



Szymon Wierzbński (Łódź)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0684-0911>

THE CHIEFTAINS OF THE EASTERN ROMAN EMPIRE IN LIGHT OF THE CHRONICLE OF MARCELLINUS COMES*

Abstract. It is clear that while *Chronicle of Marcellinus Comes* belongs to most important works from the 6th century, there is significant problem with indicating his personal attitude towards the discussed characters and the described events. The following text is an attempt to answer the question why some of the warlords and generals mentioned in Marcellin's chronicle were shown positively and others not. It seems that the key to the chronicler's assessment of a given person was his origin, attitude to imperial authority and actual influence on the most important events of the era in which he lived.

Keywords: Marcellinus Comes, military history, Byzantium

There is no doubt that the *Chronicle of Marcellinus Comes*¹ presents the most important events in the history of both the Western Roman and Eastern Roman Empires from the late 4th century to the 530s. For the author of the work, however, it was the events taking place in the East that remained the focus of attention. Furthermore, Marcellinus' work was not intended to provide a detailed account of the history of the Western Roman and Eastern Roman Empires. Even a cursory reading of the *Chronicle* allows one to conclude that the author wrote only about those events that left a significant mark on the history of the empire². While it is difficult to find controversy in the selection of events reported, the matter becomes more complicated in the case of narratives on specific figures. This

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¹ For Marcellinus Comes and his work see, among others: B. CROKE, *Count Marcellinus and his Chronicle*, Oxford 2001; M.J. LESZKA, S. WIERZBIŃSKI, *Komes Marcellin vir clarissimus. Historyk i jego dzieło*, Łódź 2022 [= BL, 45].

² It is worth noting that Marcellinus' views and areas of interest were strongly influenced by his background. It is believed that he probably came from Illyricum: B. CROKE, *Count...*, p. 21–22, 51–53; W. TREADGOLD, *The Early Byzantine Historians*, Houndmills–New York 2007, p. 328; M.J. LESZKA, S. WIERZBIŃSKI, *Komes...*, p. 14.

is particularly evident in the case of the army chieftains of the Eastern Roman Empire. The author seems to deliberately omit the role of some prominent figures, while others, who may not have played a significant role, are given considerable space. At first glance, Marcellinus' actions seem to lack a logical criterion, but this is false. The purpose of this text will be to analyze the role played in the *Chronicle* by four selected chieftains of the Eastern Roman Empire – namely, Belisarius, Aspar, Vitalian and Sabinian the Great – and to answer the question of why they were portrayed in such a way³.

Belisarius. Marcellinus' *Chronicle* describes important military events from the time of Justinian I, such as the Iberian War (526–532) and the campaign of 533–534, which resulted in the liquidation of the Vandal Kingdom⁴. Although in both cases the military talent of Belisarius, who commanded both expeditions, played a decisive role, information about him is nowhere to be found in the Marcellinus' *Chronicle*. The chieftain's name does not appear even once, despite the fact that his role in restoring the power of the Eastern Roman Empire was undeniable⁵. It should be emphasized that it was to him, to some extent, that Justinian owed his hold on the throne during the Nika Riot in January 532⁶. Marcellinus writes about the events involving Belisarius, omitting his name, which indicates that the silence was intentional. This is all the more interesting because, for the author of the *Continuation of Marcellinus' Comes Chronicle*, the aforementioned chieftain occupies a position that reflects his importance⁷.

It seems that the reasons for this omission are to be found in the historian's approach to Justinian. Marcellinus, being closely associated with him, wanted to raise his profile and show him as a victorious emperor. It is noteworthy that the historian was completing his work at a time when there were preparations to celebrate the victory over the Vandals. Since the first years of Justinian's reign coincided with the burgeoning career of Belisarius, high praise of the capable chieftain could have subdued the ruler's image. The author of the *Chronicle* was certainly

³ Consequently, this text is more an attempt to answer the question of Marcellinus' motivations in writing the *Chronicle* than even a cursory compilation of the most notable imperial chieftains from the East.

⁴ *Marcellini v.c. comitis Chronicon*, a. 529; a. 533.1; a. 534.1, [in:] M.J. LESZKA, S. WIERZBIŃSKI, *Komes...* (cetera: MARCELLINUS COMES). Thus, the war with the Persians had actually begun several years before 529: G. GREATREX, S. LIEU, N.C. SAMUEL, *Justinian's First Persian War and the Eternal Peace*, [in:] *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars*, part 2, 363–630 AD, New York–London 2002, p. 82–97. More on the course of the war against the Vandals: J. STRZELCZYK, *Wandalowie i ich afrykańskie państwo*, Warszawa 1992, p. 167–183; M. WILCZYŃSKI, *Zagraniczna i wewnętrzna polityka afrykańskiego państwa Wandalów*, Kraków 1994, p. 183–207.

⁵ For more on Belisarius' military career and his relationship with Justinian see, among others: H. BÖRM, *Justinians Triumph und Belisars Erniedrigung. Überlegungen zum Verhältnis zwischen Kaiser und Militär im späten Römischen Reich*, *Chi* 42, 2013, p. 63–91.

⁶ G. GREATREX, *The Nika Riot: A Reappraisal*, *JHS* 117, 1997, p. 60–86.

⁷ Belisarius becomes a central figure basically from the beginning: *Kontynuacja Marcellina Komesa (Additamentum)*, a. 535.1, [in:] M.J. LESZKA, S. WIERZBIŃSKI, *Komes...*

aware of the numerous conflicts, and may have been an eyewitness to many disputes in the immediate circles of power⁸. Marcellinus, as an active participant in court life, must have known whose deeds should be publicized and who ought to be scarcely mentioned⁹.

Aspar. Another figure underrated in the *Chronicle* seems to be Aspar. The aforementioned chieftain began his career under the orders of Emperor Theodosius II, and it is then that he first appears in Marcellinus' *Chronicle*¹⁰. Aspar attained the dignity of a patrician, the position of *magister militum*, and for several decades (until his death in 471), he wielded enormous power in the Eastern Roman Empire¹¹. The chieftain appears in the *Chronicle* in several places, although these are rather perfunctory mentions¹². Such a portrayal of Aspar may have stemmed from several reasons. First, with regard to times preceding his, Marcellinus relied on available sources and reported events "second-hand"¹³. Second, the fact that Aspar had enjoyed prominence in the circle of power in the East for a long time presented the author of the *Chronicle* with a certain difficulty. It was important for the chronicler to adequately portray the various emperors¹⁴, and to elaborate on the role of the Alanic chieftain would have detracted from the importance of some of them, especially Marcian¹⁵. Third, and finally, Marcellinus shifts the

⁸ Marcellinus thus witnessed the Nika Riot of 532. However, the author takes the responsibility for the events off Justinian and places it on Anastasius' nephews: MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 532; M.J. LESZKA, S. WIERZBIŃSKI, *Komes...*, p. 30.

⁹ Marcellinus is considered to have arrived in Constantinople in the late 5th or early 6th century: 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.

¹⁰ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 425.1. Aspar's career began during the war with the Persians, which occurred during the reign of Theodosius II.

¹¹ For more on this interesting character, read, among others: R.A. BLEEKER, *Aspar and the Struggle for the Eastern Roman Empire, AD 421–471*, London 2022, p. 198–200; G. VERNADSKY, *Flavius Ardabur Aspar*, SF 6, 1941, p. 38–73; B. CROKE, *Dynasty and Ethnicity: Emperor Leo I and the Eclipse of Aspar*, Chi 35, 2005, p. 147–201; M. McEVOY, *Becoming Roman?: The Not-So-Curious Case of Aspar and the Ardaburii*, JLA 9, 2016, p. 483–511.

¹² MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 425.1, a. 427 (consulship), a. 447 (consulship) and a. 471.1, on the occasion of his death. It is worth mentioning that the figure of Aspar appears on the occasion of the usurpation of John, to whose downfall the aforementioned chieftain was also said to have contributed according to other sources: *The Chronicle of Hydatius and the Consularia Constantinopolitana*, ed. et trans. R.W. BURGESS, Oxford 1993 [= OCM], p. 424–425.

¹³ Some of the most noteworthy sources Marcellinus used include Orosius and Gennadius: M.J. LESZKA, S. WIERZBIŃSKI, *Komes...*, p. 94–97.

¹⁴ For example, the sources suggest that Aspar's attitude had a major impact on the ascension of the imperial throne by Marcian, who had previously served in his troops: *Ioannis Malalae chronographia*, XIV, 27, ed. I. THURN, Berolini–Novi Eboraci 2000 [= CFHB.SBe, 35] (cetera: IOANNES MALALAS); *Chronicon Paschale*, 450, vol. I, ed. L. DINDORF, Bonnae 1832 [= CSHB].

¹⁵ We know from other sources that the aforementioned chieftain, along with Marcian's wife, Pulcheria, had an overwhelming influence on his election as emperor: K. TWARDOWSKA, *Rzymski Wschód*

responsibility for the death of the chieftain and his two sons from Emperor Leo and places it on the court eunuchs¹⁶. Eager to portray the ruler in a good light, the author of the *Chronicle* elides the fact that Aspar's assassination caused not only riots in the capital, but also hostilities in Thrace, launched in retaliation by Theodoric Strabo, who was related to the chieftain¹⁷.

Vitalian. As mentioned earlier, analyzing the work of Marcellinus Comes, one gets the impression that in the case of some protagonists, the author presents them in a good light because he disliked their opponents. Perhaps this is the case of Vitalian, *magister militum per Thracias*, who at one stage of his career came into major conflict with Emperor Anastasius¹⁸. According to Marcellinus, the chieftain rebelled upon hearing that Macedonius, Bishop of Constantinople, had been removed from office¹⁹. The scale of the threat to power must have been significant, because according to the author, Vitalian headed towards the capital leading an army estimated at 60,000 soldiers²⁰.

w latach 395–518, [in:] *Świat rzymski w V wieku*, ed. R. KOSIŃSKI, K. TWARDOWSKA, Kraków 2010, p. 98–99; A. URBANIEC, *Wpływ patrycjusza Aspara na cesarską elekcję Leona*, USS 11, 2012, p. 174.

¹⁶ Interestingly, on this occasion, the chronicler emphasizes that Aspar was an Arian: MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 471. The authors of other sources, however, suggest that the cause of Aspar's downfall was his excessive ambition and Leo's concerns about the succession to the throne of Zeno and his grandson Leo: IOANNES MALALAS, XIV, 40; *Ioannis Zonarae Epitomae Historiarum libri XIII–XVIII*, XIV, 29, ed. T. BÜTTNER-WOBST, Lipsiae 1897 [= CSHB]. See also the comment of R.A. BLEEKER: *Aspar...*, p. 203–207.

¹⁷ K. TWARDOWSKA, *Rzymski...*, p. 107; A. URBANIEC, *Wpływ...*, p. 186–187. Moreover, it seems that the consequences of Aspar's murder were far more serious than Leo would have wished. The enraged Theodoric Strabo was only partially pacified and retained considerable influence in Thrace, even during the reign of Emperor Zeno: Ł. JAROSZ, *Teodoryk Strabon*, ZNUJ 140.3, 2018, p. 217. Let us bear in mind that the above-quoted authors present the issue of Aspar's downfall from the perspective of the struggle against Germanic influence in the Eastern Roman Empire, as rightly pointed out by W. TREADGOLD – *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, Stanford 1997, p. 150.

¹⁸ The trigger for the conflict was the removal of the bishop, although a common source of soldiers' agitation were the poor conditions of service prevalent in the army, or, interestingly, the conflict between the emperor and the chieftain of a particular army: MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 514.1–3; a. 515.2–4; Ł. JAROSZ, *Teodoryk...*, p. 225. Sources indicate that his father was a chieftain in Roman service, Patriciolus: *Ioannis Antiocheni Fragmenta quae Supersunt Omnia*, 242, 1, ed. S. MARIEV, Berolini–Novi Eboraci 2008 [= CFHB.SBe, 47] (cetera: IOANNES ANTIOCHENUS); THEOPHANES, *Chronographia*, AM 6005, vol. I, ed. C. de BOOR, Lipsiae 1883 (cetera: THEOPHANES).

¹⁹ As Michael the Syrian suggests, Vitalian and Macedonius may have been cousins, which would justify the ambitious chieftain siding with the ousted bishop: *Chronique de Michel le Syrien: Patriarche Jacobite d'Antioche (1166–1198)*, IX, 9, vol. II, ed. J.B. CHABOT, Paris 1901. This hypothesis is supported by F.K. HAARER, *Anastasius I. Politics and Empire in the Late Roman World*, Cambridge 2006, p. 164.

²⁰ Even if the numbers quoted by Marcellinus are exaggerated, Vitalian had considerable forces at his disposal, as the region in which he was stationed was notoriously threatened by barbarian incursions. For more on Vitalian and his rebellion, see: J.B. BURY, *History of the Later Roman Empire from the Death of Theodosius I. to the Death of Justinian*, vol. I, New York 1958, p. 447–452; F.K. HAARER, *Anastasius...*, p. 164–179; M. MEIER, *Anastasios I. Die Entstehung des Byzantinischen Reiches*, Stutt-

Interestingly, the chieftain was not portrayed in a negative light, despite the fact that Marcellinus highlighted his Scythian origins²¹. Elsewhere in the *Chronicle*, the author describes Vitalian's daring raid, which led to the death of his opponent in the imperial service, i.e. *magister militum* Cyril²². The aforementioned account was conducted so as to juxtapose the courage and valor of the former with the slothfulness and promiscuity of Anastasius' chieftain²³.

It is possible that Marcellinus portrayed Vitalian favorably not because he had any special affection for him, but because of the negative opinion he had of Anastasius, who could hardly be considered an exemplary defender of orthodoxy²⁴. Perhaps the portrayal of Vitalian as a good Orthodox Christian was intended to show the emperor in a bad light²⁵. The rift between the ambitious chieftain and Anastasius proved to be permanent, as the tension between them continued until the end of his reign²⁶. During Justin's reign, Vitalian was given the post of *magister militum praesentalis*, however, after some time, he was assassinated²⁷.

Marcellinus mentions the commander only in a few places, i.e. when the rebellion began, when Vitalian was deposed as *magister militum per Thracia*, and when he was promoted and died shortly thereafter²⁸. Little can be learned about the

gart 2009, p. 297. Vitalian's army probably included not only troops of the regular Roman army but also numerous groups of Bulgarians and Huns: IOANNES ANTIOCHENUS, 242; THEOPHANES, AM 6006; F.K. HAARER, *Anastasius...*, p. 165–167; M. MEIER, *Anastasios I...*, p. 297–298.

²¹ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 514.1. It seems that pointing out his origin was meant to further emphasize a contrast between the God-fearing Vitalian of humble origins and the emperor, who betrayed his duties as a defender of Orthodoxy: А.С. КОЗЛОВ, *Комит Марцеллин, Виктор Туннунский и Марий Аваншский о «чужих» народах*, АДСВ 31, 2000, p. 69–70.

²² MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 514.3.

²³ Not insignificant to the narrative is the fact that death found Cyril while he was spending the night in the embrace of two concubines.

²⁴ Moreover, the aforementioned emperor was portrayed negatively throughout Marcellinus Comes' work: B. CROKE, *Count...*, p. 129–133; M.J. LESZKA, S. WIERZBIŃSKI, *Komes...*, p. 27–28.

²⁵ Religious issues may have been a factor in this case. Both Vitalian, the aforementioned Bishop Macedonius, and Marcellinus, who reported on these events, had an unequivocally negative opinion of the Monophysite path taken by Anastasius, while the restoration of Orthodoxy and communion with Rome was a constantly recurring demand of the rebellious chieftain: MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 514; F.K. HAARER, *Anastasius...*, p. 164–165.

²⁶ It is noteworthy, however, that the conferring of this dignity was twofold. Firstly, it was intended to free Hypatius, an imperial chieftain captured during fights, from captivity, and secondly, to legalize Vitalian's *de facto* independence within the borders of the Empire, by granting him the title of *magister militum per Thracia*: MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 515.4.

²⁷ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 519.3; a. 520.1. B. CROKE (*Justinian under Justin: Reconfiguring a Reign*, BZ 100, 2007, p. 34–35) suggests that the reason for the killing of the chieftain was an attempt to usurp power. However, some sources indicate that Vitalian was executed in an act of delayed revenge for rebelling against Anastasius and sparking a civil war: IOANNES MALALAS, XVII, 8; THEOPHANES, AM 6012.

²⁸ M.J. Leszka makes a valid claim that Justinian, Emperor Justin's nephew and the future emperor, was probably involved: M.J. LESZKA, S. WIERZBIŃSKI, *Komes Marcellin...*, p. 205. In *Secret History*,

period between these events (i.e., between 516 and 519) from the *Chronicle* itself, which may indicate that the entire thread served as an excuse to criticize Emperor Anastasius.

Sabinian the Great. Sometimes Marcellinus describes selected chieftains from the East because he has sincere respect for them and bemoans that, for some reason, they failed. Such is the case with Sabinian the Great. The aforementioned chieftain held the office of *magister militum* during the reign of the Eastern Roman Emperor Zeno²⁹. As the author points out, the aforementioned Sabinian took office at an extremely difficult time for the Empire. The 470s and 480s were a tumultuous period in which the Western Roman Empire finally collapsed, and numerous barbarian peoples roamed the former empire³⁰. One such federation were the Goths, seeking a new homeland for themselves. The Eastern Roman Empire found itself in a difficult position, forced to maneuver through a complicated political puzzle of not always friendly peoples³¹.

As the author of the *Chronicle* reports, under these circumstances, Sabinian tried to defend the state while attempting to maintain his position against attacks from court coteries. Marcellinus assesses the aforementioned chieftain very generously, comparing him to ancient Roman statesmen³². The author also emphasizes Sabinian's organizational talents and his devotion to the Empire, stressing that the latter supported the tottering Senate³³. Moreover, the chieftain was portrayed as the conqueror of Theodoric Strabo, although in fact, the Goths posed a real threat to the Empire at all times³⁴.

Procopius argues that the main culprit in Vitalian's death was Justinian: PROCOPIUS, vol. VI, *The Anecdota, or Secret History*, VI, 27–28, with English trans. by H.B. DEWING, London–Cambridge Mass. 1935 [= LCL, 290]. This view was supported by: A.A. VASILIEV, *Justin the First. An Introduction to the Epoch of Justinian the Great*, Cambridge 1950 [= DOS, 1], p. 113.

²⁹ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 479.1. It seems likely that Sabinian actually held the office of *magister militum per Illyricum*.

³⁰ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 476.2.

³¹ A little more information on the aforementioned topic can be found in: J.R. MARTINDALE, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, vol. II, A.D. 395–527, Cambridge 1980, p. 967 (s.v. *Sabinianus Magnus* 4).

³² MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 479.1.

³³ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 479.2. In reality, however, Marcellinus was impressed by the uncompromising attitude of the chieftain, who wanted to fight the Goths even at the cost of sabotaging Zeno's strategic plans: MALCHOS, 20, [in:] *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire*, vol. II, ed. R.-C. BLOCKLEY, Liverpool 1983 (cetera: MALCHOS).

³⁴ It appears that sheer luck played a greater role in getting rid of Theodoric Strabo than the actions of Sabinian: if we believe the sources, the Gothic chieftain was killed when he fell from his panicked horse onto a spear lying on a cart: MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 481.1. This account is consistent with Jordanes' narrative: IORDANES, *Romana*, 346, [in:] *MGH.AA*, vol. V.1, ed. Th. MOMMSEN, Berolini 1882. For more on the military struggles between Sabinian and Theodoric Strabo, see: P. HEATHER,

Marcellinus further laments the premature death of the chieftain, but does not explicitly name those responsible for this tragedy³⁵. Other sources indicate that Emperor Zeno should be held responsible³⁶. John of Antioch's account, while relevant, does not shed much light on the attitude of Marcellinus Comes³⁷. The author of the *Chronicle* probably knew who was behind Sabinian's death, but, despite his great sympathy for the leader, he did not write explicitly who was to blame³⁸. Marcellinus painted Zeno in neutral colors, which is all the more interesting because he simultaneously omits the controversy surrounding the publication of the *Henotikon*³⁹. On the other hand, the sentiment towards Sabinian may have proved that Marcellinus wanted to include characters worthy of emulation, representing traditional Roman virtues, such as courage, devotion to the fatherland and selflessness⁴⁰.

The author of the *Chronicle* also mentions the figure of Sabinian the Great's son of the same name. The aforementioned chieftain appears in the pages of the work not because of his merits: the only mention describes the defeat he suffered at the hands of the barbarian chieftain Mundo⁴¹. The reasons why Marcellinus mentions the son of Sabinian the Great were probably twofold. First, he was the son of a well-known chieftain. More importantly, however, Sabinian "the Younger" served as *magister militum per Illyricum* in the early 6th century. This is another indicator that the author of the *Chronicle* cared most about the key events from

Goths and Romans 332–489, Oxford 1991 [= OHM], p. 292–298. According to Malchos, the success, though tactically significant, was rather local: MALCHOS, 20.

³⁵ MARCELLINUS COMES, 481.2. B. CROKE (*Count...*, p. 64–66) also does not attempt to resolve the causes of the chieftain's death.

³⁶ According to John of Antioch's account, Emperor Zeno was behind Sabinian's murder: IOANNES ANTIOCHENUS, 236.

³⁷ Some scholars, such as R. Kosiński, believe that the reason for the chieftain's downfall was not only his autonomy of action, which did not always agree with the emperor's plans, but his membership in an opposition faction that grew too powerful, which sealed Sabinian's fate: R. KOSIŃSKI, *The Emperor Zeno. Religion and Politics*, Kraków 2010 [= BSC, 6], p. 103.

³⁸ As B. Croke notes, Marcellinus may have viewed Sabinian as a worthy candidate for emperor: B. CROKE, *Commentary*, [in:] *The Chronicle of Marcellinus, a Translation and Commentary (with a Reproduction of Mommsen's Edition of the Text)* B. CROKE, Sydney 1995 [= BAus, 7], p. 102–104.

³⁹ I.e., an attempt to mediate between Orthodoxy and the Monophysites, rejected by Pope Felix III in 848: M.J. LESZKA, S. WIERZBIŃSKI, *Komes...*, p. 26–27. For more on the *Henotikon*, see: J. MEYENDORFF, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions: the Church 450–680 A.D.*, vol. II, Crestwood NY 1989, p. 194–202.

⁴⁰ Marcellinus' similar attitude can be observed in the case of another Eastern Roman chieftain, i.e. Arnegisclus. The author does not whitewash the aforementioned chieftain, acknowledging his responsibility for the murder of *magister militum* John (MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 441.2), but confirms his valor and devotion to his homeland paid with his life during the war with Attila: MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 447.5.

⁴¹ MARCELLINUS COMES, a. 505.1.

the perspective of the fate of the Empire, particularly, his home province, which often tipped the balance between the two parts of the Empire. Furthermore, the figure of Sabinian was crucial because he played an important role in the struggle against Theodoric Strabo, while also being the defender of Illyricum⁴².

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Reading the *Chronicle* of Marcellinus Comes allows for drawing some preliminary conclusions about the goals the author set for his work. This seems to be evident in the accounts relating to selected chieftains of the Eastern Roman Empire. On the one hand, the author wished to produce a work that presented certain rulers in a favorable light, even if this required the omission of certain events. On the other hand, Marcellinus did not hesitate to criticize other rulers, although he did not always do it directly, sometimes using the figure of an ambitious chieftain rallying against the emperor. Finally, the *Chronicle* seems to bear the hallmarks of a moralizing work lamenting the decline of customs, but also praising those among the chieftains who were willing to make sacrifices for the fatherland. All this suggests that for Marcellinus, the *Chronicle* was more a tool to achieve goals that were important to him, rather than an opportunity for a fair and impartial account of history.

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⁴² He probably earned the chronicler's recognition also due to his uncompromising drive to fight the Goths: MALCHOS, 20.

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Szymon Wierziński

Lodz University of Technology
Faculty of Organisation and Management
Institute of Marketing and Sustainable Development
Wólczańska 215
93-005 Łódź, Polska/Poland
szymon.wierzbinski@p.lodz.pl

