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AMMIANUS MARCELLINUS 21.6.3: A MISUNDERSTOOD OMEN

Ammianus Marcellinus is our sole source for a curious incident that apparently occurred during the winter of 360/61. The emperor Constantius II had returned to Antioch in Syria following an unsuccessful campaign against the Persians and intended to winter there (20.11.32). A delegation was duly appointed to welcome him as he arrived, but this included one most unwelcome face (21.6.2–3):

Cum igitur a Mesopotamia reversus, Constantius hoc exciperetur officio, Amphilocheius quidam ex tribuno Paphlago, quem dudum sub Constante militantem discordiarum sevisse causas inter priores, fratres, suspiciones contiguae veritati pulsabant, ausus paulo petulantius stare, ut ipse quoque ad parile obsequium admittendus, agnitus est et prohibitus, strepentibusque multis, et intueri lucem ulterius non debere clamantibus, ut perduellem, et obstinatum, Constantius circa haec lenior solito, “Desinite” ait “urgere hominem ut existimo sontem, sed nondum aperte convictum, et mementote quod, si quid admisit huius modi, sub obtutibus meis conscientiae ipsius sententia punietur, quam latere non poterit,” et ita discessum est. Postridie ludis Circensibus idem ex adverso imperatoris (ubi consueverat) spectans, repentino clamore sublato, cum certamen opinatum emitteretur, diffractis cancellis, quibus una cum pluribus incumbibat, cunctis cum eo in vanum excussis laesisque leviter paucis, interna compage disrupta, efflasset spiritum repertus est solus, unde Constantius ut futurorum quoque praescius exsultabat.

Therefore when Constantius, on his return from Mesopotamia, was received with this attention, Amphilocheius, a former tribune from Paphlagonia, who had served long before under Constans and was under well-founded suspicion of having sown the seeds of discord between the deceased brothers, having dared to appear somewhat arrogantly, as if he also ought to be admitted to this service, was recognised and forbidden. And when many raised an outcry and shouted that he ought not to be allowed longer to look upon the light of day, being a stiff-necked traitor, Constantius, milder than usual on this occasion, said: “Cease to trouble a man who is, I believe, guilty, but has not yet been openly convicted; and remember that if he has committed anything of that kind, so long as he is in my sight he will be punished by the judgement of his own conscience, from which he will be unable to hide.” And that was the end of it. On the next day, at the games in the Circus, the same man was looking on from a place opposite the emperor, where he usually sat. And when the expected contest began and a sudden shout was raised, the railing on which with many others he was leaning broke, and he with all the rest fell to the ground; and while a few were slightly injured, he alone was found to have suffered internal injuries and to have given up the ghost, whereat Constantius rejoiced greatly, as if he had a knowledge of future events also.¹

1. Text and translation from J. C. Rolfe, *Ammianus Marcellinus II*, Loeb Classical Library, 315 (Cambridge, Mass., 1940), 116–19.

The purpose of this note is to investigate the reason why Constantius rejoiced at the death of Amphilochius and, more specifically, to investigate the identity of the events about which he thought he had gained or displayed foreknowledge. It is noteworthy that Ammianus explains neither of these matters himself: he leaves it to the reader to deduce these details from the wider literary context. The result has been confusion, since two quite distinct approaches to this passage are possible. The first, that adopted by most modern commentators, interprets the death of Amphilochius as the fulfillment of Constantius' claim only the previous day that his own conscience would punish Amphilochius for his crime should he ever dare to appear in his sight.² Therefore, to the extent that these words were fulfilled, Constantius seems to have displayed prophetic powers. The question that we must then ask concerns Ammianus' attitude toward this apparent display of prophetic powers. Does he accept that Constantius did indeed reveal prophetic powers on this occasion, or is he somehow holding him up to ridicule?

There are several objections to the former variant of this interpretation, that Ammianus accepts that Constantius displayed genuine prophetic powers at the occasion of Amphilochius' death. The first and most obvious objection is that this is inconsistent with Ammianus' general attitude otherwise to Constantius.³ His summation of the life and character of Constantius, in which he devotes half as much space again to his faults (21.16.8–18) as to his virtues (21.16.1–7), concludes a narrative that consistently depicts Constantius as luxurious, cruel, and easily influenced, so that there can be no doubt that Ammianus regards Constantius as a poor emperor. In contrast, the emperor Julian, against whom Constantius was preparing to fight a civil war at this very period, is consistently depicted as austere, scrupulously just, and independent minded.⁴ Furthermore, Ammianus' own attitude toward divination is extremely positive. He is keen to defend the various forms of divination and is very proud of the accomplishments of Julian in the various sciences of divination.⁵ On general grounds alone, therefore, it seems strange that Ammianus should allow any powers of divination at all to an emperor for whom he has such little regard. It is

2. This interpretation reveals itself in the use of the term "confirmation" in the Penguin Classics translation by W. Hamilton, *Ammianus Marcellinus: The Later Roman Empire (AD 354–78)* (Harmondsworth, England, 1986), 214: "Constantius was overjoyed at this apparent confirmation of his ability to foresee the future." Rolfe's translation better preserves the exact meaning of the original Latin in this respect at least. See also J. den Boeft, D. den Hengst, and H. C. Teitler, *Philological and Historical Commentary on Ammianus Marcellinus XXI* (Groningen, 1991), 74–81. An alternative interpretation is offered by L. Cracco Ruggini ("The Ecclesiastical Histories and the Pagan Historiography: Providence and Miracles," *Athenaeum* 55 [1977]: 107–26; see p. 115, n. 39), who describes the death of Amphilochius as a "bizarre incident" and claims that Constantius punished Amphilochius "by the sole supernatural power of his look."

3. In general, see M. Whitby, "Images of Constantius," in *The Late Roman World and Its Historian: Interpreting Ammianus Marcellinus*, ed. J. W. Drijvers and D. Hunt (London, 1999), 77–88.

4. See R. C. Blockley, *Ammianus Marcellinus: A Study of His Historiography and Political Thought*, Collection Latomus, 141 (Brussels, 1975), 49–52.

5. In his scientific digression at 21.1.8–14, Ammianus defends not only the science of divination itself but the competency of Julian also. It has been too little noticed that the "malicious folk" (*malivoli*, 21.1.7) who accuse Julian of practicing evil arts of divination (*pravas artes*) and the "silly commons" (*vanities . . . plebeia*) who question the science of prophecy because one man fell in battle or suffered some other misfortune are both Christians. Here Ammianus defends Julian against the Christian claim that he sacrificed humans for the purposes of divination (e.g., Theodoret *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.21–22, Gregory of Nazianzus *Oratio* 4.92) and that neither he nor his arts were very effective anyway, since he did not even foresee his own death in battle only several months away (e.g., id. *Oratio* 5.13). See also J. H. G. W. Liebeschuetz, "Ammianus, Julian, and Divination," in *Roma renascens: Beiträge zur Spätantike und Rezeptionsgeschichte Ilona Opelt gewidmet*, ed. M. Wissemann (Frankfurt, 1988), 198–213.

even stranger that he should have attributed the particular power of divination to Constantius, which he seems to do according to the present interpretation, since this would require that Constantius was far more gifted or learned than Julian. To explain, if Constantius' words did indeed come true, then he had acted as an oracle, demonstrating powers normally reserved to the holiest of men or women.⁶ In contrast, the task of interpreting the oracle's words was usually left to those less gifted or learned, a duty that they performed with varying degrees of success. Insofar as Ammianus never depicts Julian uttering prophetic statements, it is difficult to believe that he should have intended us to believe Constantius capable of such a feat.

One may also object that Constantius' statement the day before Amphilocheus died is perfectly explicable at its face value in the context that it occurs, lacks the ambiguity that we might normally expect of an oracular statement, and contains nothing preserving the slightest hint as to the nature and circumstances of Amphilocheus' death. Constantius intended to say no more than that consciousness of his guilt would make Amphilocheus very uncomfortable should he ever enter his presence again—that he would suffer terrible mental torment in wondering whether the emperor had finally obtained the necessary proof in order to act against him.

This brings us to the alternative variant of this interpretation, which is not only that Ammianus does intend us to believe that Constantius did himself interpret Amphilocheus' death as the fulfillment of his own statement the previous day—this being why he was so happy at this death—but also that he was somehow holding him up to ridicule for so believing.⁷ The whole purpose of this anecdote, the fact that it is presented as an isolated incident, may be to highlight the notion that one swallow does not a summer make, or that anyone can get lucky once. In this manner, this anecdote may be seen as a complement to Ammianus' earlier explanation of the occasions when the divinatory sciences had seemed to fail their practitioners: a grammarian has sometimes spoken ungrammatically, a musician has sometimes sung out of tune, and a doctor has sometimes proved unable to discover a cure (21.1.13). In brief, single instances of success or failure do not suffice to prove either the ability of the practitioner or the efficacy of the science. Hence, Ammianus' intention here may be to mock the foolishness of Constantius for believing that one could lay claim to prophetic powers on the basis of an isolated coincidence. He may also intend us to contrast the large number of omens that Fate deigned to reveal to Julian at this period with the solitary example of supernatural favor apparently bestowed on Constantius. The implication may be that Constantius was failing to recognize the many omens bestowed on him at this period for what they were. It is only much later in the same book that Ammianus reveals that Constantius was receiving frequent omens about his death, when these had apparently reached such a pitch of frequency and intensity that even

6. Such men and women were normally priests or priestesses. The fact that the old lady who, as Julian entered Vienne in Gaul in 355, prophesied that he would restore the temples (15.8.22) was blind marks her otherworldliness and assimilates her to the legendary Greek seer Tiresias. Doomed leaders did sometimes utter words that were recognized as prophetic in hindsight, as in the cases of Crassus in 53 B.C. (Dio Cass. 40.19.2) and of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C. (Plut. *Caes.* 63). But Constantius' words cannot be recognized as an omen of this kind themselves since they do not relate directly to his death.

7. See R. L. Rike, *Apex Omnium: Religion in the "Res gestae" of Ammianus*, The Transformation of the Classical Heritage, 15 (Berkeley, 1987), p. 22, n. 48. Rike opines that "Ammianus ridicules the emperor's pretension to sacred understanding"; see also J. Szidat, *Historischer Kommentar zu Ammianus Marcellinus Buch XX–XXI*, Teil 3, *Die Konfrontation*, Historia Einzelschriften, 89 (Stuttgart, 1996), 53.

a dullard like Constantius had to realize that something was amiss, although even then he still could not read the omens himself but required interpreters to do so for him (21.14.1–2). There may also be a contrast between the substance or seriousness of the revelations afforded the two rivals, since the omens revealed to Julian concerned great affairs of state—the death of Constantius himself, his rival for power—while the revelation bestowed on Constantius concerned a minor individual in a matter that was really of only personal interest.

It is my argument, however, that both of the above interpretations err insofar as they are variants of the same mistaken approach, which assumes that Constantius interpreted the death of Amphilochius as the fulfillment of his statement the previous day, whether or not Ammianus believed he was correct in so doing. The unexpected, apparently miraculous death of Amphilochius was an omen pointing to the future, rather than the fulfillment of a previous prophetic statement. The reason that Ammianus includes this statement in his anecdote and places such emphasis on it is to prove, first, that the fall of Amphilochius was indeed an omen and, second, that it did indeed bear the meaning that it had seemed to bear. As regards his first aim, truly ominous events distinguish themselves by their miraculous nature, by the lack of any obvious human agency.⁸ So it is, for example, that when Ammianus describes how the fall and death of a priest during the New Year celebrations at Antioch in 363 portended the death of the emperor Julian, he notes both that no one pushed the priest (*nullo pulsante*) and that it was an unlooked-for accident (*insperato casu*) (23.1.6). In this case, therefore, Ammianus has Constantius specifically claim that he will not harm Amphilochius in order to try and allay the suspicions of those who might otherwise be tempted to assume some secret actions on his part, and that imperial agents had arranged for Amphilochius to have his “accident,” not Fate. So the accident was genuine. As regards Ammianus’ second aim, the interpretation of the omen obviously depends on the status of Amphilochius. As we shall see next, Ammianus understood the omen to mean that “the enemy of the emperor will die,” which interpretation obviously requires proof that Amphilochius was in fact the enemy of Constantius. Nothing less than Constantius’ own testimony will do here because, at this point in his narrative, it is difficult to believe that Constantius would ever have let any perceived enemy escape unharmed, so cruel and suspicious was his behavior normally. Indeed, Ammianus seeks to disarm this suspicion by openly confronting it and admitting that Constantius does seem to have acted out of character on this occasion, when he was more lenient than usual (*lenior solito*).

It is my argument, therefore, that the fall and death of Amphilochius, the enemy of the emperor Constantius, was a sign that “the enemy of the emperor will die.”⁹ Not only this, but it was a sign that “the enemy of the emperor will die *without the*

8. Such spontaneous events include fires without human agency (Obsequens 25), temple doors opening by themselves (Obsequens 13), trees straightening themselves (Obsequens 43), and statues moving of their own accord (Dio Cass. 46.33.2–4; Tac. *Ann.* 14.32; Obsequens 65a).

9. J. Fontaine (*Ammien Marcellin: “Histoires,”* Tome 3, *Livres XX–XXI* [Paris, 1996], 216), exhibits some confusion as to Ammianus’ meaning and intention in this passage. On the one hand, he seems to realize that the fall of Amphilochius points to the death of the enemy of the emperor at a time when Constantius was pondering the outcome of a civil war with Julian, even though he neither clarifies who the enemy or the emperor was nor comments at all on the essential ambiguity of this omen. On the other hand, he seems to maintain also that Constantius interpreted the death of Amphilochius as the fulfillment of his words the previous day.

emperor's having to effect this himself." The latter condition was important because it seemed to provide an answer to the very question facing Constantius as he spent the winter of 360/61 in Antioch (21.7.1). He was unsure whether to march westward to confront the rebel Julian straightaway or to spend another year in the East trying to restore order there in the wake of the gains made by the Persians during their invasion of 359. I suspect, therefore, that the reason why Constantius rejoiced at the death of Amphilochius was that he interpreted it as a sign that his enemy, Julian, would die without his having to effect this—that is, that he had no immediate need personally to confront Julian and could remain in the East because Julian was going to die anyway. As we know, however, things did not turn out this way. It was not Julian, but Constantius II himself who died—of a fever at Mopsucrene in Cilicia on 3 November 361—before the rival emperors had a chance to confront one another on the battlefield.¹⁰ Hence, when the omen revealed that the enemy of the emperor would die without the emperor's having to effect this himself, it meant that Constantius, the enemy of the emperor Julian, would die without Julian's having to effect this, rather than that Julian, the enemy of the emperor Constantius, would die without Constantius' having to effect this. In other words, the omen was, at this level at least, ambiguous, capable of two directly contradictory interpretations—in the same tradition, for example, as the answer famously afforded by the oracles of Delphi and Amphiaraus to king Croesus of Lydia, that if he attacked the Persians he would destroy a great empire.¹¹

Two final arguments may be adduced in favor of this new interpretation. The first argument is that it is surely significant that Ammianus reports only that Constantius rejoiced as if he had knowledge of future events and not that others—the usual crowd of flatterers—congratulated him. This fact that no one congratulated him suggests that he was not considered to have done anything himself but that he was only the passive recipient of the same revelation afforded by this omen, the death of Amphilochius, to everyone else in the Circus also.¹² He was not the only one to think that he had just gained an insight into the future, and he rejoiced not because of his mere receipt of this foreknowledge, but because of its apparent contents. The second argument is that Ammianus' decision to describe why exactly Amphilochius was regarded by many as an enemy of Constantius is best explained by the correct interpretation of his death, in hindsight, as already explained. Amphilochius was not just an enemy of the emperor Constantius but an enemy who had separated him from his brother, Constans. So the omen revealed not merely that the enemy of the emperor would die, but that the enemy who had separated the emperor from his brother would die. Since Constantius had separated Julian from his brother Gallus—by keeping them apart during Gallus' last years, as well as by his final execution of Gallus in late 354—and since Julian had never performed likewise, it ought to have been clear that, as far as the omen was concerned, the enemy was Constantius and the emperor was Julian.¹³ Fate had played fair with Constantius, and he might have interpreted

10. Amm. Marc. 21.15.1–3; Soc. Hist. eccl. 2.47.

11. Hdt. 1.53, 86.

12. In contrast, den Boeft et al. (*Ammianus Marcellinus XXI* [n. 2 above], 80) argue that his courtiers probably suggested to Constantius that he was possessed of prophetic powers and refer us to Ammianus' condemnation of their flattery at 15.5.37.

13. See G. W. Bowersock, *Julian the Apostate* (London, 1978), 21–32.

the omen correctly, or so Ammianus seems to suggest, had he studied the matter more carefully.

In conclusion, Ammianus includes the anecdote concerning the death of Amphilo-chius in his text because of its relevance to his wider themes at that point in his narrative. It both continues the series of omens that had already revealed to Julian that Constantius would die, leaving him to rule alone, and is directly relevant to the strategic question facing Constantius as he spent the winter of 360/61 in Antioch. To this extent, it constitutes a well-chosen opening to a section of narrative that redirects our attention from the court of Julian, in the West, to that of Constantius, in the East. He did not choose to tell it simply because it was a “spectacular story, set in his home town,” and it does not show Constantius “for once in a more flattering light.”¹⁴ It was intended as a sharp attack on Constantius, designed to contrast his foolishness in rejoicing at an omen that he had completely misunderstood with the caution and success displayed by Julian in interpreting such signs.

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14. Den Boeft et al., *Ammianus Marcellinus XXI*, 74. It is doubtful in the extreme that Antioch really was Ammianus' hometown. A strong case has recently been made for his origin in Phoenicia. See T. D. Barnes, *Ammianus Marcellinus and the Representation of Historical Reality* (Ithaca, N.Y. 1998), 54–64; see also D. Woods, “Maurus, Mavia, and Ammianus,” *Mnemosyne* 51 (1998): 325–36.