

## Emperors and Generals in the Fourth Century

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Roman emperors had always been conscious of the political power of the military establishment. In his well-known assessment of the secrets of Augustus' success, Tacitus observed that he had "won over the soldiers with gifts",<sup>1</sup> while Septimius Severus is famously reported to have advised his sons to "be harmonious, enrich the soldiers, and despise the rest".<sup>2</sup> Since both men had gained power after fiercely contested periods of civil war, it is hardly surprising that they were mindful of the importance of conciliating this particular constituency. Emperors' awareness of this can only have been intensified by the prolonged and repeated incidence of civil war during the mid third century, as well as by emperors themselves increasingly coming from military backgrounds during this period. At the same time, the sheer frequency with which armies were able to make and unmake emperors in the mid third century must have served to reinforce soldiers' sense of their potential to influence the empire's affairs and extract concessions from emperors. The stage was thus set for a fourth century in which the stakes were high in relations between emperors and the military, with a distinct risk that, if those relations were not handled judiciously, the empire might fragment, as it almost did in the 260s and 270s.

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<sup>1</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 1.2.

<sup>2</sup> Cass. Dio 76.15.2.

Just as emperors of earlier centuries had taken care to conciliate the rank and file by various means,<sup>3</sup> so too fourth-century emperors deployed a range of measures designed to win and retain the loyalties of the soldiery. These measures included material incentives – above all the regular distribution of donatives and the granting of tax privileges – but also symbolic gestures such as the formal involvement of troops in the proclamation of new emperors and the use of language by emperors in their dealings with troops designed to emphasise their respect for their men and their identification with them.<sup>4</sup> Many of these features can be observed in Ammianus Marcellinus' description of the accession of Valentinian I at Nicaea in February 364:

After the whole army was assembled at dawn, Valentinian appeared on the parade-ground and was allowed to mount the high platform which had been erected. His claims as a man of substance were most cordially received, and he was proclaimed ruler of the empire by a form of popular election. Wearing the imperial robes and a crown, he was hailed as Augustus with all the applause expected from men's delight at this new development, and made ready to address the audience in a prepared speech...: 'Gallant defenders of our provinces, it is and will always be my pride and boast that I owe to your courage the rule of the Roman world, a position that I neither desired nor

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<sup>3</sup> Campbell 1984, Stäcker 2003.

<sup>4</sup> For these various aspects, see Whitby 2004: 179-86, Lee 2007: 51-66.

sought but for which you have judged me to be the best qualified. While the empire lacked a ruler, the responsibility was yours. You have discharged it splendidly in the general interest by raising to the summit of power one whom you know by experience has lived from his earliest youth to his present mature age with honour and integrity... You must maintain your discipline and refresh your spirit and strength while your winter rest gives you the opportunity. You shall receive without delay what is due to you for my nomination as emperor [viz., the standard accession donative of five *solidi* and a pound of silver].<sup>5</sup>

However, it was not just the rank and file soldiers whose loyalty emperors actively had to maintain and reinforce: careful attention was also needed with respect to the senior officers of the army. Retaining the loyalty of these men would go a long way towards retaining the loyalty of the troops under their command, while effective leadership was an essential pre-requisite for any serious military challenge to an emperor's position. It was therefore also essential for emperors to devise strategies for discouraging ambitious generals from contemplating disloyalty, and it is these

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<sup>5</sup> Amm. Marc. 26.2.1-3, 6-7, 10 (tr. W. Hamilton, with revisions), with discussion in Lenski 2002: 22 (who short changes fourth-century soldiers, however, in referring to 'the usual accession donative of one solidus and a pound of silver'; for the standard amount, see Jones 1964: 624). While Valentinian's speech was no doubt Ammianus' own confection, many elements of its language can be paralleled in official documentation from the period: see Lee 2007: 61-64.

strategies which are the subject of this paper.<sup>6</sup> Although occasional reference will be made to the early decades of the fourth century, the chronological focus will be on the latter two-thirds of the century, from the final years of Constantine's reign onwards. The reasons for this are twofold: first, the military rank of *magister* provides a natural focal point for discussion of this subject and this rank, whose creation is credited to Constantine, was probably introduced towards the end of his reign;<sup>7</sup> secondly, the source material on military commanders in the early decades of the fourth century is extremely limited, making it very difficult to pursue the avenues of investigation which open up from the late 330s onwards.

In tackling the issue of the allegiance of senior army officers, fourth-century emperors faced a number of problems. One was that the two most successful emperors of recent times – Diocletian and Constantine – had shown, through their own routes to imperial power, that disloyalty could pay.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, when, in the latter half of the fourth century, there was no obvious blood-related successor to a deceased emperor, it was the officer class of the army which was seen as the natural source of suitable candidates, as illustrated by the case of Valentinian I, as well as

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<sup>6</sup> Details of the commands and tenures of individual officers referred to in what follows can be found in *PLRE* or Demandt 1970.

<sup>7</sup> Demandt 1970: 562.

<sup>8</sup> By no means all scholars would accept that Constantine should be regarded as a usurper (e.g., Barnes 1981: 28), but his elevation in 306 certainly took place without the agreement of the senior Augustus, Galerius; for further discussion, see Humphries 2008.

that of Jovian.<sup>9</sup> This implies an assumption (which no doubt owed much to events in the mid to late third century) that experience of military command was an important criterion in determining suitability for the imperial throne. Unsurprisingly, the prevalence of such an assumption was in turn likely to encourage individuals with experience of military command to wonder whether they might not be better suited to be emperor than the current incumbent – especially if the latter happened not to have so much experience of military command themselves.<sup>10</sup> That the threat from senior army officers could be genuine is easily demonstrated by the usurpations of Magnentius in 350 and of Magnus Maximus in 383,<sup>11</sup> and that emperors could be concerned about the intentions of generals is evident not only from the well-known eliminations of Silvanus in 355 and the elder Theodosius in 376,<sup>12</sup> but also from the execution of Barbatio in 359 on suspicion of harbouring imperial ambitions, the

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<sup>9</sup> The elevation of Theodosius might also be considered relevant in this respect, although strictly speaking a blood-related successor to Valens already existed in the person of Valentinian II (who already officially held emperor status), even if his age (seven years old in 378) ruled him out as a practical option. There is also the question of whether Theodosius was elevated on the initiative of the emperor Gratian, as traditionally assumed, or rather was effectively a quasi-usurper whose elevation by his troops Gratian had little choice but to accept as a *fait accompli*, as argued by Sivan 1996 and McLynn 2005: 90-94. For further discussion of the dynastic principle in the fourth century, see Börm's contribution to this volume.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the report that Magnus Maximus rebelled against Gratian because "he was aggrieved that Theodosius was thought worthy of supreme power, while he himself had not even attained a respectable command" (Zos. 4.35.4).

<sup>11</sup> For the former, see Drinkwater 2000, for the latter, Matthews 1975: 173-82. Arbogast might be regarded as a further example, but there are some important differences in his case: his revolt in 392 came about only after the unexpected suicide of Valentinian II and Theodosius' uncompromising attitude towards Arbogast's protestations of loyalty (Matthews 1975: 238-9, Croke 1976, Errington 2006: 38-9).

<sup>12</sup> For the former, see Matthews 1989:37-8, Drinkwater 1994, Hunt 1999, for the latter, Demandt 1969, Nixon and Rodgers 1994: 453 n.18, Errington 1996: 443-7.

apparent plan to do the same to Ursicinus in 354 for the same reason until the emperor had a last minute change of mind, and accusations to the same effect against Arbitio in 356/7.<sup>13</sup>

In endeavouring to minimise the danger from ambitious generals, emperors employed a more varied range of strategies than they did in relation to the rank and file. Whereas the approach adopted towards ordinary soldiers was generally that of offering positive incentives of one sort or another, the approach vis-à-vis generals involved incentives, but also tougher-minded measures. This more varied menu of options was perhaps most obviously a reflection of the difference between dealing with large numbers of men and dealing with specific individuals: it was easier to marginalise and target the latter.<sup>14</sup>

Although military challenges to emperors in the fourth century did not invariably come from the most senior generals – Magnentius, for example, appears to have held the lesser post of *comes rei militaris* at the time of his usurpation in 350,<sup>15</sup> while Magnus Maximus was probably a *comes* or *dux* in 383<sup>16</sup> – it was holders of the pre-eminent rank of *magister* who were understandably the prime focus of imperial

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<sup>13</sup> Amm. Marc. 18.3.1-4; 15.2.1-6; 16.6.1; note also 14.11.3 regarding the alleged imperial hopes of Ursicinus' adult sons.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. also the apparent reluctance of fourth-century emperors to discharge soldiers or disband units involved in unsuccessful usurpations (although they were sometimes redeployed elsewhere in the empire): Lee 1998: 226, Carrié and Janniard 2000: 323.

<sup>15</sup> Zonar. 13.6.

<sup>16</sup> For the problematic evidence, with discussion, see Birley 2005: 443-8.

concerns.<sup>17</sup> Constantine is credited with creating the post of *magister*,<sup>18</sup> and while its imposing title was no doubt designed to appeal to the *amour-propre* of his senior commanders, he can already be observed putting in place structural arrangements which limited the power of those who held this rank. To be sure, the relevant ancient sources actually present the post's creation as one of the ways in which Constantine sought to reduce the power of the praetorian prefect, but in fact it worked both ways, since Constantine's revised version of the praetorian prefecture exercised supervision over the tax system and therefore over the army's resources.<sup>19</sup>

Constantine further limited the power of the *magister* from the outset by dividing the responsibilities of command between two posts – those of *magister equitum* and *magister peditum*.<sup>20</sup> In the second half of the fourth century, it was increasingly common for these roles to be combined by individuals holding ranks bearing such titles as *magister utriusque militiae* or *magister militum*, but this was not as worrying a development as might at first appear to be the case: the division of the empire between his three sons after Constantine's death was accompanied by a proliferation of *magistri*, and thereafter there was always a multiplicity of generals with regional

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<sup>17</sup> Indeed, could it be that Magnentius and Magnus Maximus managed to progress their usurpations further than others because their lesser ranks meant they were underestimated as potential threats? (It may also have been the case that their lesser rank meant that they had closer ties with officers further down the hierarchy whose role in persuading troops to support a usurper must have been important – a suggestion I owe to John Drinkwater.)

<sup>18</sup> Zos. 2.33, Lydus *Mag.* 2.10 (= 3.40). For valuable cautionary observations on these texts, see Brennan 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Jones 1964: 448-62.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Demandt 1970: 560.

responsibilities.<sup>21</sup> This multiplicity in turn encouraged competition. While there are instances of camaraderie and solidarity between senior army officers in the fourth century,<sup>22</sup> it is more common to find rivalry and backstabbing, which could sometimes be to the benefit of the emperor. Arbitio appears to have been particularly active during the 350s in working against the interests of fellow generals:<sup>23</sup> he is said to have been the prime mover in allegations of treason against Ursicinus in the mid 350s; he apparently encouraged the appointment of Silvanus as *magister* in Gaul in the hope that the problems confronting the region in the aftermath of Magnentius' usurpation would overwhelm him; he was instrumental in providing the evidence which secured the conviction and execution of Barbatio in 359; and he was one of the two men assigned the task in 360 of investigating the fall of Amida, whose report placed the blame on Ursicinus and led to the latter's dismissal.<sup>24</sup> Initial discussions among senior military officers of a successor to Julian following his death in Persia in 363 resulted in "violent disagreement", with those from the east and the west favouring their own candidate.<sup>25</sup> And in the immediate aftermath of Valentinian I's sudden death in 375, Merobaudes arranged for the *comes rei militaris* Sebastianus, who was popular with the troops, to be reassigned to a

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<sup>21</sup> These developments are charted in detail by Demandt 1972: 562-612, 702-726. This multiplicity did not prevent the *magister* Stilicho from concentrating power in the west in his hands at the very end of the fourth century, but this occurred in circumstances different from those which prevailed throughout most of the fourth century, above all the accession of an underage emperor in the person of Honorius.

<sup>22</sup> E.g., Amm. Marc. 15.5.6 (Malarichus and Silvanus), 15.5.27-8 (Silvanus and Ursicinus).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Blockley 1980: 483.

<sup>24</sup> Amm. Marc. 15.2.1-5; 15.5.2; 18.3.3; 20.2.2-5.

<sup>25</sup> Amm. Marc. 25.5.2.



distant post so as to facilitate a smooth transfer of power to Valentinian's sons – and no doubt also to safeguard his own influence in the new regime.<sup>26</sup>

If the existence of a multiplicity of *magistri* reduced the risk of military challenges during the fourth century, it clearly did not eliminate it entirely. As further insurance, emperors made use of a variety of rewards designed to encourage the loyalty of generals, ranging from the material to the less tangible benefits of enhanced status and prestige. With regard to material rewards, the first point to note is that senior military commanders in the fourth century had usually gained significant wealth by the end of their career. One form of evidence for this is the occasional comment on individual generals who had a reputation for not being interested in material gain, with the implication that this was the exception to the rule. Sebastianus was “an object of wonderment because of his lack of greed”; Arbogast is described as someone who “waged an endless war on corruption”, whose “wealth was no more than that of a common soldier”; Promotus was “a man superior to bribes”; and Stilicho was praised for not having used his office to enrich himself.<sup>27</sup> Another form of evidence for the wealth of generals comprises comments, either general or specific, about the material resources of individuals. Sabinianus is

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<sup>26</sup> Amm. Marc. 30.10.3

<sup>27</sup> Eunap. *fr.* 44.3, 58.1; Zos. 4.51.3, 5.34.6. Eunap. *fr.* 62.2 gives a less flattering report of Stilicho's attitude to wealth, but for present purposes, it is the assumption underlying Zosimus' comment which is significant (Zosimus' more favourable view of Stilicho towards the end of Book 5 of his history reflects his change of source, from Eunapius to Olympiodorus: Matthews 1970: 81-2).

said to have been *bene nummatus* (“well moneyed”), Timasius enjoyed “abundant wealth” and Abundantius’ property was sufficiently substantial to make him a target of the eunuch Eutropius;<sup>28</sup> Gratian senior and Theodosius owned estates in the Balkans and Spain respectively,<sup>29</sup> Victor, Saturninus and Promotus owned property in Constantinople, Ursicinus and Ellebichus in Antioch, and Hermogenes in both Constantinople and Tyre, while Jovinus had the resources to build a church in Reims.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the most telling instances, however, are Gratian the elder and Arbitio, since both are explicitly attested as coming from humble origins and yet acquired property and wealth during their careers.<sup>31</sup>

The next question, then, is how this wealth was acquired by generals. Various sources can be suggested. The regular salary of generals is not known, but as noted by Alexander Demandt, the leading scholar on the office of *magister*, the eagerness of barbarian leaders such as Alaric and Attila to extract such positions from the empire in the fifth century implies that the salary was substantial.<sup>32</sup> One might also have expected campaign booty to have been a valuable source of income, although

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<sup>28</sup> Amm. Marc. 18.5.5, Eunap. *fr.* 65.3; Zos. 5.10.5.

<sup>29</sup> Amm. Marc. 30.7.3, *Pan. Lat.* 2.9.1.

<sup>30</sup> *V. Isaacii* 4.14, Zos. 5.3.5, Joh. Chrys. *Ep.* 207, Amm. Marc. 18.4.3, Lib. *Ep.* 868, Soc. *HE* 2.13, Lib. *Ep.* 828, *CIL* 13.3256.

<sup>31</sup> Amm. Marc. 30.7.2-3 (for Gratian senior’s humble origins and property); Amm. Marc. 15.2.4 (for Arbitio starting as a common soldier), 26.8.13 (for his house being “full of priceless treasures”). By contrast, the estates of the general Gildo, which were so large that, following their confiscation in 399, they required supervision by a specially created official (the *comes Gildoniaci patrimonii*: *Not. Dig. [occ.]* 12.5), were presumably inherited by Gildo from his father, king Nubel of Mauretania.

<sup>32</sup> Demandt 1980: 630-1. Cf. also Zos. 5.10.1, concerning an individual given “a military command [of an unspecified nature] which brought him a pleasing income”.

explicit evidence to that effect is limited.<sup>33</sup> Corrupt practices were clearly another possible means of enrichment, as implied by some of the earlier comments about individuals who were credited with resisting such temptations; one of those comments includes reference to the specific practices of the sale of military office and embezzlement of soldiers' allowances.<sup>34</sup> Alongside these different potential income streams, however, there was also the possibility of gifts from the emperor. The best example comes from 414, so a little later than the chronological parameters of this volume, but its detail is fascinating:

Constantius [*magister utriusque militiae* in the west], having earlier been named consul designate, entered his consulship at Ravenna... Enough gold to cover the costs of the consulship was found amongst the estate of Heraclian (who had been killed while attempting usurpation), although not as much was found as expected. For a little less than two thousand pounds of gold were found, and his land and buildings came to two thousand pounds of gold. All of this estate Constantius received from Honorius in response to a single request.<sup>35</sup>

That this case was part of a longer-term pattern is evident from further, albeit less detailed, examples from the fourth century. The property which Hermogenes

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<sup>33</sup> Arbazacius is said to have gained much booty from an Isaurian campaign in 404, after which he lapsed into a life of luxurious living (Zos. 5.25.2-4).

<sup>34</sup> Zos. 5.34.6. Cf. also the accusation brought against Ursicinus of having misappropriated funds from the Gallic treasury in 355 (Amm. Marc. 15.5.36).

<sup>35</sup> Olympiodorus *fr.* 23 (tr. R.C. Blockley).

owned in Tyre was the gift of an unspecified emperor;<sup>36</sup> Barbatio acquired some of Silvanus' property after his death, presumed to have been a gift from the emperor Constantius;<sup>37</sup> in a similar manner, Arbitio was a recipient of some of the property of those denounced to Constantius;<sup>38</sup> and Eusebius' property was exempt from taxation, which implies some sort of special imperial dispensation.<sup>39</sup> It would be very surprising if these were the only instances of emperors deploying material rewards in their relations with their generals during the fourth century, and if more of the evident wealth of fourth-century generals did not derive from imperial largesse.

Turning to status-related rewards, these took a variety of forms. First, there was the matter of formal rank. A major development during the fourth century was the extension of senatorial status – that of *clarissimus* – to incorporate the holders of senior imperial posts.<sup>40</sup> This benefited leading civilian bureaucrats such as praetorian prefects, but it also included military *magistri*. Less certain is how early in the fourth century *magistri* acquired senatorial status. Constantine himself may have granted it, but the evidence is open to debate. A number of sources comment in passing on Constantine's general generosity with senatorial status,<sup>41</sup> but there is only

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<sup>36</sup> Lib. *Ep.* 828.

<sup>37</sup> Amm. Marc. 18.3.2 with Demandt 1980: 631 n.107.

<sup>38</sup> Amm. Marc. 16.8.11-13.

<sup>39</sup> *Cod. Theod.* 11.1.1 (360).

<sup>40</sup> Heather 1998: 184-97.

<sup>41</sup> *Pan. Lat.* 4.35.2, Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 4.1.

one which offers the possibility of a more specific link to the military – namely, Ammianus’ report of the claim that Constantine granted consular office to barbarians.<sup>42</sup> Consular office presupposes senatorial status, and the only conceivable way in which barbarians could have achieved consular office was through holding high military command. This is a plausible deduction, but it faces two related objections: on the one hand, no obviously non-Roman name appears in the consular *fasti* from Constantine’s reign, and on the other, the claim is from the mouth of a hostile witness – Julian – in a highly charged context – a letter to the Roman senate during his civil war against Constantius. In fact, neither objection is decisive. First, the absence of obvious non-Roman names is inconclusive since, it is clear that some barbarians in Roman service adopted Romanized names,<sup>43</sup> and no individual *magister* from Constantine’s reign has yet been identified with certainty.<sup>44</sup> Secondly, Julian is unlikely to have made such a claim when the holders of consular office will have been well known and the claim could easily be disproved; moreover Ammianus does not question the veracity of Julian’s claim, only his judgement in raising the matter. Nonetheless, an element of uncertainty remains.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Amm. Marc. 21.10.8.

<sup>43</sup> E.g., one would never guess from their names that Bonitus or Silvanus were Franks by origin (Amm. Marc. 15.5.33).

<sup>44</sup> This is less surprising if, as already noted, the office of *magister* was created only towards the end of Constantine’s reign (Demandt 1970: 562). The possibility that Virius Nepotianus, consul in 336, might have been a general of some sort has been raised, but the basis of the suggestion – a fifth-century hagiographical text – leaves ample scope for uncertainty (Barnes 1982: 108 is more cautious than Barnes 1974: 226).

<sup>45</sup> The subject of barbarians as generals in the fourth-century Roman army prompts one to wonder whether emperors saw such appointments as carrying the additional political advantage that such men’s ethnic origin usually precluded them from aspiring to imperial

Matters are clearer for the reign of Constantine's son, Constantius II, since there are definite examples of a *magister* holding the consulship, in the persons of Sallustius (344), Eusebius (347) and Arbitio (355).<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Constantius is praised by Ammianus for not allowing any *dux* to achieve *clarissimus* status;<sup>47</sup> since *dux* was a rank subordinate to that of *magister*, one would have expected explicit mention of *magistri* as well if they had not already achieved the clarissimate. Matters are even clearer by the joint reigns of Valentinian I and Valens when one law of 372 is explicit about *magistri equitum ac peditum* holding the same status (*dignitas*) as the most senior civilian posts, those of praetorian prefect and prefect of the city, while another law from the same year grants *comites rei militaris* – the rank immediately below *magister* – the 'highest status'.<sup>48</sup> From around the end of the fourth century, the *Notitia Dignitatum*, an administrative document whose title implies its concern with order of precedence, confirms the status of the military *magistri*, where they appear

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office. The case of Silvanus is potentially problematic for this suggestion, although his case is full of problematic elements (see further below, p.000); perhaps his status as a second-generation incomer meant his Frankish origin was not seen as a handicap in this respect (cf. the advice Silvanus received, when contemplating flight across the Rhine, that the Franks would not shelter him (Amm. Marc. 15.5.15-16), implying that they did not recognise him as one of their own).

<sup>46</sup> *PLRE* 1:94-5, 307-8, 798.

<sup>47</sup> Amm. Marc. 21.16.2. Although Ammianus often uses terminology in a non-technical sense, *dux* here must be a specific reference to that particular rank (cf. Szidat 1996: 197). Banaji (2007: 50-1) notes a number of cases from late in Constantius' reign where *duces* had in fact been promoted to the clarissimate.

<sup>48</sup> *Cod. Theod.* 6.7.1; 6.14.1 (372); since these bear exactly the same date and place of issue, they must in fact have been extracts from a single law (cf. Jones 1964: 142-3, 1096 n.13, Matthews 2000: 221-3).

immediately after the praetorian prefects and city prefects, and ahead of all other senior civilian officials.

One further, related development warrants brief comment. With the expansion in the numbers holding the status of *clarissimus* over the course of the fourth century, it is unsurprising that there was pressure from those of higher rank to create additional grades of status above the clarissimate. The result was the gradual establishment, by the end of the fourth century, of the higher grades of *illustris* and *spectabilis*, with military *magistri* being categorised in the first of these, and *comites rei militaris* and *duces* in the second.<sup>49</sup>

The prime mover behind the legislation of 372 noted above must have been Valentinian, rather than his brother Valens, since it was issued at Nasonacum (Nassogne), in the Ardennes to the west of Trier, and a concern on his part to clarify the status of military office holders is understandable. Valentinian was himself a military man and so was well attuned to the sensitivities of the officer class. More important, however, was the unease he must have felt about the legitimacy of his own claim to the imperial throne. To be sure, his accession was the result of consensus among the military and civilian elite, and had been formally approved by the army, but his lack of any dynastic link to the Constantinian family must have left him conscious of his vulnerability to challenge. That consciousness can only have

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<sup>49</sup> Jones 1964: 528.

been reinforced by the attempt of Procopius to overthrow Valens in the east, soon after his accession – an attempt in which Procopius’ appeals to his links to the Constantinian dynasty featured prominently.<sup>50</sup> Although Procopius had not followed a military career path,<sup>51</sup> Valentinian’s measures to affirm the high status of generals surely reflect his particular concern to maintain the loyalty of this important constituency in which he had his roots.

A second and more specific form of status-related reward which contributed towards the same end was the grant of a consulship. Although the consulship had long ceased to carry any powers of the sort which had distinguished it during the Republic, it remained an office which carried enormous prestige – because of its long history, predating the advent of emperors, because the names of the holders provided the official dating formula for the year in which they held office,<sup>52</sup> and because of its continuing exclusivity: “The key to the enduring status of the ordinary consulate at the very top of the pyramid lay in its restriction (amazingly enough never extended) to two per calendar year.”<sup>53</sup> Its granting was therefore a clear indication of imperial favour and honour, its significance enhanced by the fact that

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<sup>50</sup> Lenski 2002: 68-115.

<sup>51</sup> Julian did give him joint responsibility for the reserve army during the Persian invasion of 363, but his background was in the civilian bureaucracy: *Amm. Marc.* 26.6.1-2; cf. Lenski 2002: 83 (“Procopius had never been a military man until Julian’s reign...[and] his lack of backing from the military brass always proved an impediment.”)

<sup>52</sup> Cf. *Them. Or.* 16.203cd: “The greatest of all human honours is the consulship by which time itself is measured, and without which it would pass without name or division like an unstamped coin.”

<sup>53</sup> Bagnall *et al.* 1987: 6.



the traditional mode of honouring military achievement during the Republic – the formal triumph – had long been the exclusive preserve of emperors. That fourth-century generals regarded it as an appropriate reward, and could become disgruntled if overlooked when they believed they had earned it, finds explicit confirmation in Ammianus' presentation of the *magister* Silvanus' conversations with his fellow general Ursicinus in 355:

Silvanus was aggrieved because, while others had been advanced to the consulship and high dignities beyond their deserts, he and Ursicinus alone, after careers of great and continuous toil on behalf of the state, had been treated with such contempt... This was his constant theme both privately and in public.<sup>54</sup>

As already noted, Constantine is presented by one source as having been the first emperor to promote barbarians to the consulship; if this claim is true, then those individuals can only have been prominent generals. However, it is not until the reigns of his sons that specific individuals can be identified. The three appointed by Constantius II have already been noted – Sallustius and Eusebius, *magistri* in the east during the 340s when Constans ruled the west, and then Arbitio, *magister equitum* for most of the 350s and consul in 355 when Constantius was sole ruler of the empire.

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<sup>54</sup> Amm. Marc. 15.5.28 (tr. W. Hamilton, with revisions). For the difficulties which Ammianus' account of this whole episode presents, see Drinkwater 1994, Hunt 1999, with further discussion below; these difficulties do not, however, detract from the relevance or value of the complaints attributed to Silvanus.

To these can be added Flavius Salia, consul in 348 and *magister equitum* in the west, who must therefore have been granted the honour by Constans,<sup>55</sup> and perhaps also Flavius Bonosus, consul during the first four months of 344.<sup>56</sup> It has also been suggested that both consuls in 338 – Flavius Ursus and Flavius Polemius – were generals (possibly being rewarded for playing a part in the massacre of Constantine’s relatives in 337 which ensured that the imperial throne passed to Constantine’s three sons alone, and to no one else).<sup>57</sup> The last member of the Constantinian dynasty, Julian, appointed the *magister equitum*, Nevitta, to the consulship in 362 – a move which prompted Ammianus’ criticism of Julian for hypocrisy in berating Constantine’s appointment of barbarians to the consulate.<sup>58</sup> During the joint reigns of Valentinian I and Valens, six *magistri* held the consulship – Dagalaifus (366), Jovinus (367), and Equitius (374) in the west, and Lupicinus (367), Victor (369) and Arintheus (372) in the east – while Merobaudes held the consulship

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<sup>55</sup> *PLRE* 1:796, with Bagnall *et al.* 1987: 13-14 on the specific issue of Constans’ part in consular nominations during the 340s.

<sup>56</sup> The case of Bonosus has puzzled scholars because of his apparent replacement as consul by another general, Sallustius, after four months, without clear evidence of him having been disgraced (Bagnall *et al.* 1987: 222). Salway (2008: 300-9) has recently proposed a neat solution: that it was a simple clerical error on the part of Constans’ staff, who entered the wrong general’s name for Constantius’ nominee in western documentation – Bonosus rather than Sallustius – which then took four months to rectify due to the slowness of communications.

<sup>57</sup> Barnes 1981: 262, 398 n.17 (accepted by Bagnall *et al.* 1987: 13-14), Lane Fox 1997: 247. An important piece of evidence for Ursus’ status is the dedication of a work on equine medicine to a general named Ursus: Barnes (1981 398 n.17) expresses doubts about the usual dating of this work to Constantine’s reign, but see the comments of Demandt (1989: 268 n.50), who also suggests that Ursus might be the first nameable consul of Germanic origin (presumably on the basis of his name, which is not, however, decisive).

<sup>58</sup> *PLRE* 1:626-7. Uncertainty remains as to whether Gaiso, appointed consul by Magnentius in 351, held the post of *magister*, although his very elevation to the consulate might be regarded as corroboration.

twice during the reign of Valentinian's son Gratian (377, 383). Theodosius I granted the honour to five of his generals – Saturninus (383), Richomer (384), Timasius and Promotus (389), and Abundantius (393) – and Valentinian II did the same for Bauto in the west in 385.<sup>59</sup>

Generals holding the consulship eighteen times out of a possible 116 opportunities (two per year from 338 to 395) may not seem so significant, until one remembers that about half of the remaining opportunities were monopolised by emperors themselves or their relatives. This feature is particularly striking during the reigns of Valentinian I and Valens, when the consulship was held only eight times by individuals unrelated to the imperial family, and six of those eight times were given to generals.<sup>60</sup> This reinforces the point made earlier in the context of senatorial status about Valentinian appearing particularly concerned to honour fellow senior army officers – and the five consulships which Theodosius I bestowed on generals might reflect similar concerns, even if distributed over a somewhat longer period of time.

Although fourth century sources are rarely explicit about the reasons, official or otherwise, for the granting of the honour, at least some of these consulships were, unsurprisingly, rewards for specific military achievements. Ammianus relates that

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<sup>59</sup> Details in *PLRE* 1 and Bagnall *et al.* 1987. For Valens, Gratian and Valentinian II playing a part in relevant nominations, see Bagnall *et al.* 1987: 14-16.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Jones 1964: 142.

of Jovinus in 367 to his successes against the Alamanni the previous year,<sup>61</sup> while Themistius' 16<sup>th</sup> oration links Saturninus' consulship of 383 with the termination of the war against the Goths in 382, even if Saturninus' main contribution ended up being the negotiation of a peace settlement rather than a decisive military victory;<sup>62</sup> and although not explicitly stated in the sources, the consulships of Promotus and Timasius in 389 must have been in recognition of their role as commanders of the army in Theodosius' campaign to defeat Magnus Maximus the previous year.<sup>63</sup> However, the case of Dagalaifus shows that more immediate political considerations sometimes took priority over an individual's military record. He was granted the consulship in 366 despite ineffective campaigning against the Alamanni in 365, in addition to his having incurred the emperor's anger for his blunt advice to Valentinian against appointing Valens as co-emperor.<sup>64</sup> Given all this, the most plausible explanation for Dagalaifus' consulship is that Valentinian was discharging a political debt for the role he is reported to have played in helping to secure the imperial office for Valentinian after Jovian's death.<sup>65</sup>

Conferring the consulship on an individual outside the imperial family did of course entail a certain risk, since placing someone in the spotlight like this, albeit

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<sup>61</sup> Amm. Marc. 27.2.10.

<sup>62</sup> Translation and discussion of the oration in Heather and Moncur 2001: 255-83.

<sup>63</sup> Their command of the army on this campaign is reported by Zos. 4.45.2.

<sup>64</sup> Amm. Marc. 26.5.9, 27.2.1, 26.4.1-2.

<sup>65</sup> Philostorgius *HE* 8.8. The same passage also reports Arintheus' role in Valentinian's elevation, but the time lag until his consulship in 372 suggests the office is unlikely to have been a reward for this in his case – and he was appointed consul by Valens.

temporarily, might encourage that individual or his allies to entertain larger ambitions. Such ambitions might conceivably have been further encouraged by the enduring responsibility of the consul to provide games for the populace of Rome or Constantinople,<sup>66</sup> which presented an opportunity to curry favour with the urban masses. In practice, however, the financial dimension of games provision must have militated against this. It is clear that staging games on a grand scale in this period continued to be a substantial drain on the economic resources of the provider,<sup>67</sup> which presented the individual with a dilemma: trying to make a big splash would consume significant personal resources, whereas being more economical would preserve financial resources but reduce the chances of impressing on a grand scale. The only individuals who could continue to afford to provide really impressive games in the fourth century (besides the emperor) were the old senatorial families of Rome, but since they never held military posts in this period, the danger of their using the games as a stage to challenge the emperor was minimal.

As already anticipated, emperors sometimes used other strategies which did not rely on positive rewards of one sort or another to deflect potential threats from senior military men. One relatively innocuous approach of this sort was to relocate an individual from one command to another, the underlying rationale being to break the links between a general and the military units with which he had been operating

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<sup>66</sup> Jones 1964: 537-9; cf., e.g., Olympiodorus *fr.* 23, quoted above (p.000).

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Olympiodorus *fr.* 41.2.

for some time, on whose developed loyalties he might otherwise have been able to rely in the event of staging a coup. This sort of thinking was surely a factor in the various reassignments of Ursicinus in the 350s, who was initially *magister equitum* in the east for a number of years, then served as *magister equitum* in Gaul in 355-56, before being sent to the east again in 357. In 359 he was reassigned to the west as *magister peditum* to replace the recently executed Barbatio, a move interrupted by his temporary return to the east to help with the defence of Amida against the Persians. To be sure, these reassignments can be correlated with specific crises and needs, but this does not preclude their conveniently serving this additional purpose, particularly since Ursicinus does seem to have fallen under suspicion of treasonable intentions during the 350s.<sup>68</sup> These movements are known in detail, of course, because of the later account written by his then staff officer, Ammianus Marcellinus, whose undisguised admiration for his commander led him to present Ursicinus as the victim of court intrigues. It is possible, however, that rather than Constantius being swayed this way and that by the machinations of his aides, the emperor himself orchestrated Ursicinus' appointments in order to reduce the risk of one of his most able generals seeking to emulate Magnentius' recent usurpation.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Amm. Marc. 15.1.1-2.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Crump 1975: 16, Blockley 1980: 472-7. None of this is to suggest that Ursicinus himself entertained any imperial ambitions, only that his abilities made him a plausible suspect; cf. the apparent concerns about his sons: Amm. Marc. 14.11.3.

Another possible example of this phenomenon is Sebastianus who served as *comes rei militaris* in the west during the reign of Valentinian I, but is then found in the east in 378 assisting Valens against the Goths in the role of *magister peditum*, before perishing with the emperor at the battle of Adrianople. The sources disagree as to the reasons for this move: Ammianus presents the initiative as lying with Valens, who is said to have requested that Sebastianus be sent to him, whereas Eunapius and Zosimus present it as the result of intrigues against Sebastianus by western court eunuchs who saw him as a threat.<sup>70</sup> While the latter version is redolent of anti-eunuch prejudice,<sup>71</sup> there is something to be said for the idea that Sebastianus was “pushed”. As briefly noted earlier, Sebastianus had previously fallen under suspicion: in the uncertainty following Valentinian I’s sudden and unexpected death in 375, he is reported to have been seen as a potential threat because he was “very popular with the troops and needed therefore to be closely watched”, as a result of which he was reassigned to an unspecified “distant post” (in the west) before he became aware of Valentinian’s death.<sup>72</sup>

In terms of an ascending order of sanctions, the next option for an emperor was to dismiss a general from his post, though one imagines that this was not a step to be taken lightly, for fear of provoking the individual into open defiance. This perhaps

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<sup>70</sup> Amm. Marc.31.11.1, Eunap. *fr.* 44.3, Zos. 4.22.4.

<sup>71</sup> For which see Tougher 1997.

<sup>72</sup> Amm. Marc. 30.10.3. To these cases can perhaps be added that of Promotus, *magister peditum* under Theodosius, until he clashed with the praetorian prefect Rufinus in 391, who persuaded the emperor to transfer him to military duties in Thrace (Zos. 4.51.1-3).

accounts for the apparent rarity with which it was used in the fourth century.

Marcellus was dismissed by Constantius as *magister equitum* in Gaul in 356/7 for failing to assist Julian when the latter was besieged *apud Senonas*, although it is hard to see this as a pre-emptive move against a potential threat, especially since Marcellus' response was apparently to lobby the emperor at court against Julian.<sup>73</sup>

More to the point was Ursicinus' dismissal in 360 as a result of the official enquiry into the reasons for the capture of Amida by the Persians the previous year.<sup>74</sup> While placing the blame for that debacle on his shoulders was no doubt unfair, it certainly supplied an excuse for removing him from office while also providing a convenient scapegoat onto whom potential criticism of the emperor himself could be deflected.

The next step up from dismissal – and it was a big step – was exile, although again this was an option rarely resorted to in the fourth century. The prime examples are those of Timasius, one of the *magistri* whom Theodosius had placed in command of the forces which went west to suppress the usurpation of Eugenius in 394, and Abundantius, another *magister* during the final years of Theodosius' reign.

Although the *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, in its entries for each man, assumes that neither remained in post after 395,<sup>75</sup> it is apparent from the *fasti* for *magistri militum* that no individual has been identified as taking over their roles in

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<sup>73</sup> Amm. Marc. 16.7.1. For the debate as to whether *apud Senonas* refers to Sens or Senon (near Verdun), see Matthews 1989: 492 n.16, Drinkwater 2007: 220.

<sup>74</sup> Amm. Marc. 20.2.

<sup>75</sup> PLRE 1.5, 914.



396, or indeed for some years after that,<sup>76</sup> which no doubt explains why Alexander Demandt, in his encyclopaedic treatment of the office of *magister militum*, took it for granted that both men remained in post in 396.<sup>77</sup> The fact that Timasius is attested as assigning someone command of a body of troops in 396 strengthens that assumption in his case.<sup>78</sup> Soon after that, however, a charge of treason was brought against Timasius on the initiative of the eunuch Eutropius who had become the dominant figure at the court of Arcadius, and he was duly exiled to the Great Oasis in Egypt.<sup>79</sup> And soon after that, Eutropius also induced Arcadius to issue an edict exiling Abundantius to Sidon in Phoenicia, although the specific charge in this case is not indicated.<sup>80</sup> Granted that these cases were not so much about Eutropius protecting the emperor Arcadius from potential threats from the military, as about his removing potential challengers to his dominance at court, they nonetheless demonstrate another means of marginalising senior military men, in a very literal sense.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> *PLRE* 2.1290. The only securely attested *magister* in post in the eastern half of the empire in 396 is Addaeus, but he was clearly *magister militum per Orientem* (*PLRE* 1.13).

<sup>77</sup> Demandt 1970: 727-8, 790, albeit with a qualificatory superscript indicating an element of uncertainty in the case of Abundantius (790).

<sup>78</sup> Zos. 5.9.1.

<sup>79</sup> Zos.5.8.3-9.6.

<sup>80</sup> Zos. 5.10.5.

<sup>81</sup> Abundantius' exile also entailed the confiscation of his property, so it is perhaps worth noting Constantius' confiscation of the estate of Gratian senior in 351 on suspicion of his having supported the usurper Magnentius (Amm. Marc. 30.7.3) and Theodosius' confiscation of the property of the *magister* Sapores (Lib. *Ep.* 957, writing to congratulate him on its restoration in 390). In the first case, however, the confiscation occurred after he had retired from military service, while in the second case, Sapores is attested as *magister* no later than the early 380s, so is also likely to have retired prior to the confiscation.

The ultimate way of neutralising a possible threat from a general was of course through their elimination. The most straightforward instance of this from the fourth century is that of Barbatio in 359. He had been *magister peditum* in the west since 355, but in 359 his wife was found to have written a coded letter to her husband which referred to omens of Constantius' imminent death and his hopes of becoming the next emperor, and on this basis they were both executed and an attempt made to identify any accomplices.<sup>82</sup> Although Ammianus' account is strongly coloured by his disdain for religious superstition, the folly of females and the treachery of slaves and military rivals (in this case Arbitio), the basic facts are clear and Constantius' response understandable, at least in the context of fourth-century imperial politics. Any suspicion of involvement in activities related to predicting an emperor's death and successor provoked a brutal response from emperors in this period,<sup>83</sup> so when it involved a general who had at his disposal the means to fulfil such a prediction (i.e., his troops), a swift and uncompromising response of this sort should occasion no surprise. What is perhaps most interesting about the whole episode is that a figure such as Barbatio should have considered himself a potential emperor, when the Constantinian dynasty was still in place after many decades and before Jovian and Valentinian had reiterated the possibility of army officers becoming emperor.

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<sup>82</sup> Amm. Marc. 18.3.1-5. Ammianus' account leaves it unclear whether Barbatio was executed for aspiring to the purple or for failing to denounce his wife when she articulated the possibility.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Amm. Marc. 29.1, with Lenski 2002: 223-34.

Alongside this episode should be noted another, more problematic one: Ammianus' claim that, in the winter of 354/5, Constantius almost did away with Ursicinus on suspicion of treason:

After long deliberation with the emperor in the presence of a few accomplices, a decision was reached that on the following night Ursicinus should be carried off out of sight of the troops and put to death without trial... This was arranged and the agents appointed to carry out the plan were waiting for the hour to strike, when the emperor softened, and gave orders that the execution of this wicked deed should be deferred for further consideration.<sup>84</sup>

Since Ursicinus did not die at this point, the difficulty is of course to know whether Constantius really did take a decision to eliminate him, only to change his mind at the last moment, or whether Ammianus' recurrent anxieties about the safety of his superior have spilled over into unwarranted paranoia at this point. Even if the allegation "need not be taken very seriously",<sup>85</sup> however, the fact that it was regarded as a potential option for Constantius remains significant for the concerns of this paper – and of course the case of Barbatio four years later shows that this emperor was prepared to act when presented with clear evidence of treasonable intentions.

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<sup>84</sup> Amm. Marc. 15.2.5-6 (tr. W. Hamilton, with revisions).

<sup>85</sup> Matthews 1989: 36.

However, the downfall of Barbatio and the possible threat to Ursicinus' life have attracted much less attention than two other episodes from this period: the elimination of Silvanus in 355 and the execution of Theodosius the elder in 376. Admittedly, these two cases contrast sharply with one another with regard to surviving sources: Silvanus' removal is the subject of a detailed narrative by Ammianus who was himself a participant in events, whereas the death of Theodosius senior is a "notoriously obscure event",<sup>86</sup> despite it occurring before the terminal date of Ammianus' history. Yet even with the abundance of circumstantial detail concerning the Silvanus affair, it too remains problematic in many respects. How, for example, did Ursicinus and his party manage to maintain the pretence that they knew nothing of Silvanus' proclamation as Augustus while travelling from Milan to Cologne? And why is there no numismatic evidence of Silvanus' usurpation?<sup>87</sup> However, whether Silvanus was killed for open rebellion or on suspicion that this was what he might have been planning, his elimination is a further example of an emperor acting to remove a perceived threat from a general.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Matthews 1975: 64 n.3.

<sup>87</sup> Issues raised by Drinkwater 1994; Hunt 1999 provides a considered treatment of the episode which goes some way towards answering Drinkwater's concerns.

<sup>88</sup> Given Constantius' actions against Silvanus and Barbatio, it is something of a puzzle as to why he exercised clemency towards the general Vetranio who, against the background of Magnentius' usurpation in the west, proclaimed himself emperor in the Balkans in 350. Older interpretations solved the puzzle by positing that Constantius' orchestrated the whole affair as a holding action against Magnentius until Constantius could free himself from his Persian commitments and come west. However, more recent interpretations have argued persuasively that Vetranio's revolt was genuine (see Drinkwater 2000: 146-59 for discussion). Its eventual resolution without bloodshed still must have required the co-operation of

As for the death of Theodosius the elder, Ammianus' failure to comment on it has understandably been viewed in the context of his producing his history during the reign of the deceased's son, the emperor Theodosius I, with the further potential implication that the circumstances involved something discreditable to Theodosius senior.<sup>89</sup> There could, however, be a simpler, more pedestrian explanation for the incident's absence – namely, that Ammianus' regarded the death of Valentinian I in 375 as the terminal date for his detailed treatment of events in the western half of the empire.<sup>90</sup> In any case, while responsibility for the execution order must remain uncertain – Valens, Gratian and powerful courtiers in the west have all been seen as possible candidates – the event itself cannot have come as a complete surprise. Theodosius had put together an unbroken sequence of military successes in Britain, Gaul and Africa during Valentinian's reign, which must have made him a cause for concern, irrespective of his apparent loyalty to Valentinian. Ammianus describes him at the conclusion of his most recent success – the suppression of the rebel Firmus in north Africa – as “returning to Sitifis in the guise of a triumphing general, where he was received with applause and commendation by all, of every age and

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Vetranio and his leading supporters, which no doubt accounts for Constantius' leniency, but it remains something of an oddity in the wider context of Constantius' reign.

<sup>89</sup> Thompson 1949: 92-7.

<sup>90</sup> Matthews 1989: 382.

rank".<sup>91</sup> Even if not intended as such by Ammianus, these are ominous words.

Unfortunately for Theodosius, this success coincided with Valentinian's unexpected death, and in the vacuum of uncertainty surrounding the transfer of power to his sons Gratian and Valentinian – sixteen and seven years old, respectively – it is understandable that there should have been concerns about the possibility of Theodosius attempting to capitalise on his record, the substantial military forces under his command and his control of the north African grain supply to seize power for himself.<sup>92</sup>

While not all those generals suspected of harbouring imperial ambitions during the fourth century may have deserved such distrust, there were enough instances of actual or attempted usurpation to justify the concerns of emperors, not to mention the ghosts of the third century. Guarding against this potential danger involved a delicate balancing act between bestowing suitable rewards and taking action against an individual if necessary – a balancing act which most emperors in this period seem to have got broadly right. It is surely significant that the two clear cases of outright military usurpation from the post-Constantinian period – those of Magnentius and Magnus Maximus – were directed against emperors who had apparently managed to alienate the military. Although detail about the background to Constans'

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<sup>91</sup> Amm. Marc. 29.5.56. Ambrose perhaps hinted at a link between the death of the elder Theodosius and his military success when, in his funeral oration for Theodosius I, he referred to "those who murdered his father, the *triumphator*" (53).

<sup>92</sup> Further discussion in Demandt 1969, Nixon and Rodgers 1994: 453 n.18, Errington 1996: 443-7.

overthrow in 350 is frustratingly thin, one of the few points that is preserved in the sources is that he had become “unpopular with the soldiers”.<sup>93</sup> Similarly, the main cause of Gratian’s fall in 383, trivial as it may appear, is said to have been his favouring some Alan deserters in the army to such an extent that it “bred a hatred of the emperor in his soldiers, which slowly smouldering and growing, incited them...to revolt”.<sup>94</sup> Relations between emperors and generals continued to be of the utmost importance during the fifth century, and beyond, but the rules of engagement changed significantly after the premature death of Theodosius in 395 ushered in a half century of emperors who acceded to the throne as minors without any military experience and who retreated into the imperial palace.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Eutr. 10.9.3.

<sup>94</sup> Zos. 4.35.2-3.

<sup>95</sup> For further discussion, see Lee 2007: 30-37. I am grateful to John Drinkwater and Johannes Wienand for commenting on earlier versions of this paper.

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