

JULIAN THE APOSTATE (332-363)

A roman emperor who attempted to restore the classical pantheon. Julian was born in Constantinople, son of Julius Constantius and Basilina. With his half-brother Gallus, he survived the massacre that claimed many of the relatives of Emperor [Constantine](#) I on 9 September 337, including their father and elder brother. Julian was, however, removed from the capital, and his early education took place under the supervision of Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia and the eunuch Mardonius, the latter nominally a Christian but also an admirer of the classics. On Mardonius' death, Emperor Constantius II, Julian's cousin, ordered the brothers' removal to Macellum, a [distant](#) imperial estate in Cappadocia (modern Turkey).

There Julian studied the classics but, with Gallus, moved closer to Christianity. He was baptized and became a lector and a pupil of Bishop George of Cappadocia (later bishop of Alexandria). In 348 the two princes were recalled to Constantinople, where Julian came into contact with Libanius and other pagan philosophers; thenceforth the pagan classics held his devotion. In 351 Gallus was created caesar, and Julian found greater opportunity to travel. Journeys to Ephesus, Pergamum, and Troy irrevocably committed him to the mystical form of Neoplatonism, to which he adhered for the remainder of his life.

Gallus failed in his function as caesar, and in November 354 Constantius had him executed. This act, coupled with the suspicion that Constantius had been behind the [murder](#) of his father in 337, alienated Julian from the emperor. Nevertheless, he had to bide his time. In the same month he found himself accused of abetting anti- imperial activities and was summoned to the imperial court at Milan, but he was saved from Constantius' anger by the empress.

He was allowed to go to Athens, where he came into contact with BASIL THE GREAT and his friend GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, who retained a

vivid, if unfavorable, memory of Julian (Gregory *Oratio* 5.23). For Julian it was a happy period in which he was able to visit famous pagan shrines in Greece and finally to renounce Christianity, at least mentally.

In less than a year, however, Julian was back in Milan. Germanic invasions along the Rhine frontier required urgent attention. From a life of study and philosophic debate, he found himself at age twenty-three created caesar (6 November) and sent to Gaul to command the disorganized and demoralized Roman forces. To the surprise of all, Julian, ably assisted by Constantius' generals, proved himself a leader and a sound strategist. In three campaigns (356-358) he completely cleared Gaul and the Rhineland of invaders, winning a decisive victory at [Strasbourg](#) in August 357.

Meanwhile, war had broken out with [Persia](#) in the east. Constantius needed reinforcements and requested them from Julian's armies. The troops refused to leave Gaul. Early in 360 they revolted and declared Julian emperor, much against his will. For the next eighteen months, Julian was involved in negotiations designed to avoid a civil war, but they failed. He made a triumphant march through the western and Balkan provinces of the empire, but a decisive battle with Constantius was avoided by the latter's death in [Cilicia](#) in November 361. Julian entered Constantinople in triumph on 11 December.

During the next twenty months the new emperor feverishly attempted to put the clock back a generation, by restoring worship of Greco-Roman gods as the religion of the empire. Some of Julian's measures were all to the good. The corrupt and noxious crew of court spies and eunuchs with which Constantius had surrounded himself was summarily expelled, and the former emperor's episcopal advisers were replaced by pagans, mainly philosophers.

Julian attempted to restore the senate in Constantinople as a center of authority; some excessive taxes on cities were remitted; in the

countryside, justice was made more certain by restoring itinerant magistrates (*judices pedanei*), and an adequate low-value [coinage](#) on the lines of the *follis* of the tetrarchy was instituted. On the reverse side of these new coins, however, was the sacred bull Apis and the inscription *Securitas Republicae*. The choice was unfortunate, for few would accept that the safety of the state depended on a bull.

Julian began his religious reformation by recalling all those bishops and clergy whom Constantius had exiled, in the cynical belief “that no wild beasts are such enemies to mankind as are most Christians in their deadly hatred of one another” (Ammianus Marcellinus, 22.5.4). In North Africa and in Alexandria his beliefs were justified. On 24 December 361, a mainly pagan mob had lynched Bishop George of Alexandria. After a short interregnum, during which Julian wrote a mild rebuke to the Alexandrians for their violent behavior (*Letter 21*), ATHANASIUS I, who had been deposed in favor of George, was allowed to return to his episcopal city (21 February 362).

Julian’s attempt to restore paganism was hopeless from the start. Though the Celtic provinces of the empire were very largely pagan, in the wealthiest and most important areas, including Egypt, worship of the traditional deities had been giving way increasingly to Christianity. His attempt to organize paganism in a form imitating the Christian hierarchy failed to catch on, as did his effort to instill a sense of purpose and practice of charitable action among the pagan priests.

As he admitted to Arsacius, [high priest](#) of Galatia (*Letter 22*), “the Hellenic religion does not yet prosper as I desire.” Christian benevolence to strangers, [care](#) of the graves of the dead, and the pretended holiness of their lives had done most to increase atheism (i.e., Christianity). Julian was to find out the truth of this for himself at Antioch in 362-363.

Julian so far had confined himself to administrative measures, to rescinding privileges conferred on Christian clergy by Constantius

(Sozomen *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.15), to exhortation and admonishment of his correspondents to return to the gods (Letter 41, to the citizens of Bostra), and to the unconditional restoration of temple property taken over by Christians to the former owners. There were, however, two exceptions. Athanasius, who had managed to proselytize in favor of Christianity at Alexandria and to hold an important church council in the summer of 362, was once more exiled as a “bad man” (Letter 46).

More important was Julian’s effort to curb Christians who were teaching the pagan classics. On 17 June 362, he ordered that, before teaching, all professors must obtain a license from their city council countersigned by himself. There was nothing in this about Christians, but they later did not receive licenses, on the pretext of their not being sufficiently sincere in their work (*Codex Theodosianus* 13.3.5; cf. Julian, Letter 42).

Six months later he went further, forbidding Christians to teach the liberal arts (Bidez, 1930, p. 263). Though consistent with his policy of favoring paganism and restoring it as an integrated force in education and worship, this act dismayed Julian’s friends. For Ammianus it was something that “should be passed over in eternal silence” (*Res gestae* 25.4.20; cf. 22.10.7), and Christians were too firmly entrenched in the educational system throughout the East to be seriously inconvenienced, at least in the short term.

By this time, the summer of 362, Julian had established his headquarters in Antioch, preparing for what he hoped would be a final reckoning with Persia. On two counts his romanticism played him false. First his effort to restore paganism in Antioch only provoked ridicule and discontent among the populace and involved the emperor in an undignified squabble with local satirists (recorded by Julian in his *Misopogon* [“the Beard-Hater”]). Second, instead of a well-prepared, limited campaign to retake ground lost by Constantius in 359-360 and secure for the empire a defensible frontier on the Tigris with [Persia](#)—which, as events showed, was within his power—he aspired to emulate Alexander the Great and conquer Persia

outright.

It was an impossible dream. Beginning his campaign on 5 March 363, Julian won a series of brilliant victories on his march down the Euphrates toward Ctesiphon. There, like others before and after him, he was checked. Fatal miscalculations (or perhaps an act of treachery) caused him to retire up the east bank of the Tigris; and with the river behind them, his forces were counterattacked by the Persians. Even so, Julian might have made good his retreat by virtue of the superior fighting ability of his troops. But on 26 June he was wounded by a spear thrown from an unknown hand. The wound proved fatal, and he died around midnight on 26 June 363.

Christians were to claim that the emperor's death was due to the hand of God. By the sixth century, the credit for his death had been given to the Cappadocian martyr Mercurius, supposedly a general who had suffered for his Christian [faith](#) under Emperor Decius in the third century. This story became current in Egypt, and the HISTORY OF THE PATRIARCHS records how Mercurius was sent by God to punish Julian for his apostasy, and that he struck the emperor through the head with his lance. The *History* records Basil the Great as the source of this account, though placing it under the episcopate of Athanasius.

A document found in the cathedral of [Qasr Ibrim](#) in Nubia shows a further development of the legend, in which Athanasius himself and Saint PACHOMIUS are the central figures. Pachomius has a vision of Mercurius, who tells him how he struck down the "enemy of God," Julian, and this he relates to Athanasius (Frend, 1986). Pachomius had, of course, long been dead at the time; but the version of the legend, repeated on a fresco from the cathedral at Faras, shows the desire of the Coptic and Nubian churches to associate Athanasius with Julian's destruction. In addition, it demonstrates the role of the Byzantine [military](#) saints in the protection of the Christian religion and, in the case of Nubia, the national identity of the Christian Nubian kingdoms.

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