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Theatrical Metaphors in Ammianus Marcellinus

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Ammianus in his history tends to describe events in a very graphic and theatrical style. He emphasizes the visual and the gestural, leaving the clear impression that he is presenting to us characters performing on stage.¹ Not only does he present many episodes in this highly dramatic fashion, but he also makes considerable use of metaphors drawn from the theater, as if to compare actual events directly with those of the stage. While these metaphors have occasionally been noted in discussions of individual passages, they have never been the object of systematic study.² In this paper I will examine in detail the various occurrences of such metaphors and show how and why Ammianus chose to use them.

Before we look at the metaphors themselves, it is necessary to ascertain Ammianus' attitude toward the theater, which surely influenced his use of such language. In the time of Ammianus tragedy and comedy in their classical forms had almost vanished from the stage. They had been replaced by the mime and the pantomime, tremendously popular forms of stage entertainment whose immorality and triviality were often condemned in our literary sources from the period.³ These then must have been uppermost in

³ On theatrical performances under the empire see L. Friedländer, Darstellung aus der Sittengeschichte Rom in der Zeit bis zum Ausgang der Antonine (Leipzig 1920) 2.112–144; H. Jürgens, Pompa Diaboli: Die lateinischen Kirchenwäter und das antike Theater, Tübingen
his mind when he thought of the stage. As a native of Antioch and a long-time resident of Rome, Ammianus almost certainly had first-hand experience of these productions. He expresses his opinion of them in the course of his two Roman digressions. In the first he castigates the Romans for preferring the mime to the liberal arts (14.6.18): *denique pro philosopho cantor et in locum oratoris doctor artium ludicarum accitur et bibliothecis sepulchorum ritu in perpetuum clausis organa fabricantur hydraulica et lyrae ad speciem carpentorium ingentes tibiaeque et histrionicis gestus instrumenta nonlevia.*

After this he goes on to describe, in exaggerated detail, how foreigners and practitioners of the liberal arts were driven from the city during the famine of A.D. 383 while thousands of *nimae* and chorus girls were allowed to remain (14.6.19–20). The extreme bitterness of his tone here has often been thought to suggest that Ammianus himself was one of those who were expelled. A bit further on he returns to the theater, this time as the lurking place of every sort of undesirable (14.6.25): *Ex turba vero imae sortis et paupertinae in tabernis, aliqui pernoctant vinaris, nonnulli sub velabris umbraculorum theatralium latent, quae Campanam imitatibus lasciviam Catulus in aedilitate sua suspendit omnium primus.*

In the second Roman digression he criticizes the theater and its patrons as being base and degenerate (28.4.32): *Unde si ad theatralem ventum fuerit ulitatem, artifices scenerarit per sibilos exploduntur, si qui sibi aere humiliores non conciliauerit plebem. qui si defuerit strepitus, ad imitationem Tauricae gentis peregrinos vociferantur pelli debere, quorum subsidii semper nisi sunt ac steterunt, et taetris vocibus et absurdis; quae longe abhorrent a studiis et voluntate veteris illius plebis, cujus multa facete dicta memoria logiit et venusta.*

It is clear, I think, from these passages that Ammianus strongly disapproved of the theater and anyone who might be connected with it. They also suggest that Ammianus is very likely to be expressing a negative moral judgement whenever he associates anyone with it metaphorically. With this in mind, let us now turn to the metaphors.

The first instance occurs in an account of a palace conspiracy against the *magister equitum* Artilio (16.6). Ammianus expresses his distaste for pal-

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*Beiträge* 46 (1972) 213–246; H. A. Kelly, “Tragedy and the Performance of Tragedy in Late Roman Antiquity”, *Traditio* 35 (1979) 21–44. Condemnations of the immorality of late antique theater are common in both Christian and pagan authors; for references and discussion see Friedländer 115, 131–132; Jürgens 230–233, 241; S. Dill, *Roman Society in the Last Century of the Western Empire* (London 1921) 55–58, 119, 122.


5 It is worth noting that Ammianus’ opinions coincide with those of Julian, his hero; cf. *Frag. Epist.* 304 οδὸν δὲ τοὺς ἱερᾶς ὑποχώρησαν καὶ ἀποστείγαν τὸ δήμος τῆς ἐν τοῖς θεάτροις ἀνάγεσις, ἐνθάδε οὖν ἱερέας εἰς θεάτρον εὐσείας ἐγένετο φίλον τιμωλοχον μὴδὲ ἀματηλάτην, μὴδὲ ὀφθαλμῆς μὴδὲ μύως αὐτοῦ τῇ θύρᾳ προσέμενον.

*Eratos* 85
ace intrigue frequently in the *Res Gestae* (e.g. 14.9.1–2; 15.5.28, 32), and here he describes the actions of the conspirators with such unflattering terms as *circumlarbat* and *strepens immanis*. The whole account is then closed with a stage metaphor: *Cumque res in inquisitionem veniret necessariusque negotio tentis obiectorum probatio speraretur, tamquam per satyram subito cubiculariis suffragantibus, ut loquebatur pertinax rumor, et vinculis sunt exuetae personae, quae stringebantur ut consciae, et Dorus evanuit et Verissimus ilico tacuit velut aulaceo deposito scænae*. The characters (personae) are sent off and the curtain drops. Ammianus leaves his reader with the impression that the efforts to ruin Arbitio with trumped-up charges were little more than a rather gruesome farce or mime. A somewhat similar use of stage imagery is found at 18.5.3. Ursicinus, the *magister equitum* in the East, had just been removed from his command and replaced by the incompetent Sabinianus. This was, according to Ammianus, the result of the machinations of the cohors palatina, aided and abetted by the court eunuchs. Ammianus sums up these events in a transitional phrase as he passes on to another topic. It is here we find reference to the stage: *dum haec in castris Constantii quasi per lustra aguntur et scænam*. Ammianus has already expressed his strong disapproval of court intrigue against Ursicinus; he now ridicules the courtiers as acting in a manner more befitting brothels and the stage than the imperial court.

Ammianus often makes use of theatrical terminology in discussing the conduct of various imperial officials. He characterizes Lupicinus, a *magister armorum* in Gaul, in the following manner (20.1.2): *bellicosum sane et castrensis rer peritum, sed supercilia erigentum ut cornua et de tragicō, quod aiunt, coturno strepente, super quo diu ambigebatur, avarus esset potius an crudelis*. Here de tragicō ... coturno strepente is obviously intended in a derogatory way and like *supercilia erigentum ut cornua* refers to the arrogance of Lupicinus. We find quite similar metaphorical language in Ammianus’ description of the character of Petronius Probus, praetorian

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6 *Persona,* in late Latin, is often used merely in the sense of person, but here, as at 29.2.23, may well retain its theatrical associations. The *personae* are alleged accomplices of Arbitio and are expected to incriminate him when they are questioned under torture. Thus they are important characters in the farce.


8 Note that the *coturnus* was sometimes used in the mime as well as in tragedy; cf. H. Reich, *Der Mimus* (Berlin 1933) 744 n. 1 and Friedländer (above note 3) 123. Hence, even in the use of this rhetorical commonplace Ammianus may envision the *pantomimus* strutting about the stage; cf. especially his use of *coturnus* at 28.6.29 (discussed below).
prefect and head of the powerful Anician house. Probus, who seems to have been a bête-noir of Ammianus, is portrayed in the worst possible light. Among other things Ammianus calls him insidiatorum dirum et per cruentes noxium simulat (27.11.2) and makes him the object of a bit of moral indignation quoted from Cicero’s Second Philippic (29) at 27.11.4. His insecure disposition is pointed out by means of theatrical terms (27.11.2): et licet potuit, quoad vixit, ingentia largiendo et intervallando potestates assiduas, erat tamen interdum timidus ad audaces, contra timidos celsior, ut videretur, cum sibi fideret, de coturno strepere tragoico et, ubi paveret, omni humilior socco. The same phrase, de coturno strepere tragico, is again used to denote arrogance and is here balanced by omni humilior socco (cowardice). Ammianus almost portrays Probus as a miles gloriosus.

The same metaphor is used in the second Roman digression to describe and condemn the conduct of the senatorial class (28.4.27): cunqure mutuum illi quid petunt, soccos ut Micionas videbis et Lachetas, cum adiguntur, ut reddant, ita coturnatos et turgidos, ut Heraclidas illos Crespontem et Temenum putes. Hactenus de senatu. Once more we find alternating servility and arrogance expressed through the garb of the stage. Here however Ammianus expands on the comparison, illustrating soccos with names commonly given to senes in New Comedy and coturnatos with mythic figures from tragedy (or possibly the pantomime). The insulting nature of the terms is heightened by the fact that one of his passages criticizing the theater comes just a few sentences later (28.4.32).

Another official whose activities Ammianus puts on stage, so to speak, is Romanus, the comes Africæ. Romanus appears several times in the last six books of the Res Gestae, always as a malefactor. In 28.6 Ammianus tells how the Tripolitani suffered because of the corruption and greed of Romanus. The opening lines set an almost tragic tone (28.6.1): hinc, tamquam in orbe migrantes alium, ad Tripoleos Africanae provinciae veniamus aerumnas, quas, ut arbitror, iustitia quoque ipsa deflevit. quae unde instar exarsere flammorun, textus aperiet absolutus.

The same highly dramatic tone is maintained throughout the passage as Ammianus rouses our pity for the Tripolitani. Although these unfortunate people send envoys to the imperial court seeking relief, Romanus is able to

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10 In addition to 28.6, Ammianus also refers to Romanus at 27.9.1; 29.5.1–2, 50; 30.2.10–11. For a modern discussion of the activities of Romanus see B. H. Warmington, “The Career of Romanus, Comes Africæ” BZ 49 (1956) 55–64. It is possible, as Warmington suggests, that Ammianus’ account of Romanus is affected by his bias in favor of the curial class, a group which suffered heavily at the hands of Romanus. On Ammianus and the curiales in general see R. Pack, “Ammianus and the Curia of Antioch” CP 48 (1953) 80–85.
forestall imperial agents sent to investigate the situation. Finally one of his creatures, a man named Caecilius, is questioned under torture and breaks. It is at this point that Ammianus introduces his metaphor from the stage (28.6.29): *et nequid colurni terribilis fabulae relinquuerent intempiatum, hoc quoque post depositionem accessit aulaeum. Romanus ad comitatum prefectus secum Caecilium duxit cognitores accusaturn ut inclinatos in provinciae partem; isque Merobaudis favore susceps necessarios sibi plus petierat exhiberi.*

Ammianus has finished the tragedy of the Tripolitani, but there is still an afterpiece (exodium) to describe. Romanus goes to the imperial court where, through the intrigues of his friend Merobaudes, he manages to clear both himself and Caecilius of all charges (28.6.29–30). Since the exodium at a theater was normally a mime or some similar production, we may safely assume that Ammianus is once again portraying the court intrigues of corrupt officials as being a stage farce.

The last imperial official to whom Ammianus applies theatrical metaphors is Festinus of Tridentum. Festinus was a governor of Asia who, on account of ambition, changed from earlier moderation and fairness to cruelty (29.2.23): *sed cum impie peremptorum execuquis suffragantibus ad praefecturam venisse hominem comperisset immitterum, exarist ad agenda sperandaque similia et histrionis ritu mutata repente persona studio nocendi concepito incedebat oculis intentis ac diris praefecturam autumans affore prope diem, si ipse quoque se contaminasset insontium poenis.* So Festinus becomes a cruel and murderous judge. The sudden change in character is compared to an actor changing his mask, thus not only associating Festinus with the stage but also suggesting that his earlier goodness may have been hypocritical.

Ammianus, as we have seen at 28.4.27, uses theatrical imagery to characterize groups as well as individuals. He does so repeatedly in his invective against the legal profession (30.4). Ammianus begins this digression with some famous definitions of forensic oratory (30.4.3–4) and then refers favorably to many famous orators of the past (4.5–6). Upon turning to contemporary lawyers, however, he adopts a bitter, satiric tone and attacks them relentlessly. He describes lawyers as *subsidentium divites domos* (4.8), a phrase which almost suggests to the reader the parasites of comedy. This idea is reinforced at 4.14: *Quartum atque postremum est genus impudens, pericax et indoctum eorum, qui, cum immature a litteraribus eruperint ludis, per angulos civitatum discurrunt mimiambos non causarum remedii congrua commentantes fores divitum deterendo cenarum ciborumque auctantes delicias exquisitas.* Not only do they besiege the homes of the wealthy in search of free meals, but they also speak as if they were performing in a comedy. Still later (4.19) he shows the same advocates in court: *corrugatis hinc inde frontibus brachisique histrionico gestu formatis, ut contionaria Gracchi fistula post occipitum desit, consistitur altrinse-
The main thrust of this, despite the learned allusion to Tiberius Gracchus, is to compare the lawyer to a comedian yet a third time, as the words *histrionicus gestu* make clear.\(^{11}\)

There are two remaining passages containing theatrical imagery.\(^{12}\) The first is Ammianus’ account of the coronation of the usurper Procopius. Procopius, a kinsman of Julian, had gone into hiding after Julian’s death in 363. Finally in 365 he emerged and raised a revolt against Valens. Ammianus, who always shows a strong regard for the legitimacy of the emperor and hostility toward a usurper,\(^{13}\) ridicules the crowning of Procopius as if it were a mime (26.6.15): *Stetit itaque subtabidus – excitum putares ab inferis – nusquam reperto paludamento tunica auro distincta ut regius minister indutas a calce in pubem in paedagogiani pueri speciemi purpureis operius tegminibus pedum hastatusque purpureum itidem pannulum laeva manu gestabant, ut in theatrali scena simulacrum quoddam insigne per aulaeum vel mimicam cavillationem subito putares emersum.* Ammianus emphasizes the bizarre and unnatural in his description. He first suggests that the emaciated Procopius resembles a ghost from the underworld; the idea of some evil spirit which has come from hell to stir up civil strife may also be present in the image.\(^{14}\) Ammianus then dwells at great length on the outlandish purple and gold outfit of Procopius which makes him look a palace page boy. Lastly, to close the description (note the ring composition: *excitum putares – putares emersum*) there is the simile of the mime performance. This simile gives the reader the impression that the whole episode is a farce, a bit of music hall fluff, which one need scarcely take seriously, although the revolt was indeed a very dangerous one for Valens. Ammianus continues in this mocking vein when he is recounting the first acts of

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\(^{11}\) For the anecdote about Gracchus cf. Cic. *de orat.* 3.225; Plut. *Tib. Grach.* 2.4–5; Val. *Max.* 8.10.1; Gellius 1.11.10. As to the expression *histrionicus gestu,* in the second century A.D. and afterward *histrio* normally refers to a *pantomimus* rather than an actor in general; cf. *TLL* 6.2844–2845 and Friedländer (above note 3) 135. Ammianus makes further reference to the mime at 30.4.21, where he describes judges as *doctos ex Philisionis aut Aesopi cavillationibus.* Philistion is the well known writer of imitators who lived in the age of Augustus; cf. M. Bonaria, *Mimorum Romanorum Fragmenta* (Genoa 1956) 2.55–57 (nos. 516–540). The word *cavillation* also seems to be closely associated with the mime; cf. Amm. 26.6.15 and Solinus 5.13.

\(^{12}\) I omit from consideration one other stage metaphor, 16.12.57 *et velut in quodam theatrali spectaculo aulaeis miranda monstrantibus multa,* which introduces a *tableau vivant* in which the Germans who have been defeated at the Battle of Strasbourg attempt to swim across the Rhine to safety.

\(^{13}\) R. C. Blockley (above note 2) 57.

\(^{14}\) Ammianus’ description of Procopius here calls to mind Claudian, *In Rufinum* 1.74–115, where Rufinus is described as being the protégé of the powers of Hell; cf. A. Cameron, *Claudian: Poetry and Propaganda at the Court of Honorius* (Oxford 1970) 69. Ammianus himself uses a similar image in a somewhat different way at 28.4.5: *si fabularum (here meaning “myths”) rite ab inferis excitatus.*
Procopius after his investiture, beginning (26.6.16): *ad hoc igitur dehonestamentum honorum omnium ludibrio sublatus.*

The last example of theatrical metaphor is found in the obituary of Constantius II. At the very beginning of the list of the late emperor’s good qualities we encounter the following (21.16.1): *imperatoriae auctoritatis coturnum ubique custodiens popularitatem elato animo contemnebat et magno erga tribuendas celstores dignitatis impendio parcus nihil circa administrationum augmenta praeter paucu novari perpressus numquam erigens cornua militarium.* Ammianus certainly approves of the maintenance of imperial dignity and contempt for popularity (cf. 25.4.18; 27.9.10), yet the choice of words suggests that Ammianus is also hinting at the arrogance of Constantius as well. This is a topic which he has harped upon constantly, *coturnus/coturnatus,* as we have seen, indicate arrogance in the majority of their occurrences in Ammianus. It may be that Ammianus thought Constantius just a bit overzealous in keeping up his dignity. Or perhaps the choice of *coturnus* in what is supposed to be a positive context is just a subconscious manifestation of his deep-seated hostility toward Constantius. The mere fact that the metaphor is used among the *bona* rather than the *vitia* should not influence us overmuch. Another of the “virtues” of Constantius is his somewhat false pretensions of learning at 21.16.4, hardly a complimentary remark.

Certain conclusions readily emerge from our survey of theatrical imagery

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15 On the revolt of Procopius see R. Till, "Die Kaiserproklamation des Usurpators Procopiius" *Jahrbuch für fränkische Landesforschung* 34/35 (1974/75) 75–83 and Blockley (above note 2) 55–61. Blockley suggests that Ammianus may have been following imperial propaganda in his portrayal of Procopius. He cites Zosimus 4.5.5 on the same event: ἄσπερ ἀπὸ σκυνής βοσκεί τα σχεδιασμένα. This, he claims, probably reflects the same tradition. While this may have been the imperial line on the matter, I think that we have already established that such imagery is entirely in character for Ammianus. It is also probable that such theatrical metaphors were already commonplace in this context; cf. Josephus’ account of the irregular appointment of Pharnax as high priest: λαπαράνει δ’ ἀπὸ τῆς ἄντι παρανομής τῆς Ξανθίνης, ὑπὸ Ψαμοῦθαν κάμης Λαμπρίσκης, άνθη τὸ μύθον τούτου ἄρχοντα τὸ ἀρχαῖον, ἀλλ’ ὑπὸ διάμετρον σαροῦ τοῦ τῆς Ἐλεούσανθου ἀνήγαγον ἀλλ’ ἀνετοῖς. ἀπὸ γοῦν τῆς γνώσεως ἄνευ τῶν σύμβων τοῦ προσωποῦ τῆς τριστείας περιτυπηθέντοι τῆς ἔρεν καὶ τὸ τί δι᾽ ἐπὶ καθὸ διάδοσιν (BJ 4.155–156). Note also Julian’s description of Silvanus’ investiture: καὶ τέλος ἀπὸ τῆς γυναικονίτιδος ἀναδύμονος ἀλκιοσκύνης ἀμίνων γελοίος ἀλθῆς τόφανως καὶ τραγικὸς ἄνθος ἀνθρίβην (Or. 2.98d). Ammianus himself gives a much more sympathetic account of Silvanus’ revolt and suppression (15.5) events in which he was personally involved. While there are some scornful remarks showing his disapproval of the usurpation (15.5.16, 25). Ammianus actually seems to feel sorry for Silvanus (15.5.32) and even puts what appears to be his own opinion in the mouth of Silvanus (15.5.28).

16 Blockley (above note 2) 39–40.

17 Amm. 20.1.2; 27.11.2; 28.4.27 (all discussed above) denote arrogance. At 28.1.4 *coturnatus* is used to describe the style of Phrynicus’ *Capture of Miletus.*
in Ammianus. The range of application is small: corrupt imperial officials and palace intriguers, lawyers, and the senate. Indeed, apart from the viciously satiric description of the coronation of the usurper Procopius and the single metaphor applied to Constantius, we find the target is in every instance an upper echelon imperial bureaucrat or one of his hangers-on.

And in each case Ammianus' purpose seems to be a negative characterization or moral criticism. It is clear to any reader of the Res Gestae that Ammianus tends to display a smug sense of moral superiority. Also he often criticizes public officials as lacking the very literary qualities which he so ostentatiously displays. One suspects a certain feeling of resentment in Ammianus: he is excluded from the charmed circle of the imperial aristocracy, although he feels himself to be better than they are.

The distribution of theatrical imagery in the Res Gestae is also of interest. Passages containing metaphors drawn from the stage occur regularly in all parts of the work except the books covering Julian's reign as Augustus. Not one occurs in books 22–25. Obviously Ammianus feels the whole era was morally superior.

Why did Ammianus choose to make use of theatrical imagery in this way? Certainly it is in keeping with the general spirit of the age, with its artificiality and tendencies toward dramatic posing and viewing men as types rather than individuals. Yet Ammianus is well known for his imitation of earlier authors, and there are literary antecedents. Suetonius provides us with a few examples such as Tiberius 24.1: principatum, quamvis neque occupare confestim neque agere dubitasset. et statione militum, hoc est vi et specie dominatiónis adsumpta, diu tamen recusavit, impudentissimo nunc adhortantis amicos increpans ut ignaros, quanta belua est imperium... The comparison to the mime here is much like what we find in Ammianus. The most likely source, however, is Cicero, the favorite author of Ammianus.

18 It is possible that the theatrical nature of court ceremony itself has something to do with the application of such metaphors to the courtiers. On court ceremonial in general, see S. MacCormack, Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity (Berkeley 1981).

19 Orfitius, an urban prefect, is criticized for lack of learning (14.6.1), as is the praetorian prefect Modestus (30.4.2).

20 See for example 14.6.12–15, which sounds as if it might be based on personal experience.

21 A similar phenomenon is found in the case of animal images, which are used for the same purpose; cf. Blockley (above note 2) 25–26, 183–184.

22 See Auerbach and MacMullen (above note 1), also H. P. L'Orange, Art Forms and Civic Life in the Late Roman Empire (Princeton 1965) 24–26.

23 See also Caligula 45.2 and Otho 3.2; Blockley (above note 17) 31–34 discusses the influence of Suetonius and biography on Ammianus.

metaphorical language drawn from the stage.\textsuperscript{25} He frequently uses it in his speeches to ridicule opponents. An example is the delightful scene in the Pro Caelio (65) where Cicero reduces the charges against Caelius to the absurdity of the mime: mimi ergo iam exitus, non fabulae, in quo cum clausula non inventur, fugit aliquid e manibus, dein scabilla concrampis, aulaeum tollitur. Thus Cicero ends a vignette in much the same way as does Ammianus at 16.6.3.\textsuperscript{26} In the Verrines Cicero employs theatrical terminology to characterize the career of Gaius Verres:

\textit{itaque primum illum actum istius vitae turpissimum et flagitosissimum praetermittam.} (2.1.32)

\textit{qualis iste in quarto actu improbitatis futurus esset?} (2.2.18)

\textit{dubitate etiam, si potestis, quin eum iste potissimum ex omni numero delegerit cui hanc cognitoriis falsi improban personam imponerat quem et huic inimicissimum et sibi amicissimum esse arbitraretur.} (2.2.109)

Cicero divides Verres' life into acts as if it were a play. He describes Verres himself as assigning roles (\textit{personae}) to supporting characters. This type of stage metaphor is paralleled in Ammianus. He presents the corrupt and wicked governors Romanus (28.6.29) and Festinus (29.2.23) in a similar way. These parallels are rather general in nature. Still, as I pointed out above, Ammianus had a tremendous admiration for Cicero and often borrowed phrases from him.\textsuperscript{27} It is quite possible that the orations of Cicero influenced Ammianus in his use of theatrical metaphor.

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\textsuperscript{27} It is fairly certain that Ammianus had read most of Cicero’s speeches, including the Verrines. On the Verrines in particular see Michael (above 29) 22–23 and E. E. L. Owens, \textit{Phraseological Parallels and Borrowings in Ammianus Marcellinus from Earlier Latin Authors} (diss. London 1958) 96–100. Some additional parallels from Cicero for the use of theatrical metaphor in invective passages are \textit{Sest.} 166; \textit{Phil.} 2.34; 65; \textit{Prov. Cons.} 14.