

Roman Gaul and Germania (350-353 CE) in the Inter-Political System: The Potential of IR Theories for Historical Research Using the Example of Magnentius

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Introduction: The Knowledge Gap

Sources do not tell much about Magnentius' usurpation in 350 and the war that followed, but what they do tell is dramatic: in 353, when Magnentius saw the war was lost for himself and committed suicide, not only he but also a legitimate Roman emperor were dead.¹ Constantius II had outlived his brothers and was now the sole ruler of the empire, over fifty thousand soldiers had died in the battle of Mursa alone, and a decade of usurpation had begun.² After 350, six men were to claim to be *augustus* or *caesar*, and only the last of this line, Julian Apostata, was to stop the trend after his formal recognition as the legitimate *augustus*.³ The usurpation of Magnentius and the ensuing three-year war are not historical footnotes, but events central to the Roman Empire in the fourth century. The source material, especially for the Roman West outside of Italy and Illyria, is especially thin, and the causes of many events in the context of the war are difficult to reconstruct.

¹ Zeev Rubin, "Pagan Propaganda during the Usurpation of Magnentius 350-353," *Scripta Classica Israelica* 17, 1998, 124. The episode about Magnentius is a "historiographic wasteland".

² Ioannis Zonaras 13.8 puts the number of dead at 54,000. See Ioannis Zonaras, "Epitome Historiarum" in: *The History of Zonaras: From Alexander Severus to the death of Theodosius the Great*, lat.-engl. ed. and trans. by Thomas Banich and Eugene Lane, (London: Routledge, 2009). Drinkwater recently considered this estimate plausible and estimates that about 13% of the entire Roman army perished in the Battle of Mursa. See John F. Drinkwater, "The Battle of Mursa, 351: Causes, Course, and Consequences," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 15, 1, 2022, 56.

³ Dietmar Kienast, *Römische Kaiser Tabelle: Grundzüge einer römischen Kaiserchronologie* (Darmstadt: WBD, 2004), 219-223.

When dealing with the events of 350-353, historians are confronted with knowledge gaps that cannot currently be closed with classical historiographical source work and traditional source criticism.

The research field of International Relations (IR) has produced a colossal body of literature in recent decades, which from the beginning has mainly focused on the systematization and theoretical embedding of interstate conflicts, wars, and security policy decisions.⁴ Historical research took little notice of this. In the last decades, only Arthur Eckstein undertook a systematic application of neorealist IR theory to gain historical knowledge.⁵ However, especially when, as in the case of the armed conflict between Magnentius and Constantius II, much is still unclear and can hardly be explained by the sources, it seems sensible to consult theories that are supposed to explain such armed conflicts. By applying neorealist theory to the inter-political system of the Western Empire from 350-353, I pursue two goals in this paper: First, in doing so, I seek to promote a better understanding of the causes of Magnentius' usurpation and the course of the ensuing war with Constantius II in Gaul and the Germanic provinces. Secondly, I will raise the question of what knowledge historical research can gain from the application of IR theories.

In the following, therefore, the usurpation of Magnentius and the course of the war will first be constructed as the ancient sources allow, highlighting the major problems of current historiographical understanding. I will then go into more detail on the relationship between historiography and IR, as well as present the main aspects of neorealist theory according to its originator, Kenneth Waltz. I have chosen the neorealist theory, firstly, to be able to follow Eckstein, secondly, because it is the most prominent IR theory, thirdly, because IR realism, still seeks the closest connection to history and, fourthly, because it can be applied with

⁴ Jürgen Hartmann, *Internationale Beziehungen* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaft, 2009), 10.

⁵ Arthur M. Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

relative ease.⁶ This will be done subsequently, focusing on the problems of understanding highlighted prior. Finally, I will discuss explanatory approaches that lie outside of neorealist theory to evaluate the heuristic potential of IR theories for historiography.

The Usurpation of Magnentius and the War Against Constantius II, 350-353

On 18 January 350, Marcellinus, the *comes rei privatae*, i.e. the private treasurer of Emperor in the Roman West, Constans, invited several high military and civil officials to the Gallic city of Autun under the pretext of celebrating his son's birthday.⁷ Magnus Magnentius, the commanding officer of the *Iovani* and *Herculani*, was also present. Around midnight, Magnentius left the celebration and returned in imperial garb.⁸ Here, however, the sources contradict each other: Zonaras provides an alternative version of the event, in which not Marcellinus, but Magnentius himself held the celebration.⁹ This detail has considerable influence on the question of the scope of the conspiracy and how strong the initial acceptance of Magnentius was among Roman elites. While the result is the same in all versions – Magnentius is proclaimed *augustus* by those present at the celebration, later by the inhabitants of Autun and the soldiers stationed in the region – the quality of the usurpation is different in each case.¹⁰ The ancient sources express different views when, on the one hand, they point to Constans' poor standing among the acceptance groups central to his rule, and, on the other hand, seem to find the reason for the

⁶ Hartmann, 10.

⁷ "Consularia Constantinopolitana," in *Chronica Minora saec. IV. V. VI. VII, MGH Scriptores, Auctores Antiquissimi 11*, ed. Theodor Mommsen, (Berlin: 1892), s.v. 350; D. S. Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay, AD 180-395* (London: Routledge 2014), 467.

⁸ Zosimus, *Neue Geschichte*, trans. Otto Veh, (Stuttgart : A. Hiersemann, 1990), 2, 42, 2-4; *Epitome de Caesaribus*, ed. F. Pichlmayr, (Leipzig: 1911), 42, 22.

⁹ Zonaras, 8, 5.

¹⁰ Zosimus, 2, 42, 6-8; Zonaras, 8, 5.

usurpation mainly in Magnentius' personal efforts and motives.¹¹ The research on Magnentius also moves along this line.¹²

Ultimately, this touches on the question of why Constantius II decided not to recognize Magnentius' usurpation but to wage war against him. When the quality of the usurpation changes, the quality of Constantius' adversary changes. After all, it would have been quite possible for Constantius to recognize Magnentius as *iunior augustus*, and Magnentius had actively sought this recognition.¹³ Why Constantius decided against this, however, is unclear.

Constans, after being informed of the usurpation of Magnentius, tried to flee towards Hispania. On his flight he was murdered by followers of Magnentius.¹⁴ This event severely destabilized the empire. In Rome, Nepotianus, a relative of Constantius II, had briefly elevated himself to *augustus*, but Magnentius removed him after a few weeks.¹⁵ Constantius II,

¹¹ Zosimus, 2, 42, 1-3; Sextus Aurelius Victor, *Die römischen Kaiser*, ed. and transl. K. Groß-Albenhausen and M. Fuhrmann (Zurich: Artemis & Winkler, 1997), 41, 23f.; Eutropius, *Abrégé d'Histoire Romaine*, ed. and trans. J. Helleguarch (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1999), 10, 9, 3; Sokrates, "Kirchengeschichte" in *Socrate de Constantinople: Histoire ecclésiastique*, German to French, ed. and trans. Pierre Périchon and Pierre Maraval (Sources Chrétiennes 493) (Paris: Cerf, 2005), 4, 1; Zonaras, 8, 5.

¹² For the usurpation of Magnentius as directed against Constans, see e.g. John Drinkwater, "The Revolt and Ethnic Origin of the Usurper Magnentius (350-353), and the Rebellion of Vetranio (350)," *Chiron* 30, 2000, 131-159; for the usurpation of Magnentius due to his personal motivation e.g. Jill Harries, *Imperial Rome AD 284 to 363: The New Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 196.

¹³ Joachim Szidat, *Usurpator tanti nominis: Kaiser und Usurpator in der Spätantike (337-476 AD)*, *Historia Einzelschriften* 210 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2010), 153-157; John Drinkwater, "The Revolt and Ethnic Origin of the Usurper Magnentius, 350-353, and the Rebellion of Vetranio, 350," 137.

¹⁴ Zosimus, 2, 32, 9; Zonaras, 8, 5; *Epitome de Caesaribus*, 42,23; Eutropius, 10, 9, 3-4.

¹⁵ Zosimus, 2, 43, 2-4; Sextus Aurelius Victor, *Die römischen Kaiser* 42, 6-9; Eutropius, 10,11; Sokrates, 2,25; Sokrates, 4,1; *Epitome de Caesaribus*, 42, 3.

augustus in the East, could not react immediately, as he was at war with the Sassanid Empire at the time.¹⁶ Meanwhile, in Illyria, the officer Vetricius had been proclaimed *augustus*, but he surrendered without resistance when Constantius left the East and took on the situation in the West.¹⁷ Magnentius, too, decided not to tolerate Constantius as an equal. On 28 September 351, the armies of Magnentius and Constantius met at the Pannonian city of Mursa.¹⁸ The battle led to painful losses on both sides, but more so for Magnentius.¹⁹

The ancient sources portray the battle of Mursa as the climax of the conflict. However, the war against Magnentius could not have ended until he took his own life on 10 August 353 after the final battle at Mons Seleucis in southern Gaul.²⁰ This period is usually ignored by the sources. Nevertheless, there are references to two incidents in the West between 351 and 353 that are connected to the war but do not sufficiently explain themselves.

Several sources prove that barbaric Alamanian groups crossed the Rhine River and invaded the empire from 351 onwards. According to Ammianus, in one battle the Alamanian *rex* Chnodomar defeated Decentius, whom Magnentius had appointed as *caesar* for Gaul.²¹ This is significant since the Roman-Alamanian border had been relatively stable since the late 3rd century – now, however, from 351 onwards, the regions near the Rhine, and from 352/53 also the Moselle valley, found themselves as victims of repeated attacks and plundering by Germanic

¹⁶ Zosimus, 2, 44, 1; Zonaras, 13, 7, 1-12.

¹⁷ Zosimus, 2, 43, 1-2, 44, 4; Eutropius, 10, 10f.

¹⁸ “Consularia Constantinopolitana,” s.v. 351.

¹⁹ Zonaras, 13, 8; Zosimus, 2, 50, 1-2, 53, 1.

²⁰ Sokrates, 4, 7, 2; “Consularia Constantinopolitana,” s.v. 353.

²¹ Ammianus Marcellinus, “*Post hunc damnatorum sorte Poemenius raptus ad supplicium interiit, qui (ut supra rettulimus) cum Treveri civitatem Caesari clausissent Decentio, ad defendendam plebem electus est.*,” in *Roman History, Volume 1*, ed. and trans. by J. C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), 16, 12, 5; Kienast, 220-221.

groups.²² Ancient sources see the reason for this in Constantius II, who, waging war against Magnentius, is said to have incited the Alamanni to invade the areas controlled by Magnentius.²³ Although these sources tend to be hostile towards Constantius, scholars are divided as to whether the allegation of conspiracy with the Alamanni should really be rejected.²⁴

Ammian alone records another event that must have taken place during the war. In the context of the convictions of Silvanus' allies in 355, a certain Poemenius was also executed. When the city of Trier had closed its gates to *caesar* Decentius, said Poemenius had been chosen to defend its people. Ammian alludes here to a time that must have been more significant than this marginal note makes it appear since he explicitly points out that he had already dealt with the events elsewhere in his report (*ut supra rettulimus*).²⁵ This account, however, has not survived, nor has any

²² John Drinkwater, *The Alamanni and Rome 213-496: Caracalla to Clovis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 200; David G. Wigg, *Münzumlauflauf in Nordgallien um die Mitte des 4. Jahrhunderts A.D.: Studien zu Münzfunden in der Antike 8* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1991), 101; Heinz H. Heinen, *Trier und das Trevererland in römischer Zeit* (Trier: Spee-Verlag), 1985, 234.

²³ Libanius, *Selected Orations*, Volume 1, ed. and transl. by A. F. Norman, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 18, 33f; Zosimus, 2, 53, 4.

²⁴ Libanios expresses the accusation against Constantius in a panegyric on Julian Apostata, who, as is well known, competed with Constantius, and Zosimus, who was inclined towards the pagan cults, even sees the Constantinian dynasty as the trigger for the downfall of Rome. See Zosimus, 2, 7, 5; For example, Zotz exonerates Constantius. See Zotz, "Die Alemannen in der Mitte des 4. Jahrhunderts nach dem Zeugnis des Ammianus Marcellinus," in *Die Franken und die Alamannen bis zur 'Schlacht von Zülpich'* (496/97), ed. Dieter Geuenich, (Berlin: DeGruyter, 1998), 384-406, 391. In contrast, Martin and Drinkwater hold to the accusation. See M. Martin, "Alemannen im römischen Heer-eine verpasste Integration und ihre Folgen," in *Die Franken und die Alamannen bis zur 'Schlacht von Zülpich'* (496/97), ed. Dieter Geuenich, (Berlin: DeGruyter, 1998), 411; and John Drinkwater, *The Alamanni and Rome 213-496: Caracalla to Clovis*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 202.

²⁵ Marcellinus, 15, 6, 4: "Post hunc damnatorum sorte Poemenius raptus ad supplicium interiit, qui (ut supra rettulimus) cum Treveri civitatem Caesari clausissent Decentio, ad defendendam plebem electus est."

other written source about this event. It is not even clear in which year it took place. The few scholarly works that have dealt with this episode have so far produced little consensus regarding the dating and nature of this revolt.

Due to the thin source material, three events in the context of the usurpation and the civil war are, despite all efforts of historians, still unclear to us in their causes and course: (1) the usurpation itself and the outbreak of the war, and specifically in Gaul and Roman Germania (2) the background of the Alamanni attacks from 351 onwards and (3) the revolt of Trier against Decentius. In the following, I will introduce the neorealist theory of IR in order to discuss its heuristic potential for historiography in the rest of the paper.

The Neorealist IR Theory as a Methodological Alternative: IR and History

The IR research field has existed as part of political science for decades but has had little influence on historiography. The disinterest between historiography and the IR is not reciprocal, for hardly any introductory literature on the IR resists historical analyses of, say, the Peloponnesian War, the Peace of Westphalia, or other global historical classifications.²⁶ Eckstein has pointed out the shortcomings of such historical outlines, yet it is precisely the dominant realist wing of the IR that clings to Thucydides as its intellectual ancestor.²⁷ Conversely, few historiographical works

²⁶ See, for example, the historical outlines in A. Jeschke, "Eine Einführung" in *International Relations* (Tübingen, 2017), 1-51; Jürgen Hartmann, *Internationale Beziehungen*, 13-19; H. Zimmermann and M. Elsinger, *Fundamentals of International Relations: An Introduction* (Stuttgart, 2019), 21-39.

²⁷ Arthur M. Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome*, 7, esp. footnote 10; K. Meister, *Thukydides als Vorbild der Historiker: Von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, (Leiden: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 2013), 225-239; critically on the reception of Thucydides, L. M. Johnson, "The

have referred to the IR. Eckstein's 2006 attempt to use the explanatory potential of IR realism for the 2nd Roman-Macedonian War has at least been conceded a certain innovativeness by scholars, however, his approach has not developed into a *turn* in historical methodology – as was the case with other novel historiographical approaches.²⁸ Nevertheless, the question of how great the heuristic value of IR theories is for historical scholarship has not yet been answered.

Basic Assumptions of Neorealism

“The national realm,” according to Kenneth Waltz, the founder of the neorealist wing, “is variously described as being hierarchic, vertical, centralized, heterogeneous, directed, and contrived; the international realm, as being anarchic, horizontal, decentralized, homogeneous, undirected, and mutually adaptive.”²⁹ In his characterization of the international domain, Waltz described the program of the neorealism he outlined in the 1970s. Classical realism, from which neorealism emerged, is a product of World War 2. It is a psychologizing theory: in realism, states are understood as unitary entities and endowed with human

Use and Abuse of Thucydides in International Relations,” *International Organization* 48, no. 1, 1994, and D. A. Welch, “Why International Relations Theorists Should Stop Reading Thucydides,” *Review of International Studies* 29, no. 3, 2003.

²⁸ M. Tröster, review of *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome*, by Arthur Eckstein, *Gnomon* 81, no. 1, 2009; Phyllis Culham, review of *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome*, by Arthur Eckstein, *American Historical Review* 113, no. 2, 2008; Andrew Erskine, review of *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome*, by Arthur Eckstein, *Journal of Roman Studies* 98, 2008; Nevertheless, there have been some other attempts to make IR theories useful for historical scholarship, most recently by Overtoom. See Nikolaus Leo Overtoom, *Reign of Arrows: The Rise of the Parthian Empire in the Hellenistic Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

²⁹ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979), 113.

characteristics. States act according to their national interest. The intention to assert their interests in the medium to long term is fundamental and non-negotiable. To enforce these interests, they seek to accumulate power. The concept of power is often operationalized in realism as military clout. According to realists, a peacekeeping international order cannot function for this reason. States only participate in such orders as is opportune for the assertion of their interests.³⁰

With neorealism, Waltz offered a reinterpretation of classical realism. States accumulate power to enforce their interests not because they are intrinsically motivated to do so, but because the structural conditions of the international system force them to provide for their own *security*.³¹ Central to neorealism is the concept of anarchy. Unlike at the national level, there is no superior ruling authority in the international system that could enforce collectively binding rules. The international system is a *self-help system*: states must provide for their own security.³² For this reason, international relations are fundamentally characterized by mistrust. Since states can never assess the means of power of their competitors without uncertainty and must assume that in an emergency the competition will want to assert its interests against the interests of others, a pressure to arm arises, which in turn fuels mutual distrust. This phenomenon is what neorealism calls the security dilemma.³³ At the same time, Waltz retains the unitarist element: States always act as a whole. Domestic political processes

³⁰ Classical realism synthesizes the views of some of its founding fathers, including Edward Hallett Carr, Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr. For a concise account of realist theory, see Jürgen Hartmann, *Internationale Beziehungen*, 21-28.

³¹ Martin Kahl and Bernhard Rinke, “Frieden in den Theorien der Internationalen Beziehungen” in *Handbuch Frieden*, eds. H. J. Gießmann and B. Rinke (Wiesbaden: Springer Vershlag, 2019), 67–68.

³² Waltz, 104-105.

³³ *Ibid.*, 102; Kahl and Rinke, 68-69.

are irrelevant for the behavior of a state in the international system. All states act rationally.

Waltz's conception of the international system is, as Hartmann puts it, “an affair free of domination, but by no means free of power.”³⁴ The international level is anarchic, but states try to order it hierarchically according to their interests.³⁵ As they do so in competition with each other, power can balance itself in different polarities. Waltz worked in 1979 in the context of a bipolar order of states, in which the structure of the international system was determined by two states of roughly equal power. Waltz also differentiates a state order of multipolarity, in which there are many equally powerful states, and therefore no clear center of power, and unipolarity, in which one strong state constitutes a clear center of power and all other states are relatively weak. In the latter case, the neorealists speak of hegemony.³⁶ Smaller states are left with two options to fulfil their basic security interest: either they subordinate themselves hierarchically to a strong state, but are rewarded for this with relative opportunities for advancement and security guarantees (*bandwagoning*) – which, as follows from the theory itself, however, only ever exist as long as it is opportune for the stronger state – or they try to change the polarity of the international order by arming themselves or entering into alliances with which the states can free themselves from the oppressive influence of the power poles, but acquire powerful competition and unstable partnerships (*balancing*).³⁷

Having established these necessary fundamentals, the following section applies and specifies the theory in the context of the events in the Roman West 350-353 problematized above.

³⁴ Hartmann, 29.

³⁵ Waltz, 109.

³⁶ Waltz, 161-170.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 125-127.

Application

Before the application can proceed, it is necessary to make general adjustments to neorealist theory for ancient conditions. IR operates in a context in which the territorially delimited state is taken for granted and in which the concept of state and nation can be operated with ease. An uncritical transfer of the notion of what IR researchers, not unproblematic from a historical perspective, call the ‘Westphalian state,’ would be anachronistic.³⁸ To avoid discussions of the concept of state and nation in antiquity, which are important but not useful for this work, in the following, the actors central to IR, formerly states, are understood as political entities and their interaction is characterized as *inter-political* rather than international. In this way, Roman partial empires, rebellious empire territories, and barbarian groups can be conceptually equated as political units, which is indispensable for the application of the theory. At the same time, the areas of power of Magnentius and Constantius are identified by the names of their leaders in the following. This is not intended to insinuate an absolutist model of the principate but merely serves to differentiate the respective spheres of power.

The Usurpation of Magnentius and the Start of the Civil War

Neorealism's fixation on the international level and its programmatic ignorance of domestic developments seem to complicate its application to civil wars. In fact, since the 1990s, political science scholars have increasingly interpreted this fact as a weakness of Waltz's theory.³⁹ However, a line of argument has developed that emphasizes that the structural assumptions of

³⁸ Hartmann, 15-16.

³⁹ Nicholas Sambanis, “A Review of Recent Advances and Future Directions in the Quantitative Literature on Civil War,” *Defense and Peace Economics* 13, no. 3, 2002, 225-226; Steven David, *Internal War: Causes and Cures*, *World Politics* 49, no. 4, 1997, 560-562.

neorealism do apply to civil wars. If the formerly legitimate government loses its monopoly on the use of force – for whatever reasons neorealism leaves open – the domestic state resembles international anarchy, and if individual groups no longer see their need for security fulfilled, they will militarize.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, there is still no *opinio communis* on this.

The course of Magnentius' uprising alone says something about its extent, at the same time about Constans' government. He could not crush the usurpation; he no longer had any military power, so he had to flee and was murdered a week later.⁴¹ Magnentius, who had himself proclaimed *augustus* in the Gallic city of Autun, seemed to have his center of power in Gaul and the Germanic provinces. He experienced no opposition there, so with the usurpation he had neorealistically filled a power vacuum that Constans had left. These regions were also exposed to strong external, barbarian security risks. They probably did not see their security interests satisfied by Constans. It does not seem coincidental that Magnentius' center of power coincided geographically with the 'Gallic Empire', which split from the Roman Empire in 260-274, aiming to effectively protect the previously unstable Rhine frontier from barbarian incursions.⁴² Until after the Battle of Mursa, there is no evidence that Magnentius' control over this core area diminished; in large part, his rule there was secure long beyond.⁴³ The logic behind this is

⁴⁰ David, 556-559; Sambanis, 226.

⁴¹ Zosimus, 2, 42, 5, which names a Gaiso as the murderer of Constans. The Chronograph of 354 lists Gaiso for the year 351 as Magnentius' colleague in the consulship. See "Chronographus anni CCCLIII" in *Chronica Minora saec. IV. V. VI. VII. (MGH AA 11)*, ed. T. Mommsen (Berlin 1892), 10, s.v. 351.

⁴² Thomas S. Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians: 100 B.C.-400 A.D.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 260, 282.

⁴³ This was not the case in Italy (see T.D. Barnes, "An Urban Prefect and His Wife" in *The Classical Quarterly* 56, no. 1, 2006). The connection between the usurpation of Magnentius and the security concerns on the Rhine border has already been speculated on by Kulikowski and Szidat, admittedly without

not new to historiography – Kulikowski speaks of an ‘iron link’ between barbarian invasions and usurpation in the context of the third century – and it seems to be confirmed by neorealist security concerns in this case as well.⁴⁴

Those security interests may have mobilized enough power for Magnentius to secure Gaul and Germania, but not all regions formerly ruled by Constans wanted to join him. Constans' death created a power vacuum in those areas for which the Rhine frontier posed less of a threat. In Rome, notably far from the border, another *augustus*, Nepotianus, who belonged to the Constantinian dynasty, rose to power.⁴⁵ Although his uprising was probably not concerted with Constantius II, it was primarily directed against the rule of Magnentius, before the latter crushed the uprising in Rome after a few weeks.⁴⁶ Magnentius' power did not reach into Illyria either. In the east, his territorial ambitions initially ended at the Julian Alps, possibly to facilitate an agreement with Constantius II, whose recognition he still hoped for.⁴⁷ In Illyria, Roman troops filled the power vacuum left by Constans' death by proclaiming one of their own, Vetranio, *augustus*.⁴⁸ Magnentius apparently

neorealist vocabulary. See Michael Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars: From the Third Century to Alaric* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 103 and Joachim Szidat, *Usurpator tanti nominis: Kaiser und Usurpator in der Spätantike 337-476 AD, Historia Einzelschriften 210* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2010), 227.

⁴⁴ Michael Kulikowski, “Constantine and the Northern Barbarians” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, ed. Noel Lenski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 354.

⁴⁵ Zosimus, 2, 43, 3f; Eutropius, 10, 11, 2; Sextus Aurelius Victor, 42,7.

⁴⁶ Ehling 2001.

⁴⁷ John Drinkwater, “The Revolt and Ethnic Origin of the Usurper Magnentius, 350-353, and the Rebellion of Vetranio, 350,” 148-149.

⁴⁸ Bleckmann argues against the historiographical tradition that saw Vetranio as a satellite of Constantius and thus characterizes his elevation as an authentic proclamation by his troops. See Bruno Bleckmann, “Constantina, Vertranio, and Gallus Caesar” in *Chiron* 24, 1994, 29-68. Drinkwater follows this line of argument but emphasizes that Vetranio's sympathies lay rather with Constantius,

accepted this and, together with Vetranio, lobbied Constantius for a division of the empire according to the triarchic model.⁴⁹

Constantius did not agree. Neorealistically, the events can be conceptualized as a *power-transition-crisis*: The collapse of Constans' position of power abruptly changed the inter-political status quo. Magnentius had emerged as a new actor. Such questioning of the inter-political hierarchy causes irritation among the political units, which provokes action.⁵⁰ His decision not to recognize Magnentius as *augustus* results neorealistically from the rational consideration of whether war or recognition held the greatest security risks for Constantius' part of the empire. The distrust was too great for Constantius to accept giving Magnentius permanent access to the resources of a partial empire as a legitimate *augustus*. Constantius seemed to have considered the war against the regionally limited Magnentius to be winnable from the onset. Priority was initially given to the ongoing war against the Persians. From a security point of view, he must have feared a Persian advance, which he would allow by focusing on West, more than anything he thought Magnentius could do. For the year 350, Constantius was able to hold out against Magnentius: His power was too regionally limited, he was still trying to enter into negotiations with Constantius, and Vetranio's sphere of power still lay as a buffer between Magnentius and Constantius.⁵¹ Nevertheless, Magnentius had brought about the death of an emperor, he seemed to be able to evoke a certain acceptance even among those elites who had followed the Constantinian dynasty,

who, however, was still fighting the Persians in the spring of 350 and could not subordinate Illyria to his rule. See John Drinkwater, "The Revolt and Ethnic Origin of the Usurper Magnentius, 350-353, and the Rebellion of Vetranio, 350," 146-151.

⁴⁹ J. Šašel, "The Struggle between Magnentius and Constantius II for Italy and Illyricum" in *Zant* 21, 1971, 208-209.

⁵⁰ Daniel S. Geller, "Power Transition and Conflict Initiation" in *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 12 (1), 1992.

⁵¹ Drinkwater, "The Revolt and Ethnic Origin of the Usurper Magnentius, 350-353, and the Rebellion of Vetranio, 350," 150.

and with Trier Magnentius controlled a military and economic powerhouse that possessed a mighty propaganda tool in the form of a mint by minted gold, silver and bronze coins for Magnentius, spreading Magnentius' portrait into the breadth of Roman society.⁵²

The Alamanni Attacks from 351

The incidents from 351 onwards, when Alamannic groups, allegedly at the request of Constantius, invaded the Magnentius' realm, are commonly described as 'Alamannic invasions', which relates to the ethnic composition of these groups. However, from the early 4th century onwards, Alamanni had already fought in the Roman army.⁵³ These Alamanni who were (partially) integrated into the empire are not meant in the following. The focus is on Alamannic groups that are to be understood as independent political units outside the empire. Libanios vividly describes their attack as very devastating. An offer from Constantius had been the reason for the invasion: if the Alamanni moved into the territory controlled by Magnentius, they would be allowed to take as much land as they could.⁵⁴

The strategic advantage of such an arrangement in a war situation would be obvious. Magnentius, or his *caesar* Decentius, thus had to assert himself on two fronts from 351 onwards. Constantius approached from the south-east via Illyria, where he was to inflict a military defeat on Magnentius at Mursa in September of the same year, from which the latter never

⁵² Rebecca Usherwood, *Political Memory and the Constantinian Dynasty* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2022), 226-228; Heinen, 215, 232-234.

⁵³ M. Martin, "Alemannen im römischen Heer-eine verpasste Integration und ihre Folgen," in in *Die Franken und die Alamannen bis zur 'Schlacht von Zülpich'* (496/97), 407-410.

⁵⁴ Libanios, 18, 33-34; Zosimus, 2, 53, 4.

recovered.⁵⁵ Alamanni now entered the empire from the north-east, unexpectedly posing a remarkable challenge. Probably in 352, the Alamannic *rex* Chnodomar defeated Decentius in a battle '*aequo Marte*' – under equal conditions – and thereupon plundered Gaul without resistance.⁵⁶ The academic debate on the alleged collusion between Constantius and the Alamanni is primarily concerned with the question of whether Constantius would have voluntarily allowed barbarians to raid Roman land.⁵⁷ Here, however, lies the danger of projecting the further bloody development of Roman-Alamanni relations of the 350s back to the possible alliance in 351. Constantius' possible decision to involve the Alamanni from 351 onwards must be considered in the temporal context. The associated security concerns neorealist theory emphasizes are quite useful as an explanatory model for a pact between Constantius and the Alamanni, both for the Constantinian and Alamanni perspectives.

Although Constantius saw no need to take immediate action against Magnentius in 350 due to his regional containment, he was nevertheless a considerable security risk in the medium term, as explained above. At the same time, the interests of Constantius and the Alamanni collided: Constantius wanted to conquer Magnentius' territory; the Alamanni probably wanted to settle there.⁵⁸ In inter-political anarchy, distrust is systemic, so Constantius had to take into account the risks the Alamanni would pose to his own rule. The risk seemed less to him than leaving Magnentius' core territory untouched. Barbarians were often fought and defeated by Constantius' predecessors in office, but usurpers could overthrow rulers. In neorealism, alliances between

⁵⁵ On the long-term aftermath of Mursa, see Humphries, 171-176.

⁵⁶ Drinkwater, *The Alamanni and Rome 213-496: Caracalla to Clovis*, 201; Marcellinus, 16, 12, 5-6.

⁵⁷ Zotz, 391; Drinkwater, *The Alamanni and Rome 213-496: Caracalla to Clovis*, 202-203.

⁵⁸ That is the content of the agreement according to Libanius, 18, 33-34.

political entities are communities of convenience.⁵⁹ Such an alliance also makes sense from the Alamanni perspective. The behavior of the Alamanni is characterized in the neorealist conception as *bandwagoning*. They allied themselves with Constantius at little cost to themselves and with the prospect of their own gains.⁶⁰

The problem with this explanation, however, is that although neorealism makes the alliance between Constantius and the Alamanni theoretically plausible, it does not provide any valid evidence. For the academic argument of the opposing side, that the Alamanni had invaded the territory of Magnentius because he had withdrawn the troops stationed on the Rhine to fight Constantius, can just as easily be made plausible in neorealist terms: In this scenario, too, a rational security policy consideration took place.⁶¹ Barbarians would not destroy his empire, but Constantius was an existential threat to Magnentius. The added value of neorealist theory lies more in the fact that it provides a conceptual framework for considerations of security policy and foreign policy risk assessment. However, it cannot clarify the concrete facts for historians.

The Revolt of Trier

The episode, known only through a half-sentence by Ammian, in which Trier denied *Caesar* Decentius entry into the city as it was defended by a certain Poemenius, is sometimes mentioned only in passing by historians. The generally accepted account is that in 353, towards the end of Magnentius' reign, the city of Trier chose a certain Poemenius to lead the city's revolt against Decentius.⁶²

⁵⁹ Waltz, 163-170.

⁶⁰ Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In" in *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994), 93.

⁶¹ Zotz, 391.

⁶² See e.g. Humphries, 164; R. M. Frakes, "Some Hidden Defensores Civitatum

Relying on Ammian's choice of words, however, Overbeck/Overbeck succeeded in demonstrating with substantial arguments that Poemenius was only elected after the revolt. "He had been elected to defend the people" (*ad defendam plebem electus est*) – that should not be understood here as an election in which the Trier people chose their military leader, but as the selection of a person who would legally defend the Trier people after the revolt. This is central to the classification of the revolt, as it means that Trier must have been retaken by Magnentius or Decentius.⁶³

It is possible that this episode can be classified by Zosimus when he writes that Magnentius experienced resistance in Gaul after the Battle of Mursa.⁶⁴ In this case, the battle of Mursa serves as the *terminus post quem* of Trier's revolt. Holt also sees numismatic evidence for placing the revolt late, since he dates a coin series minted for Constantius in Trier at this time, which on the one hand has symbolism unusual for Constantius and was therefore probably not officially authorized, and on the other hand differs so clearly in its weight and dimensions from the Magnentius coins minted in Trier that it would not be plausible for the production to switch back to the Magnentius after the reconquest.⁶⁵ It would be possible to synthesise the numismatic findings of Holt and the philological findings of Overbeck/Overbeck in such a way that Magnentius/Decentius had

in the Res Gestae of Ammianus Marcellinus," 529-530.; Drinkwater, *The Alamanni and Rome 213-496: Caracalla to Clovis*, 5; K. J. Gilles, "Die Aufstände des Poemenius (353) und Silvanus (355) und ihre Auswirkungen auf die Trierer Münzprägung," 384; W. C. Holt, "Evidence of the Coinage of Poemenius' Revolt at Trier,," Heinen, 233.

⁶³ M. Overbeck and B. Overbeck, "Die Revolte des Poemenius zu Trier – Dichtung und Wahrheit," in *Humanitas: Beiträge zur antiken Kulturgeschichte, Festschrift für Gunther Gottlieb zum 65. Geburtstag*, eds. P. Barceló and V. Rosenberger, (Munich: E. Vögel, 2001), 238-242.

⁶⁴ Zosimus, 2,53,4.

⁶⁵ W. C. Holt, "Evidence of the Coinage of Poemenius' Revolt at Trier," 67-72.

retaken Trier late after the revolt, but the city could not issue any more coins until the end of the civil war.

There is also a neorealist argument for dating the revolt at the earliest after Mursa, but rather late. As the imperial residence, Trier was the center of Roman rule north of the Alps.⁶⁶ The city's importance is made clear by the fact that Magnentius had made it his first task after his elevation to enforce his rule in Trier.⁶⁷ From a neorealist perspective, this may have two reasons: Firstly, the expectation of fiscal resources to help him expand his military power, and secondly, the strategic location of the city in the Moselle valley close to the Rhine frontier. Especially if, from a neorealist perspective, the legitimation of rule is fed by the satisfaction of the need for security, it must have been of central importance for Magnentius to secure the Rhine border in the turmoil of the collapse of Constans' rule. At the same time, Magnentius/Decentius cannot have been satisfied with the loss of the city because of its importance, which confirms the theory of the reconquest. The dating of the revolt is related to its reason, which, although not proven neorealistically, can probably be plausibly deduced. Trier was also badly hit by the Alamanni invasions.⁶⁸ Decentius, who as *caesar* for Gaul probably resided in Trier, is known to have been unable to oppose the Alamanni. At this time, Trier probably did not see its security interests satisfied. However, it needed clearer signs of political decay, namely those described by Zosimus, to rationalize the revolt in neorealist terms.⁶⁹ Trier may have been dissatisfied with its rulers, but as long as they were militarily potent, a revolt would have violated the city's elementary security interests. In the model of rational actors, armed conflicts presuppose that those who start them consider them winnable in

⁶⁶ Thomas S. Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians: 100 B.C.-400 A.D.*, 312; Heinen, 309-310.

⁶⁷ Pierre Bastien, *Le monnayage de Magnenc, 350-353* (Wetteren, Belgique: Éditions cultura, 1964), 11.

⁶⁸ Heinen, 233.

⁶⁹ Zosimus, 2, 53, 4.

principle. For this reason, dating the revolt to the time when Magnentius/Decentius were already having problems asserting their rule even in Gaul only makes sense. That Decentius briefly reconquered the city is quite possible, but the numismatic evidence suggests that this situation could not have existed for a long time.

Alternative Explanatory Models

At this point, the neorealist *black box* ought to be opened and the explanatory models from the previous section critically questioned. In doing so, the domestic political discourses programmatically ignored by neorealism will be given special consideration.

The ancient sources are very unanimous in their view of the cause of the usurpation. With astonishing uniformity, they report on Constans' unpopularity and his vicious personality.⁷⁰ Zosimus describes him as tyrannical, and the consensus of the historiographical sources seems to be that Constans' personal wrongdoings destroyed his relationship with the most important acceptance group of the exercise of rule: the military.⁷¹ This

⁷⁰ Sextus Aurelius Victor, *Die römischen Kaiser* 41, 23, 4: Constans was “*per aetatem cautus parum atque animi vehemens, adhuc ministrorum pravitate execrabilis atque praeceps in avaritiam despectumque militarium.*”

Furthermore, Aurelius Victor accuses him of practising homosexual acts with captive barbarians: “*Quarum obsides pretio quaesitos pueros venustiores quod cultus habuerat, Ibid. in huiusmodi arsisse pro certo habitur.*” The essence of these accusations is found in the same way in Sokrates 10, 9, 3; Zonaras 13, 5-9; Zosimus, 2, 42, 1-2.

⁷¹ Zosimus, 2, 42, 1; Joachim Szidat, *Usurpator tanti nominis: Kaiser und Usurpator in der Spätantike (337-476 AD)*, 289-290; Alan E. Wardman, “Usurpers and Internal Conflicts in the 4th Century A.D.” in *Historia* 33, no. 2, 1984, 226; Mark Hebblewhite, *The Emperor and the Army in the Later Roman Empire AD 235-395* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 1; E. Flaig, “Für eine Konzeptionalisierung der Usurpation im Spätromischen Reich,” in *Usurpationen in der Spätantike: Historia Einzelschriften* 111, eds. F. Paschoud and J. Szidat, (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1997), 16-17. I do not follow Woudhuysen's speculation that Constans' image was shaped by rumors spread by Magnentius

finding is important because the historiographical sources only partially confirm the neorealist interpretation of the usurpation set up above, that Magnentius had channelled the lack of a sense of security in a region close to the border to proclaim *augustus*, since Ammian and Aurelius Victor attested to at least Constans' early success on the Rhine border.⁷² In the 340s, however, Constans had withdrawn from Gaul and had not visited the north of his domain for years.⁷³ In conjunction with the neorealist findings, the usurpation of Magnentius can thus certainly be explained by security concerns. These were probably not acute, but Constans had already decisively lost acceptance in Gaul by this time. Constans' rule had thus collapsed in the area – he could no longer help with riots on the border, but the power vacuum had to be filled. Constans' entire apparatus of government and power in Gaul had passed to Magnentius.⁷⁴ The fact that Magnentius' rule in Rome was not as strongly consolidated as in Gaul, although Constans is also said to have behaved ignorantly towards Rome, seems to confirm the influence of security concerns.⁷⁵

Taking the domestic political discourse into account, Drinkwater sees an explanation for Constantius' refusal to recognize Magnentius in Magnentius' origins, which, however, was overstretched into the unreal in Constantius' propaganda.⁷⁶ The early texts close to the court characterized Magnentius as a barbarian, from which, however, later historiography distanced

(Woodhuysen 2018, 180). The rejection of him seems too broad for that; the characterization of Magnentius too negative.

⁷² Marcellinus, 27, 8, 6; Sextus Aurelius Victor, *Die römischen Kaiser*, 41, 23, 5.

⁷³ Mark Hebblewhite, 19.

⁷⁴ Szidat, 215: Such a court revolution, in which the usurpation itself does not require a military confrontation, had otherwise not occurred in the 4th century. It is worth emphasising again that while the usurpation of Magnentius was followed by a war with Constantius II, the usurpation, however, was directed solely against Constans.

⁷⁵ Harries, 190-193.

⁷⁶ Drinkwater, "The Revolt and Ethnic Origin of the Usurper Magnentius, 350-353, and the Rebellion of Vetrico, 350," 138-140.

itself and, while not denying a barbarian ancestry, relativized it.⁷⁷ Drinkwater assumes Magnentius' origin in northeastern Gaul, which could form the argumentative basis for Constantius' accusation. The insinuation of barbarian origins was not actually a practice used by *augusti* to compromise their political rivals, allowing us to assume that there was some truth to the accusation.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, his origins must have been acceptable enough for Roman soldiers and elites to proclaim him *augustus*.⁷⁹ The portrayal of Magnentius as a barbarian – and, according to Drinkwater, just as fictitiously, as a pagan – gave Constantius a new level of legitimacy to wage war against Magnentius: It was not a civil war anymore but a war against external enemies.⁸⁰ Without speculating on further personal motivations, Magnentius' modest origins may reinforce Constantius' neorealist systemic mistrust, which stood in the way of a peaceful outcome to the usurpation.

The characterization of Magnentius as a barbarian also serves a second function, as this accusation insinuates that Magnentius, not Constantius, was to blame for the barbarian invasions.⁸¹ In fact, Zosimus notes that Magnentius had employed barbarians in his army.⁸² In this, however, he differed as little from

⁷⁷ Themistios, *Staatsreden*, gr.-dt. ed. and trans. Hartmut Leppin and Werner Portmann (Stuttgart: A. Hiersemann, 1998), 3, 43A; Julian, *Orationes*, gr.-engl. ed. and trans. W.C. Wright (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913), 1,34D; Sextus Aurelius Victor, 41, 25; Zosimus, 2, 54, 1; *Epitome de Caesaribus*, 42,7.

⁷⁸ Drinkwater, “The Revolt and Ethnic Origin of the Usurper Magnentius, 350-353, and the Rebellion of Vetricano, 350,” 144.

⁷⁹ Underwood, 215; Szidat, 257-261 on the general eligibility for princeps pretender in the 4th century.

⁸⁰ Drinkwater, “The Revolt and Ethnic Origin of the Usurper Magnentius, 350-353, and the Rebellion of Vetricano, 350,” 145; Julian 1,42; A. D. Lee, *Warfare in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 110.

⁸¹ Drinkwater, “The Revolt and Ethnic Origin of the Usurper Magnentius, 350-353, and the Rebellion of Vetricano, 350,” 142.

⁸² Zosimus, *Neue Geschichte* 2, 51, 1.

Constantius as from his predecessor Constans.⁸³ This shows above all that in the mid-4th century the binary coding of Roman/Barbarian existed perhaps in ideological propaganda, but not in reality, and that there must have been gradations between these poles.⁸⁴ Possibly this also calls into question the neorealist conceptualization of the Alamanni tribes as independent political units from the Alamanni who were (partially) integrated in the empire, since even research has not ruled out the possibility that there was something like an Alamanni solidarity, i.e. loyalties that transcend the boundaries of the unitary actor and thus complicate the notion of the military conflict between *the* Alamanni and Magnentius.⁸⁵ To better understand this aspect, no differentiation and relativization of both poles is sufficient regarding the Roman-Barbarian relationship, but rather a novel, better conceptualization of the relations.

Along with its strategic and fiscal importance, Trier also had an ideological importance. By the mid-4th century, Trier's status as the most important northern Alpine city had long been established. The chronograph of 354 ranks Trier as the fourth city of the Empire behind Rome, Alexandria and Constantinople.⁸⁶ With its elevation to the imperial residence with Diocletian and later under Constantine I, Trier underwent two major building and reconstruction programs that resulted in numerous magnificent buildings.⁸⁷ The Roman aristocracy in Gaul gathered in Trier.⁸⁸

⁸³ Burns, 333.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 14; Mischa Meier, *Geschichte der Völkerwanderung. Europa, Asien und Afrika vom 3. bis zum 8. Jahrhundert n. Chr.* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2017), 341-343.

⁸⁵ Affirmatively Zotz, 392-393.; negatively Drinkwater, *The Alamanni and Rome 213-496: Caracalla to Clovis* 2007, 206f.; also Marcellinus, 16,10,6-7.

⁸⁶ Chronographus anni CCCLIII 2.

⁸⁷ Heinen, 285.

⁸⁸ Caillan Davenport, "The Dynamics of Imperial Government. Collegiality and Regionalism" in *The Sons of Constantine, AD 337-361: In the Shadows of Constantine and Julian*, eds. Nicholas Baker-Brian and Shaun Tougher (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 227.

Magnentius must therefore have been aware of what the capture, and later also the loss, of Trier meant to other Romans. Taking this into account, one could make a further argument for the dating of the revolt by referring to Zosimus 2, 53, 2-3, placing the battle for Trier at the beginning of the disintegration of Magnentius' rule in Gaul. The loss of Trier for Magnentius could therefore have led to a collapse of acceptance for the usurper in Gaul. As long as this argument cannot be further substantiated – the sparse sources on the revolt are not optimistic in this respect – this proposed dating once again becomes pure academic speculation.

Conclusion

This paper has pursued two goals: First, it has attempted to fill the knowledge that remains about the Roman West in the context of the usurpation of Magnentius by applying neorealist IR theory. At the same time, this work evaluates the heuristic potential of IR theories in historical scholarship. The result is ambivalent in the first case. Neorealist theories offer a plausible explanatory model for the geographical extent of the usurpation and the resistance to Magnentius in the Western Empire. The security considerations associated with neorealism might also explain Constantius' non-recognition of Magnentius without recourse to personal beliefs. Regarding the Alamanni invasions and Trier's revolt, the theory offers little new insight. In the research debate about the alleged alliance between Constantius and the Alamanni, both scenarios can be rationalized by neorealism, and the revolt of Trier is so poorly documented in sources that the application of theory could only produce tentative, not valid results. Thus, the most fruitful application of neorealist IR theory was in the case where an established historical situation had to be interpreted. Only based on classical historiographical craft and traditional source criticism could the neorealist theory unfold its heuristic potential.

The application of a simplistic explanatory model is counter-intuitive for historians who think multicausally. A theory

that seeks explanatory potential in macro-structures alone programmatically ignores the detailed questions that are central to ideographic research. This is no longer uncontroversial even in IR. Regarding IR theories, when Buzan/Little claim that the central question is not “which of these [theories] are right, but what kind of configuration of all of them produces,” then they call for a multi-perspectival theory culture in which the numerous IR theories do not compete for interpretive sovereignty, but complement each other.⁸⁹ If one denies the theory's claim to be the only valid one, neorealism introduces a perspective into the academic discussion about Magnentius that emphasizes power and security interests. The ideas associated with this are not necessarily innovative and can already be found in their essence in some existing literature. However, neorealist theory conceptualizes and specifies these ideas and gives them a standardized academic vocabulary. In this sense, the potential of IR for historical scholarship, precisely because of its theoretical diversity, is potentially enormous.

⁸⁹ Barry Buzan and Richard Little, “Why International Relations has Failed as an Intellectual Project and What to do About it” in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 30, no. 1 (2001): 38. Even Eckstein had acknowledged this and never completely submitted to neorealist theory, but always understood the application of theory as the introduction of a new perspective. See Eckstein, 35.