

Online Research @ Cardiff

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/24524/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Tougher, Shaun Fitzroy ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5261-4715> 2000. Ammianus Marcellinus on the Empress Eusebia: a Split Personality? Greece & Rome (Second Series) 47 (1) , pp. 94-101. 10.1093/gr/47.1.94 file

Publishers page: <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract...>
<[http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?](http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=4427324)
fromPage=online&aid=4427324>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies.

See

<http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



Greece & Rome

<http://journals.cambridge.org/GAR>

Additional services for **Greece & Rome**:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



Ammianus Marcellinus on the Empress Eusebia: a Split Personality?

Shaun Tougher

Greece & Rome / Volume 47 / Issue 01 / April 2000, pp 94 - 101
DOI: 10.1093/gr/47.1.94, Published online: 07 September 2009

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0017383500024657

How to cite this article:

Shaun Tougher (2000). Ammianus Marcellinus on the Empress Eusebia: a Split Personality?. Greece & Rome, 47, pp 94-101 doi:10.1093/gr/47.1.94

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

AMMIANUS MARCELLINUS ON THE EMPRESS EUSEBIA: A SPLIT PERSONALITY?*

By SHAUN TOUGHER

The Roman empress Eusebia, wife of the Christian emperor Constantius II (A.D. 337–361), owes what fame she enjoys amongst historians to her role in the life of Julian the Apostate, the last pagan emperor (361–363); in the years 354–355 the empress emerged as the saviour and advocate of her (still in the closet) pagan in-law. However in this article I wish to focus exclusively on the treatment of the empress Eusebia in the history of Ammianus Marcellinus, the great historian of Late Antiquity and himself a devotee of Julian.¹ This treatment merits attention not just for the undoubtedly interesting fact that Eusebia is one of the few female characters to surface in the history,² but also because in the history the empress is cast in seemingly different personae. She is the kind and beautiful empress, akin to the image Julian himself created of her in his *Speech of Thanks* to Eusebia, written in commemoration of his salvation at her hands;³ but she is also a devious player, as we find too in Zosimus' treatment of the empress, though in Ammianus her deviousness is malevolent. It is this contradictory characterization aspect of the treatment that I wish to explore here. For whilst general attempts have been made to reconcile these images in the context of political history,⁴ the repercussions for our understanding of Ammianus have been little explored. How can the historian let these contrasting images co-exist? Has he merely assembled his history clumsily, or is there a more rewarding explanation for the impression of the empress's split personality?

First some context. Following the death of Constantine the Great in 337 the Roman Empire was shared between Constantine's three sons Constantine, Constantius, and Constans (most of Constantine's other male relatives having been conveniently massacred in Constantinople by the military). By 350 Constantius found himself the last son and heir alive, and thus faced with the difficulty of establishing sole power and of dealing with two problematic frontiers simultaneously. His solution was to share power with a Caesar; he chose his cousin Gallus, one of the few male relatives to survive the massacre of 337. In 351 Gallus was

despatched to the East, where he resided at Antioch. This left Constantius free to deal with the West, where he crushed the rebel Magnentius in 353. At this time he also married again, taking as his bride Eusebia, a native of Thessalonike.⁵ Shortly afterwards Constantius' power-sharing scheme foundered when Gallus fell into disfavour; he was recalled from the East, and executed in 354.

It is in the aftermath of this fall of Gallus that the empress Eusebia plays her famous part, when Julian himself was summoned to the court at Milan, under suspicion due to his connection with Gallus (he was the latter's half-brother, another survivor of the massacre of 337). The typical reconstruction of the events of Julian's life and Eusebia's role in it during the years 354–355 plays as follows. Julian was reconciled with Constantius and then liberated, due to the influence of Eusebia, who had secured an audience for Julian with her husband. Julian's subsequent residence at Athens, where he attended the university, was also due to the suggestion of the empress. And when Julian was swiftly recalled to court again, it was with the encouragement of Eusebia that he accepted the offer of the position of Caesar, an offer that the empress herself supported if not even suggested. Julian was elevated to the Caesarship on 6 November 355, and was posted to Gaul with a wife (Helena, the sister of the emperor Constantius) and also with a gift from the empress Eusebia of a collection of books, which seems famously to have pleased him more. Subsequently it was in Gaul in 360 that Julian found himself acclaimed Augustus by his troops, contrary to the wishes of Constantius. The prospect of civil war however was resolved by the sudden death of Constantius in 361 as he was returning from the East to confront Julian.

For the details of the interventionist role of the empress Eusebia in 354 and 355 we have significant source material. Julian himself has left us both his *Speech of Thanks* to Eusebia (probably written shortly after his arrival in Gaul as Caesar) and his *Letter to the Athenians* of 361, written after the death of the empress and justifying his opposition to Constantius. The major historian of the period, Ammianus Marcellinus, also documents Eusebia's role. And there is also the testimony of the late fifth/early sixth-century chronicler Zosimus, based on that of the fourth/early fifth-century pagan historian Eunapius of Sardis, a younger contemporary of Ammianus.⁶ However whilst Julian explains the actions of the empress (more fully in the *Speech of Thanks*) in terms of her virtuous and philanthropic character, Zosimus (dealing only with the elevation of Julian to the Caesarship, not the initial protection in 354) preserves a strikingly different image – that of an uncommonly well-educated

intelligent and manipulative woman.⁷ He reports that Eusebia, believing that it would be for the good of the Empire that Julian be sent to Gaul as Caesar, had however to couch her argument in terms designed to appeal to her suspicious husband. She argues that Julian is a safe candidate to rely on, and benefit will result from his appointment either way; if Julian is lucky his successes will be ascribed to Constantius, and if he fails and dies he will thus be rid of as an imperial rival. As for Ammianus, he has elements in common with both Julian and Zosimus; Eusebia appears as both simply kind and politically aware.⁸ He also has the additional possibility that Eusebia was merely seeking to avoid having to travel to Gaul herself.

These different images have led historians to be preoccupied with explaining why Eusebia acted as she did. Paschoud suggests that the empress was indeed moved by contradictory sentiments, including a sincere interest in Julian and a concern for the western frontier.⁹ Drinkwater has also looked beyond the image of the kind Eusebia, throwing into the ring deeper political motives of her own.¹⁰ Aujoulat accepts that the altruistic image is not sufficient, and suggests political motivations, but also the possibility of intellectual sympathy between the empress and Julian. I too have explored the topic, favouring political motivation, but suggesting that the emperor Constantius lies behind the empress's actions rather than automatically accepting that Eusebia was acting as a free agent.¹¹

But there is here not just the question of the motivations of an historical person, but also an issue of historiography. It is the issue of historiography as it relates particularly to Ammianus Marcellinus that I wish to explore. This historian preserves both positive and negative images of Eusebia in his single text. In his history the striking contradiction in the account of the character of Eusebia is found between Book 16.10.18–19 and Book 21.6.4.¹²

In the latter Ammianus records the marriage of the emperor Constantius to Faustina in the year 361, which leads him to mention that Eusebia has died. He then refers back to her role in the salvation and elevation of Julian, and attributes her with beauty of character and a kindly nature.

In the former passage however, in the context of the triumphal visit of Constantius to Rome in 357, Ammianus credits Eusebia (having summoned Julian's wife Helena to Rome) with ensuring the childlessness of Julian by making his wife drink a potion that would cause her to miscarry whenever she conceived. Ammianus implies that

Eusebia was motivated by her own childlessness, and adds a further story concerning the death of Helena's baby son earlier in Gaul, due to the cutting of the umbilical cord to a deadly extent by a bribed midwife; in this added story though it is not made explicit who did the bribing.¹³

Thus in Ammianus a Eusebia who is kindly by nature co-exists with one who is malevolently selfish, deceiving and drugging her sister-in-law to ensure that she will have no children; the image polarizes dramatically between the panegyric and the stereotype of the evil empress, so familiar from Tacitus.¹⁴

Given such a striking contradiction it seems odd that ancient historians have largely ignored it. Of students of Julian, for example, Bidez does not tackle it,¹⁵ Bowersock makes no comment,¹⁶ and neither does Athanassiadi.¹⁷ Aujoulat does dwell on the episode of Eusebia ensuring the childlessness of Helena, but is generally more interested in historicity than historiography, believing Ammianus' account here.¹⁸ Of students of Ammianus Thompson notes the contradiction but says no more,¹⁹ Blockley says nothing,²⁰ while Matthews merely comments that the story of the poisoning of Helena by Eusebia comes as a 'discreditable shock', and rejects it as 'an unsupported fragment of court gossip'.²¹ Sabbah does touch on Ammianus' general treatment of Eusebia but fails to engage with the contradiction.²² Barnes is content to refer to Aujoulat.²³ Of the commentaries de Jong notes the contradiction raised by 16.10.18, but does not expand,²⁴ and Szidat contents himself with a reference to a comment by Rosen,²⁵ which den Boeft, den Hengst, and Teitler also allude to (though without highlighting any contradiction).²⁶ In fact Rosen is one of only two ancient historians, as far as I am aware, who have commented explicitly on the contradiction; the other is Aujoulat.

Rosen's comment is brief.²⁷ He simply stresses that the history of Ammianus is of course literature, and not a contradiction-free zone, a point Barnes has highlighted.²⁸ Certainly other ancient historians are not lacking in contradictions; for instance, Hornblower remarks that Herodotus' assessment of the Spartan king Cleomenes alters between the king being the 'most just of men' (3.148) and in fact being off his head (5.42 and 6).²⁹ Rosen reiterates Blockley's view that Ammianus is essentially a pragmatic historian.

Aujoulat also seeks to minimize the contradiction, treating it as more apparent than real. It is suggested that Ammianus only wanted to see Eusebia as the benefactress of his hero Julian, so shut his eyes to the empress's machinations against Helena when it came to his comment in Book 21 on Eusebia's role in the events of 354–355.³⁰

However these direct comments fail to provide a resolution to the tense contradiction, despite highlighting that we are surely dealing with the issue of Ammianus' motivations as a writer.³¹ Rosen's assessment is evidently true, but then fails to explore why Eusebia is treated in this pragmatic fashion. Aujoulat's explanation falls down in part by failing to account for the fact that Ammianus himself recorded the crime of Eusebia against Helena; why did he not screen it out altogether? But the explanation is also found wanting in that it fails to do justice to Ammianus' general view of Eusebia, for beyond the poles of heroine and villainess the empress is a neutral, even ambiguous, figure. At 17.7.6 Ammianus merely records that Constantius created the diocese Pietas in honour of his wife. At 18.3.2 we find the story of Assyria the wife of the Master of Infantry Barbatio, who fears that her husband will marry the physically beautiful Eusebia on the death of the emperor. More significantly at 15.2.7–8 Eusebia's initial befriending of Julian in 354 is ascribed to the favour of divine power – something beyond human control, beyond Eusebia's choice.³² Most interesting of all, when Ammianus details the support of Eusebia for the proposal that Julian be made Caesar and sent to Gaul (15.8.1–3) he leaves her motivations unclear, undecided between whether she feared travelling to Gaul or was thinking of the good of the state.³³ Thus the issue becomes even more focused on the polarities presented in Books 16 and 21. Why at these points does Ammianus commit himself to such strong, and contrasting, views of the empress?

The image of Eusebia as the wicked deceiver in Book 16 is perhaps easier to understand. Here Ammianus seeks to provide an explanation for why his hero Julian failed to have a son and heir by Helena, perhaps a crucial issue for pagan supporters of Julian, whose reign was cut short by his death on the Persian expedition and who had signally failed to attend to the matter of the succession. Eusebia, childless herself but presumably the respository for Constantius' desires for a successor of his own blood, is moved to prevent Helena and Julian producing a rival imperial child. The story of the bribed midwife conjures up, it seems, a wider plot to avoid this possibility. For Ammianus Constantius was the archetypal tyrant³⁴ – suspicious, a prey to unethical favourites – and in Book 16 Eusebia emerges as the appropriate scheming wife. It is surely telling that in Ammianus' necrology for Constantius the emperor is damned for having been excessively influenced not just by courtiers and eunuchs but also by wives.³⁵

Ironically, given its greater familiarity, the positive view of Eusebia is

more problematic to account for. Aujoulat's view that it was prompted out of interest in Julian is, as I have argued, hard to accept given the rather different and uncommitted view of Eusebia's motivations in 354–355 presented earlier in the history, and the fact that Ammianus does not consistently close his eyes to Eusebia's crime. The problem is compounded by the fact that Ammianus is the only extant source to relate this overtly negative detail about the empress.

However an explanation can be found for the positive view of Eusebia when it is appreciated that Julian is not the only figure of interest for Ammianus at 21.6.4. The passage may end with a reference back to Julian, but it incorporates also a reference to Eusebia's brothers, the ex-consuls Eusebius and Hypatius.³⁶ The empress's brothers, especially Hypatius, occupy Ammianus elsewhere.

They are first mentioned at the start of Ammianus' account of the year 356 (18.1.1), naturally enough since they were the consuls for that year. But they are also bound up here with an up-beat, positive assessment of affairs at that time; not only were affairs in Gaul in a better condition due to Julian, who was now able to turn from campaigning to domestic concerns, but the brothers were also consuls. Eusebius and Hypatius reappear in Book 29.2.9 as 'that admirable pair of consuls' ('*egregium illud par consulum*') who were caught up in the treason trials at Antioch under the emperor Valens (364–378) in the years 371–372. They were accused of having imperial ambitions, put on trial, and though innocent were fined and exiled, only to be recalled and restored a short time later. Ammianus dwells particularly on Hypatius at 29.2.16 in the context of Valens' compelling of distinguished men to attend on the bier of the man who had been the chief accuser during the treason trials, Heliodorus. The historian remarks: 'Conspicuous among all of these was our ('*noster*') Hypatius, a man recommended from his youth by noble virtues, of quiet and calm discretion, and of a nobility and gentleness measured as it were by the plumb-line; he conferred honour on the fame of his ancestors and himself gave glory to posterity by the admirable acts of his two prefectures.'³⁷

Ammianus thus presents a consistently favourable and positive view of Eusebia's brothers, in marked contrast to his treatment of their sister the empress Eusebia herself. As noted, Ammianus praised especially the figure of Hypatius; the personal bias, and personal connection, here is unmistakable. It is clear that Ammianus was also present in Antioch at the time of the treason trials, and was possibly in danger himself.³⁸ Hypatius' prefectures also provide a link with Ammianus. Hypatius was

prefect in Rome in 379 and Praetorian Prefect of Italy in 382 and 383, and thus has been nominated as a contact for Ammianus during his own time in the West at Rome, if not even a patron of the historian. It is this background which makes sense of the one unambiguously positive view of Eusebia found in the history of Ammianus Marcellinus.³⁹ The passage in question (21.6.4) is distinguished, not by its reference to Julian, but rather to Hypatius and Eusebius. The consistently lauded brothers, linked explicitly with Eusebia here, lead Ammianus to commit himself to the positive view of their imperial sister.

To conclude, Ammianus' contradictoriness concerning the character of the empress Eusebia can be explained by the fact that as a writer he was prey to a vortex of differing motivations – his hostility to Constantius and his court, his idolization of Julian, and his partiality for the siblings of Eusebia – Eusebius and Hypatius. It is Ammianus, not Eusebia, who emerges as the split personality.

NOTES

*This is a revised version of a paper delivered at the annual conference of the Classical Association, Liverpool 1999.

1. For Ammianus see J. Matthews, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus* (London, 1989), and now T. D. Barnes, *Ammianus Marcellinus and the Representation of Historical Reality* (Ithaca and London, 1998).

2. Discussed by G. Sabbah, 'Présences Féminines dans l'Histoire d'Ammien Marcellin', *Cognitio Gestorum. The Historiographic Art of Ammianus Marcellinus*, edd. J. den Boeft, D. den Hengst and H. C. Teitler (Amsterdam/Oxford/New York/Toronto, 1992), 91–105, and Barnes (n. 1), 120–8.

3. For the speech see Tougher, 'In Praise of an Empress: Julian's *Speech of Thanks* to Eusebia' in *The Propaganda of Power. The Role of Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, ed. Mary Whitby (Leiden/Boston/Köln, 1998), 105–23.

4. See below for further details.

5. For Eusebia see *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* I, edd. A. H. M. Jones, J. R. Martindale, and J. Morris (Cambridge, 1971), 300–1. See also N. Aujoulat, 'Eusébie, Hélène et Julien. I Le témoignage de Julien', *Byzantion* 58 (1983), 78–103 and 'Eusébie, Hélène et Julien. II Le témoignage des historiens', *Byzantion* 58 (1983), 421–52.

6. On Eunapius see R. C. Blockley, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire* I (Liverpool, 1981), 1–26; F. Paschoud, ed. tr., *Zosime, Histoire Nouvelle*, II.1 (Paris, 1979), xi.

7. Zosimus 3.1.2–3 and 3.2.3. In the latter Eusebia persuades Constantius to let Julian govern Gaul alone, using the same arguments.

8. For the question of the relationship between the texts of Eunapius and Ammianus see for instance Matthews (n. 1), 164–75.

9. As well as her hope of providing a male heir for her as yet childless husband.

10. J. F. Drinkwater, 'The Pagan "Underground", Constantius II's "Secret Service", and the Survival, and the Usurpation of Julian the Apostate' in *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History* II, ed. C. Deroux (Brussels, 1983), 348–87 esp. 368.

11. Tougher, 'The Advocacy of an Empress: Julian and Eusebia', *CQ* 48 (1998), 595–9.

12. For characterization in Ammianus generally see D. A. Pauw, 'Methods of Character

Portrayal in the *Res Gestae* of Ammianus Marcellinus', *Acta Classica* 20 (1977), 181–98. Pauw however does not discuss the characterization of Eusebia.

13. Though J. Bidez, *La Vie de l'empereur Julien* (Paris, 1930) assumes that Eusebia was behind it.
14. See, for example, S. Usher, *The Historians of Greece and Rome* (London, 1969), 212–14.
15. Bidez (n. 13).
16. G. W. Bowerstock, *Julian the Apostate* (London, 1978).
17. P. Athanassiadi, *Julian. An Intellectual Biography* (London and New York, 1992).
18. Aujoulat, 'Eusébie, Hélène et Julien. II Le témoignage des historiens' (n. 5), esp. 434–8.
19. E. A. Thompson, *The Historical Work of Ammianus Marcellinus* (Cambridge, 1947), 20–1.
20. Blockley, *Ammianus Marcellinus. A Study of his Historiography and Political Thought* (Brussels, 1975).
21. Mathews (n. 1), 86.
22. Sabbah, *La Méthode d'Ammien Marcellin* (Paris, 1978), 220 and n. 4. In 'Présences Féminines dans l'Histoire d'Ammien Marcellin' (n. 2) he simply refers to Aujoulat.
23. Barnes (n. 1), 121–2.
24. P. de Jong, *Philological and Historical Commentary on Ammianus Marcellinus XVI* (Groningen, 1972).
25. J. Szidat, *Historischer Kommentar zu Ammianus Marcellinus, Buch XX–XXI*, III, *Historia Einzelschriften* 89 (Stuttgart, 1996), 54–5.
26. J. den Boeft, D. den Hengst, H. C. Teitler, *Philological and Historical Commentary on Ammianus Marcellinus XXI* (Groningen, 1991), 81.
27. K. Rosen, *Ammianus Marcellinus* (Darmstadt, 1982), 114–15.
28. See, for instance, Barnes, 'Literary Convention, Nostalgia and Reality in Ammianus Marcellinus' in *Reading the Past in Late Antiquity*, ed. G. Clarke *et al.* (Rushcutters Bay, 1990), 59–92; *Ammianus and the Representation of Historical Reality*.
29. S. Hornblower, *Thucydides* (London, 1987), 25.
30. Aujoulat, 'Eusébie, Hélène et Julien. II Le témoignage des historiens' (n. 5), 450 remarks that posterity tends to have the (positive) eyes of Julian and Ammianus when it comes to Eusebia.
31. An anonymous referee to a previous article suggested to me that Ammianus is simply presenting a deterioration in Eusebia's character due to the corrupting influence of the court, but this fails to convince for there is not a linear development in his presentation of the empress's character. Ammianus shifts from ambiguity to negativity then to positivity, as I shall stress below.
32. This recalls Julian himself, as noted by Sabbah, *La Méthode d'Ammien Marcellin*, 300 n. 21.
33. See also Sabbah (n. 22), 529 and n. 59.
34. See Teitler, 'Ammianus and Constantius. Image and Reality' in *Cognito Gestorum* (n. 2), 117–22. See also Michael Whitby and Tougher in *The Late Roman World and its Historian: Interpreting Ammianus Marcellinus*, edd. J. W. Drijvers and D. Hunt (London and New York, 1999), 64–73 and 77–88.
35. 21.16.16.
36. For these figures see Jones, Martindale, and Morris (n. 5), 308–9 and 448–9.
37. Trans. J. C. Rolfe, *Ammianus Marcellinus* III (London/Cambridge, Mass., 1952), 225.
38. 29.2.4.
39. Realised by Barnes (n. 1), 122.