

Nicholas Baker-Brian: *The Reign of Constantius II*. Abingdon/New York: Routledge 2023. XXII, 414 p., 4 ill., 3 family trees, 3 maps. £ 145.00/\$ 190.00. ISBN: 978-1-03-201042-7.

In the autumn of 2017 together with colleagues at University College Cork I organised two workshops, the first on the emperor Constantine, and the second on Constantine's most successful heir, Constantius II. The attendance at the first dwarfed the second, despite the same promotion, similar speakers, and logistics. As we wondered why, one of the attendees suggested that Constantius II was always going to struggle to get the same attention as his father, indicating that he had only come to the second workshop out of curiosity and in fact that he had barely even heard of Constantius II – despite knowing a considerable amount about Constantine. This suggestion is certainly borne out in both the popular and scholarly attention that the two emperors have received to date. Nicholas Baker-Brian's *'The Reign of Constantius II'*, following in the wake of Muriel Moser-Gerber's *'Emperor and Senators in the Reign of Constantius II'*<sup>1</sup> will go a long way towards redressing some of Constantius' neglect. Over the course of nine chapters Baker-Brian plumbs the intriguing depths to Constantius' reign. Throughout he does well to keep his focus more or less on Constantius, even as attention is necessarily devoted to others, including Constantius' co-emperors, his brothers, Constans and Constantine II, and cousins, Gallus and Julian. Below I offer synopses of each chapter, and then conclude with a couple of overall comments.

Chapter 1 "Introduction: the Roman empire of Constantine's sons" (pp. 1–25) provides a detailed overview of Constantius' reign, drawing attention the multiple and complex difficulties that Constantius encountered over those twenty-four years, including usurpations, wars on multiple frontiers, and growing tension between the imperial government and the increasingly more powerful and assertive ecclesiastical figures. Baker-Brian then pivots to what will be the main gist for his mill, not the events of Constantius' reign, but how he was depicted in texts, both literary and non-literary. This is a clever focus as it brings to the fore the manifold nature of his depiction in the

1 M. Moser: *Emperors and Senators in the Reign of Constantius II. Maintaining Imperial Rule Between Rome and Constantinople in the Fourth Century*. Cambridge 2018 (Cambridge Classical Studies), reviewed by J. Weisweiler: *Plekos* 22, 2020, pp. 291–296, URL: <http://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2020/r-moser.pdf>.

source material, from the subtle condemnation of Ammianus, to the more blatant censure of Athanasius or Lucifer, to various panegyrics, and many more in between. In this respect Baker-Brian's *Constantius* usefully extends the "representational approach" (p. 17) of Diederik Burgersdijk and Alan Ross by combining it with recent assessments of imperial legitimacy.<sup>2</sup>

Chapter 2 "Seeing and reading the sons of Constantine" (pp. 26–63) issues a direct challenge to the evidentiary value of epideictic texts, a challenge that is made all the stronger by Baker-Brian's use of Jan Willem Drijvers' distinction between auto- and hetero-images, the former being those generated either by an emperor or their administration, and the latter coming from others.<sup>3</sup> This distinction enables Baker-Brian to sort the extensive source material, and focus in this chapter on what the numismatic, epigraphic, and iconographic evidence offers. This is an important, albeit relatively short, chapter, given the focus of the rest of the book tends to be on the hetero-images, and especially, the more literary textual evidence.

Chapter 3 "Writing Constantius II" (pp. 64–107) analyses the wide range of literary sources that describe Constantius' reign from 337 to 361. Baker-Brian does well to focus on "the multiplicity of narratives" (p. 64) rather than bemoan the absence of a single authoritative account especially for the years of Constantius' reign (337–353) that were presumably covered by Ammianus' presumably lost books.<sup>4</sup> Occasionally Baker-Brian has recourse to critiquing modes of scholarly inquiry that are well and truly dated and of marginal relevance given the important studies of the last three decades on the complex dynamics of praise. The usual suspects (e.g. Themistius, Libanius, Ammianus) all receive extensive treatment, as one is to expect, but Baker-Brian also analyses some more *recherché* material, including Proba's lost cento on Constantius' war with Magnentius (pp. 82–83).

2 D. W. P. Burgersdijk/A. J. Ross: Introduction. In: D. W. P. Burgersdijk/A. J. Ross (eds.): *Imagining Emperors in the Later Roman Empire*. Leiden/Boston 2018 (*Cultural Interactions in the Mediterranean* 1), pp. 1–17.

3 J. W. Drijvers: Jovian between History and Myth. In: Burgersdijk/Ross (eds.) (note 2), pp. 234–256, at p. 239.

4 R. Rees: Intertitles as Deliberate Misinformation in Ammianus Marcellinus. In: L. Jansen (ed.): *The Roman Paratext: Frame, Texts, Readers*. Cambridge 2014, pp. 129–142 suggests that Ammianus' 'lost books' may never have been written.

Chapter 4 “Making and shaping a dynasty” (pp. 108–157) explores how Constantinian sources repeated Constantine’s efforts to define and assert a dynasty. The placement of this chapter feels a little out of place, given its chronological purview is the earliest, but perhaps Baker-Brian felt that Chapter 4 needed to introduce the reader to Constantine’s dynastic creation which paved the way for Constantius’. Baker-Brian offers a detailed analysis of Constantine’s dynastic planning in the lead up to his death in 337. Some discussion of Philostorgius’ claim that Constantine’s daughter, Constantina, was bestowed with the rank of Augusta prior to his death would have been welcome here, especially given her subsequent involvement in imperial politics (Baker-Brian does this later pp. 239–243, but if Philostorgius is right, is Constantina’s meddling in imperial politics simply her following through on her father’s advice and instructions to keep the boys in line?). The analysis of the relationship between Constantine II, Constantius II, and Constans prior to and after the death of their father is a real highlight (pp. 136–147) of the chapter and indeed the book.

Chapter 5 “Upholding the legacy: the dynasty between 340–350” (pp. 158–218) explores how Constantius’ relationship with his brother and fellow emperor Constans was celebrated as a harmonious political union. Baker-Brian cleverly highlights how the messaging in favour of Constantius II exploited Constans’ death at the hands of the usurper Magnentius. Here Baker-Brian delves deeper, showing in detail what can be pieced together about Constans’ reign to elucidate which elements of his image are Constantinian and what may be taken as an accurate reflection of his reign, especially with regards to Constans’ attempts to “[deepen] imperial sponsorship of the Church” (p. 171). In his assessment of Constans the legal evidence is key and Baker-Brian uses this well to make his case.

Chapter 6 “New faces, old enemies” (pp. 219–273) charts the significant challenges that confronted Constantius in the 350s, including the usurpations of Magnentius, Vetrano, and Nepotianus, and the war with Persia. Baker-Brian’s assessment is rightly sympathetic towards Constantius’ predicament, but he still devotes considerable attention to others, including by showing how Magnentius tried to graft his rule on to the Constantinian dynasty. Throughout the chapter Baker-Brian moves seamlessly from the numismatic evidence to literary texts, and profitably demonstrates the benefits of a synthesised approach, especially to the usurpers, for whom the evidence is unsurprisingly somewhat limited. The chapter concludes by highlighting

the systemic factors that exacerbated the instability that Constantius experienced during his reign, and so provides a useful setup for the chapters that follow.

Chapter 7 “Sole Augustus” (pp. 274–320) analyses Constantius’ reign in the early to mid-350s. Baker-Brian’s analysis is again thought provoking, but at times he may have offered the reader some further ways of reconciling conflicting evidence. For example, in the case of Constantius’ involvement in the battle of Mursa, Baker-Brian merely notes the discrepancy between Sulpicius Severus’ *Chronicle*, which placed Constantius at some distance from the battlefield, and Julian’s (and to a lesser extent Zonaras’) account, which claimed Constantius was present. Is this a case of Sulpician bias against Constantius, and if so, how should it be understood, as another example of the Arian Constantius being judged by an orthodox writer, or simply a manifestation of Sulpicius’ general tendency to dislike imperial figures, orthodox or otherwise? Similarly, Sulpicius’ depiction of the bishop Valens might have been contextualised by Sulpicius’ attitude to episcopal power elsewhere in his corpus. The remainder of the chapter assesses Constantius’ relationships with his Caesar, Gallus and Athanasius, the controversial bishop. Baker-Brian tends to go wherever the evidence leads, which while no-doubt very interesting, has the tendency to result in extensive discussion that is not clearly nor strictly relevant to a chapter’s purpose. For example, the analysis of Gallus’ connections to Eastern Christians (pp. 298–303) which leads to discussion of Apollo and then Theophilus ‘The Indian’ may well have been considerably shortened. Conversely, the discussion of Constantius’ interactions with Athanasius and other clerical figures (pp. 306–310) feels somewhat rushed, although perhaps Baker-Brian felt less inclined to traverse in detail ground that was so well trodden by Timothy Barnes.

Chapter 8 “War and little peace: Constantius II’s final years” (pp. 321–376) begins more or less with Constantius’ promotion of Julian to the rank of Caesar and ends with Constantius’ death following Julian’s proclamation by his men to the rank of Augustus. At the beginning of the chapter Baker-Brian highlights the difficulty in determining whether sources were simply being anti-Constantius or pro-Julian, given one often necessarily entails the other. Ammianus is Baker-Brian’s main source for this material, but his account of this period is read closely and critically. Again Baker-Brian draws attention to the complexity and multiplicity of Constantius’ challenges,

which goes some way towards explaining if not fully excusing the chaos of his final years.

Chapter 9 “Afterword: A funeral and a usurpation” (pp. 377–382) analyses Gregory of Nazianzus’ tempered praise of Constantius in his two orations against Julian. Given the book’s focus is Constantius’ reign, this very short chapter could probably have been cut, or otherwise expanded, if Baker-Brian felt the need to delve into the rich creation and use of Constantius’ place in historical memory through the remainder of the fourth century.

This book is very well researched, contains many valuable insights, and no doubt will be of tremendous use to a wide range of readers from undergraduates through to specialists. At times the details can bog the reader down, especially when Baker-Brian is carefully analysing ground that appears somewhat tangential. I wonder if another structure may have helped here, one that was more thematic rather than largely chronologically, given Baker-Brian seems at times confined rather than empowered by the chronological limits of certain chapters. Constantius’ interaction with ecclesiastical figures receives minimal treatment. This is a missed opportunity, especially given Pedro Barceló’s “Constantius II. und seine Zeit: Die Anfänge des Staatskirchentums”, despite its title, similarly gives limited space to an important dynamic of Constantius’ reign (and an important part of how his reign was written about and remembered).<sup>5</sup>

Overall Baker-Brian should be applauded for a fine scholarly achievement.

5 For this criticism of Barceló’s book see W. Portmann: Review of P. Barceló: Constantius II. und seine Zeit: Die Anfänge des Staatskirchentums. Stuttgart 2004. In: H-Soz-u-Kult, 18. 10. 2004, URL: <https://www.hsozkult.de/publication-review/id/reb-5867>.

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