THE CHRONOLOGY OF VALENS’ DEALINGS WITH PERSIA AND ARMENIA, 364–378 CE

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Abstract: This article reexamines the chronology of foreign affairs on Rome’s eastern frontier during the reign of Valens. Questions of strategy are avoided in favor of a systematic treatment of the order and dating of events. Ammianus provides the basis for a narrative and a number of chronological indicators in passages at 27.12, 29.1, 30.1–2, and 31.7. These are fleshed out with passages from the Armenian Epic Histories, Themistius, and the ecclesiastical historians. When brought into synergy with the chronological indicators of the Theodosian Code, this information is made to yield a datable order of events involving Persia, Armenia, Iberia, and the Saracens between 364 and 378.

The best chronology of Rome’s dealings with Persia, Armenia and Iberia during the reign of Valens was established by Otto Seeck in 1906. Seeck based his conclusions on two series of winters listed in Ammianus’ narrative, the only narrative for the period to give us sound chronological indicators. Seeck combined his results from Ammianus with his chronological analysis of the Codex Theodosianus to fashion a largely convincing narrative for east Roman foreign policy during Valens’ reign in his Geschichte des Untergangs der antiken Welt. Most schol-

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1 Otto Seeck, ‘Zur Chronologie und Quellenkritik des Ammianus’, Hermes 41 (1906) 481–539, at 520–521, 523, 525. Important chronological observations were made already at J. Marquart, ‘Untersuchungen zur Geschichte von Eran’, Philologus 55 (1896) 213–244, at 219–227. Marquart himself drew extensively on the work of Henry F. Clinton, Fasti Romani (Oxford 1845) 460–492. The present article recreates the basis for the chronology used in chapter 4 of my Failure of Empire: Valens and the Roman State in the Fourth Century AD (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2002), which does not deal with questions of chronology in detail. It is drawn from appendix 2 of my 1995 Princeton dissertation, which it heavily revises and expands. The two Armenian sources used throughout, the Buzandaran Patmut’ıunk’ (Epic Histories, hereinafter BP), and the histories of Moses Khorenats’ı (hereinafter MX) are quoted in the translations of Nina Garsoian (tr. and comm.), The Epic Histories attributed to P’awstos Buzand (Buzandaran Patmut’ıunk’) (Cambridge, Mass. 1969) and Robert W. Thomson (tr. and comm.), Moses Khorenats’ı History of the Armenians (Cambridge, Mass. 1978).

2 Otto Seeck, Geschichte des Untergangs der antiken Welt, vol. 5 (4th ed.; Stuttgart 1921) 58–69 with 448–453. On difficulties of chronology in Ammianus more generally and on Ammianus’ tendency to date military campaigns by sequences of winters, very much in
ars have since followed Seeck’s chronology which is without question the fundamental work on the problem, but many have not, especially because everyone since Seeck has treated chronology as secondary to larger arguments about foreign policy. The result is that a number of schemes have appeared, most of them less reliable than Seeck’s, though some contain important insights. Moreover, as we shall see, Seeck did not give full weight to sources other than Ammianus and the Codex. Thus, his scheme contains some important errors and remains unnecessarily vague on a number of issues. Because the chronology has not

