edward Gibbon, Jovian issued a decree restoring Christianity at Antioch, allowing Christians to resume teaching and administration, exempting the clergy from taxes, and halting the rebuilding of the pagan temple. However, he also allowed some religious freedom and tolerance, and pagans could still worship in the remaining temple [9]. Despite the veracity of historical sources that could be doubted, the decline of paganism and the rise of Christianity could be seen in the actions of successive emperors. Under the rule of Valentinian and Valens, this period of religious tolerance continued. Some pagan writers praised the emperor's policy of religious tolerance [1]. But towards the reign of Theodosius I, the persecution of Paganism began on a large scale. Between 389 and 391 he issued the "Theodosian decrees," which established a practical ban on paganism [10]. Anti pagan

laws were formally published and continued after Theodosius I until the demise of the Roman Empire in the West. So, the conclusion was that Julian's hopes of restoring Paganism were shattered, Christianity almost dominated all of Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire.

The last consequence related to the kingdom of Armenia. According to the 363-peace treaty, the influence of the Romans in Armenia would be abandoned. According to Roger C. Brockley, the Purpose of the Persians in Armenia in 363 as well as later was to suppress the Asazid monarchy and replace it with the Persian Marzban (governor). Once successful, they were able to hold the central, southern, and eastern provinces firmly in their hands, except the west, where Roman and Christian culture had deep influence [11]. The treaty of 363 soon proved unsatisfactory. Shapur II easily invaded the Kingdom of Armenia without the help of the Roman army. Arshak II of Armenia was dead in the Persians' jail. The queen continued to retreat to the fortress of Artogerassa, but was later captured. However, with Valens' help, his son ascended to the throne and brought Armenia closer to Rome. But he later rebelled against Rome, so the emperor had him assassinated [9]. The situation in the front line was now unstable, and both Rome and Persia rejected each other's treaties. Mountains of uprisings took place in Armenia, which one of the most important leaders was Manuel. He was crowned king of Armenia and placed Arsac under Roman protection before his death. But many Nakharars rose and demanded that Persia provide another ruler [12]. In a situation like this, in 384, a formal treaty was signed between Theodosius I and Shapur III, son of Shapur II, which divided Armenia between two parts under two spheres of influence respectively, bringing an end to the independent Armenian monarchy. [13]¹²⁵.

3. CONCLUSION

In 363, Julian carried out his predecessor's unfinished expedition to Persia and personally led his army and powerful fleet to Persia. After a series of victories, the balance of final victory seemed to tilt towards the Romans. However, under the city of Ctesiphon, Julian paid the price for his reckless burning of the ship and not enough supplies, leading to the defeat of the Roman empire and his death. Julian demonstrated his military strength during the war, including the division of manpower in the siege and the strategy of attacking by digging underground tunnels. Julian also took a pincer attack, scattering his troops successfully, misleading the Persian army, and reaching the Persian capital. The Persians also used scorched earth tactics to prevent the Romans from getting supplies from their land.

This paper mainly described and analyzed the causes, processes, and consequences of Julian's

expedition to Persia. It was difficult to describe the emperor Julian, who was perhaps an unusually complex man, a military commander, theosophist, social reformer, and man of letters. He tried to restore paganism and conquer Persia, and finally and unluckily ended in death. His legacy was overthrown by future generations, but we still could remember his name, Julian, the last Roman emperor who tried to revive polytheism, and his epic, idealistic, heroic expedition.

REFERENCES

- [1] Marcellinus Ammianus, *The Roman History of Ammianus Marcellinus*, Wyatt North Publishing, LLC, 2020.
- [2] Downey Glanville, *Julian the Apostate at Antioch*, *Church History*, 1939, 8(4), pp.303-315. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3160167>
- [3] Frendo David, *Dangerous Ideas: Julian's Persian Campaign, Its Historical Background, Motivation, and Objectives*, *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 2007 (21), pp. 79-96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24049364>
- [4] Julian, ed. and trans. J., *Bidez*, vol. 1, pt. 1, pp. 29-31.
- [5] Shayegan, M. Rahim, *On the rationale behind the Roman Wars of Šābuhr II the Great*, *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 2004 (18), pp.111-133. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24049144>
- [6] Lee, A. D., *The Role of Hostages in Roman Diplomacy with Sasanian Persia*, *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte*, 1991, 40(3), pp. 366-374. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4436202>
- [7] Bullough, Vern L., *The Roman Empire vs. Persia, 363-502: A Study of Successful Deterrence*, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 1963, 7(1), pp.55–68. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/172830>
- [8] Socrates of Constantinople, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.22.
- [9] Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of The Roman Empire*, New York: Chap, 1932, pp.798-890.
- [10] Idem aaa, *Evagrio praefecto Augustali et Romano comiti Aegypti.*, *Theodosian Code*, Book 16, Title 10, 11 <https://droitromain.univ-grenoble-alpes.fr/Constitutiones/CTh16.html#10>
- [11] Roger C. Blockley, *The Division of Armenia between the Romans and the Persians at the End of the Fourth Century A.D*, *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte*, 1987, 36(2), pp.222-234. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4436006>.
- [12] Faustus of Byzantium, *P'awstos Buzand's History of the Armenians*, <http://www.attalus.org/armenian/pbtoc.html>
- [13] Chap. II. *Ancient History, An Encyclopedia of World History*, Houghton Mifflin Company Boston, 1952.