

Res Gestae: Christianity through the Eyes of a Passive Aggressive Pagan

During the 4th century AD the Roman Empire saw major changes when Christianity surpassed paganism as the empire's official religion. The *Res Gestae* of Ammianus Marcellinus, one of the most important sources for this period, provides insight into contemporary anti-Christian views. As a high-ranking member of the Roman army under Christian emperors, Marcellinus had to conceal his paganism, even after retirement. As a result he wrote his *Res Gestae* as not only a history of the times but as a subversive attack on the religion that now dominated the empire. He accomplished his goal by using abstract terminology and by demonstrating that Christianity was a weaker religion compared to those of other civilizations, while maintaining plausible deniability as to his pagan beliefs. This paper looks at Marcellinus' subversive language as he discussed Christianity and his subversive description of religions. Thus, I demonstrate that Marcellinus attacked Christianity because he believed that Christianity was weakening the empire and its rulers.

Since Christianity was growing in popularity, men like Porphyry, who wrote openly against Christianity (qtd. in Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* VI, 19:1-12) were publicly condemned by Christian writers, making their works less widely read throughout the empire (Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* VI, 19:1-12). Furthermore, the creation of anti-pagan laws, which banned blood sacrifices (Bradbury 1999: 120), caused pagans to fear for their lives, since the punishment for making a blood sacrifice was death (*CTh* 16.10.2; *Lib. Or.* 1.27). Therefore, not wanting to draw attention to himself, Marcellinus never openly expressed his feelings about Christianity and instead found an indirect way to slander Christianity without risking his life or reputation.

When describing Christianity and its customs Marcellinus used vague yet derogatory terms, such as *cantilena* (22.4.6) and *sepulchrum* (18.7.7; 22.11.7), to avoid criticism and “sneak

a quick insult against the Christian opposition” (Woods 1998: 148); for example, Marcellinus uses the derogatory form of *cantilena* and the adjective *molliores* in order to highlight how effeminate the soldiers had become (22.4.6-8; Woods 1998: 145). Although some have translated the phrase *cantilena molliores* to mean ‘effeminate ditty/music hall-song’ (Rolfe 1940: 199; Hamilton 1986: 238), Woods argues that Marcellinus was actually referring to the required Christian prayers of that time and was thus subtly implying that the effeminate prayers had made the soldiers weak (1998: 145). Marcellinus’ subtle attack on Christian prayers is easily missed and therefore demonstrates his use of vague language in order to avoid criticism. It is also important to compare how Marcellinus discussed other religions in addition to Christianity. When describing the various polytheistic religions of other civilizations, such as those of the Burgundians and the Persian Hagesitias (28.5.14; 23.6.32-36), he went into great detail, and emphasizes their complexity (Rike 1987: 91-92), while calling Christianity a *religio absoluta et simplex* (plain and simple religion), implying that it was an inferior religion compared to the ones he had also discussed (21.16.18). Although Marcellinus never explicitly says that polytheistic religions were superior to Christianity, his descriptions of them demonstrate his preference to the former.

In summary, a closer reading of Ammianus’ Christian vocabulary and his overall attitude toward Christianity in comparison to other religions reveals that the *Res Gestae* was not only meant to be read as a history of the times, but also as negative critique against the religion that was currently dominating and, in his opinion, weakening the empire.

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