

Julian, emperor

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Julian (331/332–363 CE) is famed as the last pagan Roman emperor, whose attempt to restore traditional religion and undermine the position of Christianity in the Roman Empire was curtailed when he was killed during his abortive invasion of the Persian Empire. Although Julian only ruled briefly as sole Augustus (361–363), his life and reign are among the best documented in Roman history, largely because of his religious aspirations; he became a symbolic figure for supporters and opponents and inspired writings by several of his contemporaries, most notably LIBANIUS, GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, and AMMIANUS MARCELLINUS. Furthermore, Julian was a prolific writer himself and has bequeathed an extensive corpus of letters, speeches, hymns, satires, and tracts (most famously the satirical works the *Caesars* or *Symposium* and the *Misopogon* or *Antiochikos*). Despite this wealth of evidence, questions still remain about Julian's life and aspirations, and interpretations of his character and reign differ widely. There still remain lacunae in the study of Julian; for example, he needs to be contextualized in contemporary Christian culture, and his writings require focused treatment.

Given Julian's religious aspirations, it is ironic that he was the nephew of Constantine I the Great; Julian's father, Julius Constantius, was also a son of Constantius I, though by a different mother, Theodora. Julian's own mother, Basilina, came of distinguished Bithynian stock. Julian's association with Constantine I is underscored by the fact that he was the first emperor to be born in Constantinople. The Constantinian legacy also had a more drastic impact on Julian's life. When Constantine died in 337, he left the empire in the hands of a multiplicity of Caesars, and his sons, especially CONSTANTIUS II, moved decisively to secure power; most of the male descendants of Constantius I and Theodora, including Julian's

father, were eliminated. The youthful Julian and his half-brother Gallus survived, but from that moment on they felt the controlling hand of their cousin Constantius upon their lives, for example, their six-year spell at the imperial residence of Macellum in Cappadocia. Although these circumstances lent their existence great uncertainty, in the case of Julian it enhanced the extent and degree of his education. A formative influence was his mother's old tutor, the eunuch MARDONIOS, and following his release from Macellum he studied with Neoplatonic philosophers at Pergamon and Ephesos, the theurgist Maximos being a particularly strong influence; he is credited with converting Julian from Christianity to paganism, though Julian reveals virtually nothing of the details, or reasons, for this. Julian was also to spend the summer of 355 at the university in Athens, prior to entering the political arena on November 6, 355 as Caesar to Constantius (Gallus had been Caesar since 351 but in 354 was executed for treason).

Following his acclamation as Caesar, Julian was despatched to Gaul. There he acquired the reputation of being, despite his apparent lack of training, an effective soldier and administrator. He was especially celebrated (not least by himself) for his victory over the ALAMANNI at the Battle of Strasbourg (357). When Constantius sought to transfer forces from the west to the east for his Persian campaign in 360, Julian found himself acclaimed Augustus as the troops gathered at Paris (though whether they were incited to this action is a moot point). Civil war loomed again, but luckily for Julian, Constantius died of a fever before battle could commence, reportedly designating his cousin as his heir before he died.

On becoming sole Augustus, Julian could pursue his religious program with a free hand. Eschewing persecution of the Christians, he declared toleration for all, though making clear his own attachment to paganism and overseeing a restoration of traditional religion, notably the rite of sacrifice, which he enthusiastically embraced. His predilection for Neoplatonism

gave his brand of paganism a distinctive character, but whether he was seeking to replace the Christian God with Mithras specifically deserves to be questioned. His attachment to the sun god Helios is understandable in the context of the ideology of the Constantinian Dynasty, and he was enthusiastic about all the gods. Whether he sought to create a “pagan church” has now, thanks to van Nuffelen (2002), been thrown open to discussion. Regarding Christianity, it is understood that his avowed tolerance was a calculated mask, and in reality his treatment of Christians could reveal disfavor and hostility. Witness his infamous teaching edict, which forbade Christians from teaching the classics. This earned the rebuke even of Ammianus, though the exact scope of the law and what Julian hoped to achieve by it deserve to be considered further. Religion was not Julian’s sole preoccupation, however, and he has been characterized as seeking to reform the Roman Empire, though to what extent he had a defined program has been questioned. Certainly he was preoccupied with the nature of imperial rule, seeking to present himself as a citizen emperor, though he may in fact have developed a theocratic conception of rulership. He sought to rid government of excess personnel, such as the eunuchs who had become a defining feature of the Late Antique court, and desired to revive the city councils. The degree to which these aims make him a unique Late Antique emperor is questionable. His other major preoccupation was the war with Persia. His response of a major invasion may have been consistent with imperial policy, but his exact aims remain obscure, and his ability as a soldier and strategist can be debated. He did not designate an heir and was succeeded by Jovian (363–364).

Overall, it is easy to consider Julian an oddity, but in reality he was both very much a product of his time and distinctive due to the especial circumstances of his life. What is also evident is that the intense attraction he held for his contemporaries has persisted; numerous studies of his life and reign have been written, and he has also been the subject of poems, plays, paintings, and novels. His reception is in itself a fascinating subject.

SEE ALSO: Constantine I; Eunuchs, Late Antiquity; Mithras and Mithraism; Neoplatonists; Persia and Rome; Sacrifice, Roman; Theurgy.

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