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MARCELLINUS COMES ON EMPEROR ANASTASIUS A HANDFUL OF REMARKS*

Abstract. Anastasius was for Marcellinus not only a historical figure, but a ruler whose reign he was first able to observe from the perspective of his native Illyricum, and later as an inhabitant of Constantinople. The dominant influence on Marcellinus' attitude towards Anastasius, as has already been pointed out many times, had been the Emperor's religious policy, to which the chronicler, as a supporter of the orthodoxy, was opposed. Undoubtedly it was also not indifferent to the manner of Anastasius' portrayal that at the time of the creation of the first *Chronicle* Marcellinus was either already associated with Justinian, or wanted to gain recognition in the eyes of Justin I, who after taking over the power after Anastasius' death had taken action to reverse the negative outcomes of his predecessor's religious policy.

Keywords: Marcellinus Comes, Anastasius I, Justin I, Justinian I, Byzantine historiography

In Marcellinus Comes' *Chronicle*¹, which covers the period from 379 to 534 and is a continuation of the chronicles of Eusebius of Caesarea and of Hieronymus, there are mentions of Eastern Roman Emperors, starting from Theodosius I and ending with Justinian I. For Marcellinus, most of these have been historical figures, and his attitude towards them was likely determined to a considerable extent by views of the authors whose works he used². He may have however made up his own mind about the later ones, as the time of their rule (from Zeno to Justinian) coincided with his adult life. Among those, a special place belonged

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¹ The edition and translation of the *Chronicle* used in this paper: *The Chronicle of Marcellinus, a Translation and Commentary (with a Reproduction of Mommsen's Edition of the Text)* B. CROKE, Sydney 1995 [= BAUS, 7] (cetera: MARCELLINUS COMES).

² On the topic of the sources used by Marcellinus, see i.a.: M.J. LESZKA, S. WIERZBIŃSKI, *Komes Marcellin...*, p. 94–97 (further reading can be found there).

to Emperor Anastasius (491–518)³, whose long reign lasted for a considerable part of the historian's life. The aim of this paper is to highlight Marcellinus' attitude to Anastasius and the reasons behind it, as well as the manner in which the historian constructed the ruler's portrayal⁴.

Even a summary presentation of Marcellinus' own history will allow the Reader to better understand his attitude towards Emperor Anastasius. The historian was likely born at the turn of the 470s and 480s⁵ in Illyricum, perhaps from the area of the modern-day Skopje⁶. By the virtue of the place of his origin, his "native" tongue was Latin. It was in that language that he wrote the *Chronicle*, but he also knew Greek⁷. He received a fairly good education in his homeland⁸, most likely a consequence of his family belonging to, as is thought, the decurial class⁹. Until the end of his life Marcellinus felt ties to the Latin culture and language, which is most visibly expressed in the fact that after years of living in the Greek-speaking Constantinople, he wrote his *Chronicle* in Latin.

Marcellinus was certainly a Christian – although he did not state this directly in his *Chronicle*. A series of remarks regarding religious matters allows one to form a view on his religious attitude. He was undoubtedly a follower of the Nicene creed. This is attested to, i.a., by the manner in which he presented Theodosius the Great¹⁰, who is described with the word *orthodoxus*¹¹, as well as *vir ad modum religiosus et catholicae ecclesiae propagator*¹². This is further indicated by the fact of self-identifying with Catholicism through the use of the word *noster*¹³.

³ Basic literature on the reign of Anastasius: C. CAPIZZI, *L'imperatore Anastasio I (491–518). Studio sulla sua vita, la sua o pera e la sua personalità*, Roma 1969 [= OCA]; P. CHARANIS, *Church and State in the Later Roman Empire. The Religious Policy of Anastasius, 491–518*, Tessaloniki 1974 [= BKMε, 11]; F.K. HAARER, *Anastasius I, Politics and Empire in the Late Roman World*, Cambridge 2006; M. MEIER, *Anastasios I. Die Entstehung des Byzantinischen Reiches*, Stuttgart 2009.

⁴ This question has already been investigated by i.a. B. CROKE, *Count Marcellinus and his Chronicle*, Oxford 2001, p. 129–133.

⁵ W. TREADGOLD (*The Early Byzantine Historians*, Houndmills–New York 2007, p. 227–228) thinks that Marcellinus was born ca. 480 (before 482). B. CROKE (*Count...*, p. 20) points to the 470s, although he notes that the historian may have been born earlier, during the 460s, as well as later, during the 490s.

⁶ This is only a hypothesis, based on Marcellinus' account (518.1). More on its basis – B. CROKE, *Count...*, p. 21–22, 51–53. This idea is accepted by, e.g., W. TREADGOLD, *Early...*, p. 328.

⁷ There are visible traces of Greek orthography within the *Chronicle*, and of use of documents written in Greek (B. CROKE, *Count...*, p. 21).

⁸ Conclusions about Marcellinus' education are drawn on the basis of the *Chronicle* and the place of his origin. On the subject of its quality and extent – *ibidem*, p. 21.

⁹ W. TREADGOLD, *Early...*, p. 228.

¹⁰ On the subject of Theodosius I's portrayal in the *Chronicle* in the context of his religious attitude – A.C. КОЗЛОВ, *Социальные симпатии и антипатии комита Марцеллина*, АДСВ 15, 1978, p. 58–59.

¹¹ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 380.

¹² MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 379.1.

¹³ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 381.1: *nostris catholicis*; cf. a. 380; a. 399.3; a. 429.1; a. 431.2.

Like most of his countrymen, Marcellinus was a supporter of the resolutions of the Council of Chalcedon, and averse or even hostile towards the Monophysites. Marcellinus' unequivocally positive attitude towards the Council of Chalcedon is attested to by an expression in the *Chronicle – sexcentorum triginta patrum sancta et universalis synodus*¹⁴, as well as by considering Emperor Marcian, who convened the Council, as one of the rulers most distinguished in service of the Church, equal to Theodosius the Great or even surpassing him¹⁵. Marcellinus consistently refers to the supporters of Chalcedon as orthodox, and their faith – the orthodox one¹⁶. In turn, the opponents of the Council of Chalcedon are presented by Marcellinus in an unequivocally negative light. Thus, for example, Eutyches is called *nefandissimorum praesulem monachorum*¹⁷, the Council of Sydon *infamem et inripendam synodum*, and its participants *perfidorum episcopis*¹⁸.

At the turn of the fifth and sixth centuries Marcellinus left his homeland and arrived in Constantinople¹⁹, seeking for himself some career path. It is not out of the question, as Warren Treadgold suggests, that thanks to his education he found a place as one of the staff of Patricius, who was the *magister militum praesentalis* during the period of 498–520²⁰. It is likely that Marcellinus remained in his services until 520, when Justinian, the future Emperor, became the *magister militum praesentalis*. Perhaps he already was at that time one of the two *cancellari*²¹,

¹⁴ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 451.

¹⁵ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 379.1.

¹⁶ E.g. MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 458 (orthodox bishops, to whom Emperor Leo I directed a letter regarding the support for Chalcedon); a. 476.1 (Basiliskos acting against the catholic faith); a. 512.2–3 (opponents of the addition to Trishagion are the orthodox or catholic). Further examples – R. KOŚCIŃSKI, *The Elements of Identity as Exemplified by Four Late-Antique Authors*, [in:] *Routledge Handbook of Identity in Byzantium*, ed. M.E. STEWART, D.A. PARNELL, C. WHATELY, London–New York 2022, p. 148. On the subject of the portrayal of gatherings of bishops in the *Chronicle – A.C. КОЗЛОВ, Социальные...*, p. 55–56.

¹⁷ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 451: *Eutychetem nefandissimorum praesulem monachorum*.

¹⁸ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 512.8. More on this subject R. KOŚCIŃSKI, *The Elements...*, p. 148–149.

¹⁹ This may have taken place around 498, which may be hinted at by the fact that from that time onwards the *Chronicle* includes information originating from the author's own observations, and regarding Constantinople (W. TREADGOLD, *Early...*, p. 228). B. CROKE (*Count...*, p. 22–23) indicates, that Marcellinus' arrival in the Byzantine capital may have taken place between 498 (MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 498.2: humiliation of Longinus of Solinunte, the leader of an Isaurian uprising, in Constantinopolitan hippodrome) and 501 (MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 501.1–3: riots in the theatre). See also A. KOMPA, *Mieszkańcy Konstantynopola w oczach intelektualistów miejscowej proweniencji*, [in:] IDEM, M.J. LESZKA, T. WOLIŃSKA, *Mieszkańcy stolicy świata. Konstantynopolitańczycy między starożytnością a średniowieczem*, Łódź 2014 [= BL, 17], p. 38–39.

²⁰ W. TREADGOLD, *Early...*, p. 228. On the subject of Patricius – J.R. MARTINDALE, *The Prosopography of Later Roman Empire* (cetera: PLRE), vol. II, A.D. 395–527, Cambridge 1980, p. 840–842 (s.v. Fl. Patricius 14).

²¹ On the subject of this office – A.H.M. JONES, *The Later Roman Empire 284–602*, vol. I, Oxford 1986, p. 602–603.

although it cannot be ruled out that he only received the promotion to this position from Justinian. It is worth noting that Justinian, much like Marcellinus, came from Illyricum, and perhaps it was this fact that contributed to some extent to the Emperor's positive attitude towards the historian. It is not impossible that Marcellinus' appointment to the position of a *cancellarius* may have been a consequence of the publicity surrounding him, which resulted from the publishing around that time of the first edition of his *Chronicle*²². Marcellinus owed to Justinian the high titles of a *comes* and *vir clarissimi*²³, which he received before Justinian became an Emperor (527). Marcellinus left the service and retired before that event. He may have been around fifty at that time. Near the end of 534 or soon after Marcellinus supplemented his *Chronicle* with an account of the period between 518 and 534, ending with the events associated with the conquest of Africa by Justinian²⁴. Marcellinus passed away sometime after 534.

Considering the biographical sketch of Marcellinus presented above and keeping in mind the characterisation of the reign of Anastasius, it would appear that the matters which would have predominantly affected the historian's attitude towards the Emperor and the selection of information had been religious matters, his emotional connection to Illyricum, and connection with Justinian.

* * *

Even a cursory familiarity with a passage of the *Chronicle* devoted to Anastasius, and containing 67²⁵ mentions across 28 years, must therefore lead to a conclusion that he was not the historian's favourite. The author's emotions can be seen within – a dislike, or even hostility towards the Emperor. The basis for such attitude of Marcellinus towards Anastasius was the Emperor's religious policy. Marcellinus, as I have indicated above, a supporter of the orthodoxy, went so far as to claim that the Emperor declared a war on the orthodox, in the early part of his reign²⁶, and that Euphemius, the bishop of Constantinople, who was falsely accused and removed from his position, became his first victim²⁷. The chronicler kept a diligent

²² B. CROKE, *Count...*, p. 29. In the original version it encompassed the period from 379 to 518.

²³ This was a senatorial rank, but this had not necessarily meant that Marcellinus was a member of the senate (cf. *ibidem*, p. 30).

²⁴ On the possible influence of the victory over the Vandals on the preparation of the second edition of the *Chronicle* by Marcellinus – *ibidem*, p. 32–34.

²⁵ Included among those is a reference devoted to Dara, located in Codex Sanctomerensis 697. On its subject recently – *The Fragmentary Latin Histories of Late Antiquity (AD 300–620)*, ed., trans., comm. L. VAN HOOFF, P. VAN NUFFELEN, Cambridge 2020, p. 188–189. In nearly half (32) of the remarks there is a direct reference to Anastasius (491.1, 493.1, 494.1, 495, 496.1, 496.2, 498.2, 498.3, 500.2, 506, 507.2, 508, 511, 512.2, 512.4, 512.5, 512.6, 512.7, 512.8, 512.11, 513, 514.1, 514.3, 515.2, 515.3, 516.1, 516.2, 516.3, 517, 518.2, 518.3, 532).

²⁶ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 494.1.

²⁷ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 495.

record of the Emperor's actions against the orthodox. Among such actions the most spectacular and widely discussed were the riots associated with an attempt of introducing the *Trishagion*. There was bloodshed, and Anastasius even came close to losing power²⁸. He only kept his throne, as the chronicler writes, thanks to his lies and empty words²⁹. It is worth noting that Marcellinus in describing these events, during which, after all, blood was shed and the capital city suffered, does not condemn the orthodox inhabitants of Constantinople, putting the entire responsibility for all the evils that occurred during that time on Emperor Anastasius and his men. The ruler not only provoked the riots and supported the heretics, but in the end also tricked the orthodox, who returned to their homes counting on fulfilment of the promises made to them. The chronicler – an observer, and perhaps a participant of the riots – clearly sides with the orthodox and shares their disappointment with Anastasius' religious policy that followed.

Anastasius' policy towards orthodoxy, and more directly the removal of bishop Macedonius, in Marcellinus' view were supposed to have led to Vitalian's rebellion³⁰, who acted against Anastasius, with numerous forces rallied behind him³¹. Vitalian, as Marcellinus emphasised, was a Scythian³². Perhaps by making a note about this fact the chronicler wanted to present Anastasius in an even worse light. Here a Scythian-barbarian³³, and not the Emperor, was defending the orthodoxy, which was after all one of, if not the most important task of any Byzantine ruler. The aforementioned examples were only a part of the Emperor's hostile actions against the orthodox, but it seems they should be entirely sufficient to portray the chronicler's view of his religious policy.

Marcellinus formulated other accusations against Anastasius as well. From the very beginning of his reign, he was unable to secure peace, neither in the capital, nor outside of it. Even the very first mention of Anastasius' reign informs about

²⁸ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 512.2–7. These events culminated in an attempt at overthrowing Emperor Anastasius and elevating a new ruler, in the person of Areobindus, the husband of Anicia Juliana (he was recently the subject of: M.J. LESZKA, *Flawiusz Areobind – wódz jednej wojny*, BP 27, 2020, p. 5–16). More on the subject of these events: P. CHARANIS, *Church...*, p. 77–79; W.H.C. FREND, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement. Chapters in the History of the Church in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries*, Cambridge 1972, p. 220; B. LANÇON, *La contribution à l'histoire de l'Eglise de la Chronique de Marcellin d'Illyricum*, [in:] *L'historiographie de l'Eglise des premiers siècles*, ed. B. POUDERON, Y.-M. DUVAL, Paris 2001, p. 478–480; F.K. HAARER, *Anastasius I...*, p. 156–157; M. MEIER, *Σταυρωθεῖς δι' ἡμᾶς – Der Aufstand gegen Anastasios im Jahr 512*, *Mil* 4, 2007, p. 157–237.

²⁹ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 512.7.

³⁰ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 514.1. On the subject of Vitalian, who at the time of the rebellion was the *comes foederatorum* – see *PLRE II*, p. 1171–1176 (s.v. *Vitalianus* 2).

³¹ History of the conflict between Vitalian and Anastasius: MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 514.1–3; 515.2–4; 516.1; cf. i.a.: F.K. HAARER, *Anastasius I...*, p. 164–179; M. MEIER, *Anastasios I...*, p. 298sqq.

³² MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 514.1 (*Vitalianus Scythia*).

³³ Attention has been drawn to the negative undertones of this ethnonym in Marcellinus' *Chronicle* by – А.С. Козлов, *Комит Марцеллин, Виктор Туннунский и Марий Аваниский о «чужих» народах*, *АДСВ* 31, 2000, p. 69–70.

unrest which erupted in Constantinople³⁴, the next informs about an uprising in Isauria³⁵. The following events of this type noted by the chronicler took place in the capital in 493³⁶, and in 501³⁷, where he stated: *For the imperial city wept for more than three thousand citizens lost*³⁸, as a result of clashes between the circus factions. The next event of this type took place in 507³⁹, and the following, on the religious grounds and already discussed above, in 512⁴⁰.

Anastasius was not only unable to secure internal peace (often even causing its disruption himself), he could not defend the empire's lands from raids, either. Marcellinus noted the defeats suffered while defending from the Bulgar raids⁴¹, defeats in the war with Persia⁴² and with the Goths⁴³, to name but a few. The military defeats were to some extent a consequence of the indolence and less than good morale of Anastasius' commanders. One such commander was Cyril, *magister*

³⁴ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 491.2.

³⁵ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 492. The thread of the Isaurian uprising appears also in 497.2 (end of the war, without any commentary); 498.2 (mentions the capture and death of Longinus of Solinunte, but does not state that he was one of the leaders of the uprising). It needs to be noted however that Marcellinus did not put the responsibility for causing this uprising on Anastasius, while this would follow from the accounts of other sources. On the causes and progress of this uprising see: C. CAPIZZI, *L'Imperatore...*, p. 94–99; N. LENSKI, *Assimilation and Revolt in the Territory of Isauria, from the 1st Century BC to the 6th Century AD*, JESHO 42.2, 1999, p. 428–430, 440–441; A.D. LEE, *The Eastern Empire: Theodosius to Anastasius*, [in:] CAH, vol. XII, ed. AV. CAMERON, B. WARD-PERKINS, M. WHITBY, Cambridge 2000, p. 52–53; K. FELD, *Barbarische Bürger. Die Isaurier und das Römische Reich*, Berlin 2005 [= Mil.S, 8], p. 332–338; F.K. HAARER, *Anastasius I...*, p. 11–28; M. MEIER, *Anastasios I...*, p. 75–83.

³⁶ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 493.1. In this passage it is clear that the uprising of the capital's population was directed against Anastasius' rule, whose statues were toppled and dragged through the streets of the city.

³⁷ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 501.1–3.

³⁸ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 501.3 (trans. p. 33).

³⁹ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 507.

⁴⁰ On the subject of Marcellinus' portrayal of social unrest in Constantinople, see: M.J. LESZKA, *Niepokoje społeczne w Konstantynopolu w świetle Kroniki Marcellina Komesa*, [in:] *Dynamika przemian społecznych w średniowieczu*, ed. T. GRABARCZYK, T. NOWAK, Warszawa 2011, p. 71–78.

⁴¹ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 499.1 (the Byzantine army was commanded by Aristus, the *magister militum per Illyricum*. During the battle near the Tzurta river, four thousand of his soldiers were said to have died; lamenting this event, Marcellinus referred to them as the flower of the Illyrian army); a. 502.1 (the Bulgars were successful in raiding Thrace because, as Marcellinus emphasised, *there was no Roman army there capable of resisting them*).

⁴² MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 502.2 (a remark about the taking of Amida by the Persians, as a result of a betrayal), a. 503 (a remark about the loss in battle near the fort of Syphiros by the commanders Patricius, Hypatius and Areobindus).

⁴³ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 505; a. 517 (the Goths were said to have taken many Romans captive; while Anastasius sent a thousand pounds to buy them out of captivity, the sum was too small, and as a result they *were either burnt while shut in their dwellings or killed in front of the walls of the enclosed cities*, trans. p. 39. While Marcellinus did not state this directly, in the Emperor's attitude one could find miserliness and lack of compassion for his subjects, whose safety he was unable to secure).

militum per Thracias, described by Marcellinus as slothful, and whom Vitalian managed to slay in the circumstances which, to put it mildly, did not show Cyril in the best light⁴⁴.

Marcellinus' tendentiousness in the manner in which he presented activities of Byzantine armies during Anastasius' reign can be attested to by the portrayal of actions of Celer, a *magister officiorum* tasked with opposing the Persians, which contributed to some extent to the conclusion of a peace treaty favourable to the Byzantines (an event not even mentioned by the chronicler). From Marcellinus' account one could conclude that those opposing Celer's army were peasants, and not Persian soldiers⁴⁵. In the eyes of a reader of Marcellinus' *Chronicle* this would naturally not have been something to be particularly proud of. It is also worth bringing up in this context the evaluation of a naval expedition from 508, commanded by Romanos, *comes domesticorum* and Rusticus, *comes scholarum*, which was described as a contemptible victory⁴⁶.

To add to this rather gloomy portrayal of Anastasius' reign one needs to mention the natural disasters ravaging the empire, such as earthquakes⁴⁷ or fires⁴⁸. The historian made note of them, but did not comment. Either way, they complete the portrayal of the rule of a bad emperor.

The sole positive aspect of Anastasius' reign which the chronicler noted was the monetary reform⁴⁹. It is interesting that Marcellinus did not say a single word even about the changes to the taxation that benefited the people. B. Croke⁵⁰ indicated that the sole good actions of Anastasius had been the donatives for the army in 496⁵¹ and 500 (in this case the beneficiaries of Anastasius' decision had been, close to Marcellinus' heart, Illyrian soldiers)⁵². It does not seem that B. Croke's view was correct, as it needs to be clearly stated that Marcellinus only mentioned these actions of the Emperor and left them without a commentary; he did not positively evaluate them, which he did regarding the monetary reform.

⁴⁴ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 514.3 (*Vitalian found Cyril [...], sleeping between two concubines and, when he had extricated him, he slaughtered him with a Gothic knife...*, trans. p. 37–38).

⁴⁵ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 504.

⁴⁶ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 508; cf. B. CROKE, *Count...*, p. 131.

⁴⁷ E.g. MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 494; a. 518.1.

⁴⁸ E.g. MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 499.2.

⁴⁹ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 498.3: *Nummis, quos Romani teruncianos vocant, Graeci follares, Anastasius princeps suo nomine figuratis placibilem plebi commutationem distraxit* (By striking, in his own name, the coins which the Romans call 'terunciani' and the Greeks 'follares' the emperor Anastasius brought a peaceful change to the people, trans. p. 32). On the subject of Anastasius' monetary reform, see i.a. F.K. HAARER, *Anastasius I...*, p. 202–206.

⁵⁰ B. CROKE, *Count...*, p. 129.

⁵¹ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 496.1. It needs to be stressed that the donatives have been granted to the soldiers not from the Emperor's own initiative, but from that of his brother.

⁵² MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 500.2.

It seems that to complete the portrayal of this bad reign, Marcellinus rather frequently refers to Anastasius using the titles of Caesar⁵³ or Princeps⁵⁴, rather than Augustus or Imperator⁵⁵.

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Anastasius, as discussed above, was for Marcellinus not only a historical figure, but a ruler whose reign he was first able to observe from the perspective of his native Illyricum, and later as an inhabitant of Constantinople. The dominant influence on Marcellinus' attitude towards Anastasius, as has already been pointed out many times, had been the Emperor's religious policy, to which the chronicler, as a supporter of the orthodoxy, was opposed. Undoubtedly it was also not indifferent to the manner of Anastasius' portrayal that at the time of the creation of the first *Chronicle* Marcellinus was either already associated with Justinian, or wanted to gain recognition in the eyes of Justin I, who after taking over the power after Anastasius' death had taken action to reverse the negative outcomes of his predecessor's religious policy⁵⁶.

It nonetheless needs to be noted that despite the negative attitude towards Anastasius, in ending the narrative of his reign the historian did not break from the manner in which he was concluding the narratives about other emperors (mentioning an emperor's death and the length of his reign) and did not formulate even a general evaluation, as he did in the case of Marcian⁵⁷, whom he held, one may suppose, in an exceptionally high regard.

Translated by Michał Zytka

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⁵³ E.g. MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 514.1.

⁵⁴ E.g. MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 508; a. 511; a. 512.2; a. 512.7.

⁵⁵ Cf. B. CROKE, *Count...*, p. 131.

⁵⁶ On the subject of Justin I's religious policy see: A.A. VASILIEV, *Justin the First. An Introduction to the Epoch of Justinian the Great*, Cambridge Mass. 1950, p. 132–253.

⁵⁷ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 457. Cf. M.J. LESZKA, S. WIERZBIŃSKI, *Komes Marcellin...*, p. 24–25.

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