THE EMPEROR SILVANUS AND HIS ARMY

by W. den Boer (Leyden)

In the year 355 Silvanus, a Frank, ruled for twenty-eight days as Emperor at Cologne. Ammianus Marcellinus is our main source for this rebellion against the authority of Constantius. The history which precedes this episode takes place in Gaul; the best modern treatment is given in C. Jullian's Histoire de la Gaule. The narrative of Ammianus seems perfectly clear. Most modern historians are, therefore, content to transmit his rendering of the events, or at any rate an extract of it. Only one recent study is known to me in which emphasis is laid on a fact which Ammianus does not mention expressis verbis: namely the social problem of the barbarians within the Roman Empire. The article concerned draws our attention, and rightly so, to the importance of the Franks in the middle of the fourth century in Gaul, at court and in the army. But here also the author draws without misgivings on the account of Ammianus as an eye-witness, without questioning his views on the happenings at Cologne. Among our modern historians criticism is of an almost exclusively ethical kind. The vile treachery of Ursicinus, as a military man the rival of Silvanus, is also censured in the latest monograph on Ammianus as an historian. The cowardly manner in which Silvanus' good faith is exploited by his fellow officer is sharply condemned again and again. Otherwise such inaccuracies as are pointed out in Ammianus' account are confined to his one-sided presentation of affairs, which is regarded as being inspired by Ursicinus and his environment. The factual commentary of De Jonge confines itself to clarifying Ammianus' account, and in doing so, does indeed make an important contribution towards the correct understanding of Ammianus' presentation of the events. In the following pages also I am deeply indebted to his commentary. To what extent, however, Ammianus' presentation is tenable, is an aspect which De Jonge does not raise.

It is not my object to relate the history of this shortlived government once more. But four questions may be mentioned here which find no satisfactory answer in Ammianus' handling of the subject.

(1) Why did Silvanus not march against Constantius but lingered a whole month in Cologne in uncertainty?

1 Amm. Marc. XV, 5 and 6; also XVI, 2, 4; XVI, 11, 2; XVIII, 3, 2; XVII, 4, 2. Apart from a few passages in Julian (Or. 1 48B; III 98C; Epist. ad Ath. 273D, 274C) other sources are virtually of no importance for this essay. These are Zonar. XIII, 9; Aur. Vict., Caes. 42, 13f; epit. 42, 10, 11; Eutr. X, 13; Joh. Ant. fr. 174; Liban. Or. XVIII, 31; Mamert. paneg. XI, 13; Theodoreus, h.e. 11, 16—21; Hieron. chron. 2370.


4 E. A. Thompson The historical work of A.M., Cambridge 1947, 42, 44—45; 52 and 54.

5 Not however by Jullian, whose apology for Ursicinus is one of the few matters which call for criticism in his brilliant survey of the events.

6 P. de Jonge Philological and Historical Commentary on A.M., III, 1948; IV, 1953, respectively on XV, 1—5 and XV, 6—13.

7 In hoc sententia mentis amisit (5. 30), I believe, refers to Silvanus' mood.
It is certain that the Franks were held in esteem and had much influence at Court (5. 11); Silvanus could, therefore, have found support in Milan had he so wished. It is also certain that his army was eager to march against Constantius (5. 29); he could, therefore, have risked an expedition from Cologne to the South. This expedition was all the more advisable inasmuch as he could reckon on little loyalty and co-operation from his countrymen along the Rhine. They only served as general whoever paid (5. 16). It follows that only success could secure their co-operation. All the more reason to take action. Five years earlier the Franks had been the allies of the usurper Magnentius, and it was due to Silvanus that they only went over to Constantius in 351, immediately before the battle of Mursa (5. 33). It is unthinkable that they would not have been prepared to follow him as soon as he could offer them the prospect of rich booty — which he could now do as commander-in-chief of the Roman army, and, therefore, with a far greater likelihood of success.

(2) Why did Silvanus not discuss such a possibility with Ursicinus, i.e. to march on Milan?

The passage 5. 27ff. is very vague. As soon as the delegates under the leadership of Ursicinus arrived at Cologne, Silvanus was greeted by everybody as Emperor. The free and friendly intercourse between these two men is evident. But it is all the more surprising that Silvanus did not put forward any proposal of collaboration. It goes without saying that Ammianus would surely have mentioned a proposal by Silvanus to combine forces, if it had really been made. Especially in view of the later difficulties in which Ursicinus was involved (5. 36) a refusal of collaboration would have been a strong argument in favour of his loyalty to Constantius. The fact that this argument does not occur in the historian’s defence of his master, makes it nearly certain that Silvanus did not make any proposal of this kind. Had his heart really been set on emperorship, he would assuredly have endeavoured to secure the collaboration of Ursicinus, the able second general of the Empire.

(3) Why did Proculus subsequently, as witness in the proceedings against the friends of Silvanus, in spite of torture, and to all appearances with the approval of Ammianus, persist with great steadfastness in upholding the innocence of his master?

Of particular importance is 6. 2, where the dream about the ‘innocent one’ could only be meaningful if Silvanus was in fact innocent. It is true that Silvanus did do something, as we infer also from Proculus. A deed was done by Silvanus: factum Silvani, but done in extreme necessity, and one which he did not wish to do: id non cupiditate sed necessitate compulsum (6. 2). Ammianus no doubt interprets these words as alluding to Silvanus’ assumption of the purple. Moreover it is highly curious that in order to prove Silvanus’ innocence the witness states

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8 Incorrect in this connection is Seeck’s assumption (IV, 230), that Silvanus’ popularity with the Franks suffered a set-back. The well known untrustworthiness of the Franks (see De Jonge’s Comm. ad. 5, 16) makes it possible to say of them interfecturos eum aut accepto praemio prodituros, where accepto praemio should be taken with interfecturos as well.

9 He describes Silvanus also at the first greeting of the legation as anhelantem celsius purpuratum (5. 27).
that four days prior to the usurpation Silvanus gave a donativum to the soldiers in the name of his lawful sovereign, Constantius, and not in his own name (6. 3). This fact could only be relevant for the defence if the attitude of four days previously still persisted on the day of the alleged usurpation. Only then can one speak of a causa probabilis in favour of Silvanus' innocence 10. It is difficult to believe that the usurper's young son and also his friends at court who interceded so vigorously on his behalf (5. 6) would have been left unmolested if there had indeed been a question of treason in the strict sense of the word. Nor can one believe, in view of the administration of justice in the fourth century, that a witness who refuted such a serious charge would have been left unmolested and would in addition have won general respect by his noble attitude (6. 1 and 2), had Silvanus been truly as black as the court tradition paints him 11.

(4) The most important question of all: what did take place at Cologne on the 11th August, 355?
According to Ammianus the initiative lay with Silvanus. When it became known to him that Apodemius, the agent of Constantius, was plotting against him (5. 8 and 15), he went to the extreme of allowing himself to be proclaimed Emperor (5. 16). Although the court tradition which Julian reflects differs noticeably from Ammianus, it agrees with him in this respect that Silvanus himself did do something: he made himself Emperor. However, in regard to the manner in which the assumption of the purple took place, the two sources disagree; and it is entirely relevant to pause and consider this symbolic action. Under the later emperors for most people purple was a dangerous material to wear. It was reserved with a few exceptions for the official robes of emperors and for imperial insignia 12. Purple was used for draping the statues of goddesses, or for decorating the dracones and vexilla of units in the army. Already, therefore, before the time of Silvanus there had been usurpers who had been constrained to content themselves with the decoration of standards or the drapery of statues for their imperial robes 13. In female dress, however, the use of purple seems to have been condoned. The tradition of the court pictures Silvanus as an emperor clad in 'female attire' like the king in a tragedy (Pentheus is meant), going forth to meet his doom (Or. III); Or. 1 speaks of the purple mantle of a woman. Ammianus gives the other expedient for usurpers: cultu purpureo a draconum et vexillorum insignibus ad tempus abstracto (5. 16). These words require careful translation: 'as a temporary expedient his purple robe 14 was torn from the standards of the cohorts and companies'. A painstaking sewing together of small pieces of purple to form a mantle 15 was necessary before the

10 There is much to be said for Seeck's suggestion, Hermes 41, 501; R.E. s.v. Silvanus (4); Geschichte des Untergangs der Antiken Welt IV, 232, 467, that the usurpation took place on 11th August and that the donativum was given on 7th August, on the birthday of Constantius.
11 In Julian, who, in his panegyric on Constantius, has apparently only heard of Silvanus from the circles which were hostile to him—see question (4).
12 See R.E., XXIII, 2 (1959), 213, s.v. purpura (K. Schneider).
13 See e.g. De Jonge, III, p. 96.
14 See e.g. as 'state robe' T.L.L., s.v.
15 The imperial standards of XVI, 12, 39 and XVI, 10, 7 are of a different kind; see among others R. Grosse Röm. Militärgeschichte von Gallienus bis zum Beginn der byzantinischen Themenverfassung, Berlin 1920, 232; R.E. V, 1633f., s.v. Daco (Fiebiger), and D.S. s.v. signa militaria.
new Emperor could appear in his state robe. Seeck’s attempt to combine the two versions of history has failed. Such harmonizing in fact might ruin our prospects of finding the answer to the four questions raised.

It is clear that Ammianus’ rendering should be preferred. There were no large temples in Cologne containing elaborately draped statues, nor was there a class of women who went about smartly clad in purple. For the person who wished to assume the purple there was only one solution: the purple of the *vexilla* and *dracones*. But no usurper could as much as touch these sacred symbols without the permission of the soldiers. The only parallel therefore of an imperial robe made for a new emperor from *vexilla* and *dracones* is that of the Gordiani (Hist. Aug. 8. 3), *sublata de vexillis purpura imperatores eos dicemus*. On that occasion those who ripped or tore the purple from the standards were the people; in the case of Silvanus it was the soldiers.

It stands to reason that the judgement on the attitude of the soldiers should differ strongly in the court tradition from that of Ammianus. In Julian’s panegyric on the Emperor the soldiers on the Rhine remained faithful, and they tore ‘the wolf’ Silvanus to pieces in their devotion to the lawful emperor, Constantius. In this context the announcement that the imperial purple was taken from the *vexilla* of the *turreae* and the *dracones* of the legions would strike an obvious discord, as it would brand the soldiers as accomplices.

The questions I have raised can be answered, if we assign the right meaning to the rôle of the soldiers in this attempted usurpation. My reconstruction of what happened is as follows:

Silvanus’ success in Gaul (5. 15) gave his troops — and the non-Roman divisions in particular — reason to hope for greater things. Silvanus kept hesitating, but in the end he could no longer restrain their pressure. When he finally yielded to their insistence, the personal insult which he had received from Apodemius did play a rôle, but a secondary one. The news of Apodemius’ action brought him to a decision, but this decision had in any case been unavoidably forced upon him, regardless of Apodemius’ behaviour. Had he refused the purple the soldiers would have mutinied and begun a campaign of plunder throughout the length and breadth of Gaul. In order to avoid this Silvanus (now also disturbed by the personal treatment inflicted upon him) made up his mind, and the troops provided him with the purple of their *dracones* and *vexilla*.

But the new emperor was brought into this position against his wishes. He hesitated during the first weeks, and after the arrival of Ursicinus he hesitated still more. The presence of the other general reminded him increasingly of the disappointments which both of them had suffered; and in their conversation, as may be expected, personal grievances predominated. Ammianus, who had complete knowledge of these conversations, inferred — understandably but incorrectly — that already in the first phase of the rebellion the grievances of Silvanus had likewise been the deciding factor (5. 15—16). The evidence at the trial, however, revealed the truth of the matter (6. 1—3). It was the soldiers who compelled Silvanus (*necessitate compulsam*). The situation of Silvanus was the

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16 *Geschichte* IV, 233; excellent on this, Jullian VII, 166.
17 Rolfe’s translation: ‘he tore the purple decorations from the standards...’ is therefore incorrect.

108
same as that of Julian five years later in Paris (XX. 4. 17). In both instances it was the troops who instigated the revolt.

Proculus is, therefore, vindicated; and Silvanus is not condemned in Ammianus, in spite of the atmosphere poisoned by intrigue, and in spite of the dishonourable conduct of Ursicinus. The material which the historian gives us, as well as the court tradition which Julian follows, enables us better to understand the position of the army of barbarian origin. Silvanus became the victim of the dangerously strong position of his own soldiers, and of their precarious favour.
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