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# The roles of Marcian, Aspar and Zeno in the interregnum between the death of Theodosius II and the accession of Marcian

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## Abstract

In scholarly literature, it is often assumed that the elevation of Marcian (450–457) was a result of an agreement between Aspar and the Empress Pulcheria; sometimes another general, Zeno, is thought to be a significant figure in this election. However, it is unclear how Zeno was involved and whether he even was in Constantinople at the time. Equally unclear is what Aspar's official position was – he may have been a general, but what sort of general? The article offers some possibilities and further argues that Zeno, although absent, was essential for Aspar's plans. Aspar may have managed to convince the Empress and all the courtiers that Marcian was the best choice; however, he still needed to secure Zeno's support and avoid a civil war, as Zeno had been suspected of mutiny. Further, we may well ask whether the accession of Marcian was an election at all, or rather a „surrogate usurpation“ which was a common thing in the 5th century in the West: it can be argued that just like Ricimer, Aspar did not aspire to the imperial title himself, but conveniently, there was a suitable candidate among his servants. Another puzzle is the interregnum between the death of Theodosius II and the accession of Marcian. It lasted for 28 days, which is much more than with any other case of imperial election. The logical conclusion is that several weeks were required to find Zeno (whose location in the East was apparently unknown), brief him and ask him to come to Constantinople to give his approval and support for the choice of Marcian. The article thus tries to answer an important question: was the accession of Marcian a convenient way of Aspar to preserve and even enhance his own standing without altering or disrupting the power structure in the East?

## Keywords

Marcian; Byzantium; Aspar; Theodosian dynasty

In July 450, the East Roman Empire was deprived of its ruler when the fifty-year-old Theodosius II fell from his horse and soon died of his injuries. The unexpected death of the emperor, who left no direct heir, must have come as a shock. Legally, the new ruler of the Eastern Empire should have been the Western Roman Emperor Valentinian III, but he was not asked to take up his inheritance; he was not even consulted about the choice of a new emperor. A rare event took place in Constantinople: the election of an emperor (or at least that is the impression we get from our sources). If there was an election, who were the electors and who were the candidates?

In his latest book *The New Roman Empire. A History of Byzantium*, Anthony Kaldellis sums up succinctly the election of a new East Roman Emperor in summer 450 in these words: “The accession of Marcian (450–457) was the work of an Arian Alan general (Aspar), a pagan Isaurian general (Zeno), and a virgin princess (Pulcheria).”<sup>1</sup> This is also the prevailing scholarly view.<sup>2</sup> And yet, in his brilliant analysis, Richard Burgess pondered the influence of both Aspar and Pulcheria in Marcian’s accession, but ignored Zeno altogether, not naming him even once.<sup>3</sup> Why? Was or was not Zeno really involved in the choice of Marcian? In fact, as we will see below, both Burgess and Kaldellis may be right.

Another unresolved issue is the incredibly long interregnum between 28 July (when Theodosius II died) and 25 August (when Marcian was proclaimed Emperor). Why did it take 28 days to elect a new Emperor?<sup>4</sup> The imperial elections in the 4th and 5th centuries were rare occasions but when they took place, they understandably tended to be short affairs, taking a few days at most. We can even enumerate these interregna quickly. When Julian died (26 June 363), his successor Jovian was chosen on the very next day; when Jovian died unexpectedly on 17 February 363, Valentinian was chosen a few days later, on 21 or 22 February.<sup>5</sup> There were no further elections until Theodosius II died. After Marcian himself died, it took

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1 Kaldellis (2024: p. 200).

2 For example Bleeker (2022: p. 100), McEvoy (2016: p. 487), Lee (2013b: pp. 95–96), Kelly (2010: pp. 232–233), Treadgold (1997: p. 97) or Zuckerman (1994: p. 172).

3 Burgess (1994).

4 This is also the main argument against the assertion of John Malalas (XIV,27) and *Chronicon Paschale* (s.a. 450) that Theodosius II designated Marcian as his successor. If he did, why the delay? Burgess (1994: p. 59) remarked that “if Marcian had been designated emperor (...) by the reigning Augustus there would have been no need for a one-month interregnum between Theodosius’ death and the accession of Marcian (28 July and 25 August), and there would have been no need for Pulcheria to have married Marcian.”

5 Szidat (2010: p. 404). Valentinian accepted his nomination on 25 or 26 February, but the actual election took place four or five days after Jovian died, in Nicaea. See Jones (1964: p. 139), Potter (2004: p. 521) or Elton (2018: pp. 120–121) (26 February); and Szidat (2010: p. 404) or Lenski (2002: p. 22) (25 February).

11 days to elect a new Emperor, Leo I.<sup>6</sup> Then there remains a short interregnum of 491, when Zeno died and Anastasius was elected only two days later, on 11 April.<sup>7</sup> If we disregard the affairs of the West in the 5th century, where no true imperial elections took place (see note 52), the interregnum between the death of Theodosius II and the accession of Marcian was by far the longest one in the 4th and 5th centuries. The questions posed in this article therefore are: who were the “electors” of July and August 450, and what took them so long to elect a new Emperor?

Trying to answer the first question, one should begin with the weakest link of the supposed triumvirate of Pulcheria, Aspar and Zeno: the Empress. While it is undeniable that Pulcheria lent a great deal of legitimacy to Marcian, her role should not be exaggerated. Kenneth Holum advocated most vocally for her being the most decisive element at the court after the death of her brother. Holum even goes as far as to say: “For nearly a month thereafter Pulcheria reigned alone at Constantinople.”<sup>8</sup> Richard Burgess rightly objected to his view, and his persuasive statement deserves to be quoted in full: “Far from being a proto-Irene, one of the first ‘Byzantine empresses’, as Holum would have us believe, Pulcheria was manipulated and sacrificed to the whims of a man who held much greater power and influence than she, even though she was an Augusta, a title replete with ceremonial awe but invested with little actual power when put to the test. She could be a power behind the throne and influence her brother and sisters, but that power died with Theodosius.”<sup>9</sup>

Obviously, the person Burgess refers here to is Aspar.<sup>10</sup> Let us first address the question who Aspar was and then, what his actual power or influence in July 450 might have been. Now, most scholars agree on Aspar’s Alanic descent,<sup>11</sup> although there are some who view him as an Alanic-Gothic mixing.<sup>12</sup> This discrepancy is easy to

6 Elton (2018: p. 197), Szidat (2010: p. 410), Croke (2005: p. 149). Marcian died on 27 January, Leo was announced on 7 February.

7 *PLRE* II, p. 79 (Anastasius 4), *PLRE* II, p. 1202 (Fl. Zenon 7).

8 Holum (1982: p. 208). Cf. Norwich (1997: pp. 47–48) who ignores Aspar and his influence altogether, or Gregory (2005: p. 104) (“the power naturally fell to Pulcheria”), or Mitchell (2015: p. 121), or Busch (2023: pp. 215–216; 2015: pp. 125–135).

9 Burgess (1994: p. 68). This is perhaps an extreme view. Lee (2013b: pp. 95–96) is an example of a more balanced view: “While Theodosius’ sister Pulcheria no doubt had some role in the approval of Marcian as successor to the imperial throne, Marcian’s close association with Aspar over many years as one of his staff officers, including service under him during the campaign against the Vandals in the early 430s, makes it inconceivable that Aspar did not have a significant hand in Marcian’s elevation.”

10 Not everyone agrees with this view. Szidat (2010: p. 115) downplays Aspar’s role in the election: “*Man sollte seine Rolle aber nicht überbewerten. Er war nicht der Kaisermacher.*” But cf. Demandt (2007: p. 218): “(Aspar)... spielte als Kaisermacher eine ähnliche Rolle wie Rikimer im Westen.”

11 E.g. Kaldellis (2024: p. 200), Croke (2005: p. 152), Bleeker (2022: p. 20), Bachrach (1973: p. 42), Goffart (2006: p. 38), Lee (2007: p. 193) or Elton (2009: p. 136).

12 For example Wolfram (1998: p. 281) who says that (Aspar) “war alanisch-gotischer Herkunft” or McEvoy (2016: p. 484) (“of Alan and Gothic origins”).

explain. There are basically two sources attesting to Aspar's ethnicity: Candidus and Jordanes. Candidus, whose work covered the years 457–491 and fragments of which are preserved by Photius (*Bibliotheca* 79), may have lived in Constantinople,<sup>13</sup> and he may have even seen or known Aspar there in 460s. He states Aspar's ethnicity in an unambiguous way (ἦν Ἀλανὸς μὲν γένος),<sup>14</sup> and we should definitely prefer his testimony to that of Jordanes, who stated that Aspar was a Goth, but who wrote his *Getica* some 80 years after Aspar's death. I fully agree with Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof that Jordanes simply added the Gothic origin to Aspar who was an Alan.<sup>15</sup>

Besides, Jordanes can easily be apprehended red-handed, if we compare the relevant passage in his *Getica* with what Marcellinus Comes, his source, has to say about the year 471. Jordanes says (*Get.* 239): ***quo tempore in Constantinopolim Aspar primus patriciorum et Gothorum genere clarus cum Ardabure et Patriciolo filiis, illo quidem olim patricio, hoc autem Caesare generoque Leonis principis appellato, spadonum ensibus in palatio vulneratus interiit.*** However, his source, Marcellinus Comes (a. d. 471) says: *Aspar primus patriciorum cum Ardabure et Patriciolo filiis, illo quidem olim patricio, hoc autem Caesare generoque Leonis principis appellato, Arrianus cum Arriana prole spadonum ensibus in palatio vulneratus interiit.* Jordanes judged it best not to disclose Aspar's religious identity, but used this opportunity to make yet another famous individual a Goth. Jordanes is known to attach a Gothic origin to many individuals who certainly were not Goths, e.g. Zalmoxis and Dici-neus (*Get.* 39), Sithalcus (*Get.* 66), Burebista (*Get.* 67), and so on. In conclusion, we should reject any notion that Aspar was a Goth, or a half-Goth.

What was Aspar's career is another question, and a much harder one. He defeated and captured the Western usurper Ioannes in 425 at Ravenna, and in 431–434 he fought the Vandals in Africa, commanding the combined armies of the West and East. Marcian took part in this African campaign in Aspar's service.<sup>16</sup> Before that, Marcian had already served Aspar's father, an Eastern *magister militum praesentalis* Ardabur. In total, he was Ardabur's and Aspar's *domesticus* for fifteen years.<sup>17</sup> A *domesticus* was a minor figure in the late Roman imperial hierarchy. Jones defined this post as "the personal assistant of his chief", which could be a *magister militum* or almost any other important official.<sup>18</sup> According to Boak, "the *domesticus* took an active share in the administration of a *magister militum*

13 Treadgold (2007: p. 103).

14 Candidus, *Fragmenta*, in Blockley, R. C. (ed. & tr.), *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire*, vol. II, Cambridge: Francis Cairns, 1983, p. 464.

15 Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof (2020: p. 331).

16 *PLRE* II, pp. 714–715 (Marcianus 8); Theoph. AM 5943.

17 Other than that, not much is known about Marcian, if we disregard a couple of later legends; a son of a soldier, he served in the army, then he became a member of Ardabur's and Aspar's retinue.

18 Jones (1964: pp. 602–603). For example, praetorian or urban prefects, provincial governors, etc.

and enjoyed in a high degree his confidence and esteem.”<sup>19</sup> We know of many *domestici* serving important officials, including *magistri militum*, in the 4th to 6th centuries, and some of them were entrusted with important tasks.<sup>20</sup> In July 450, when Theodosius died, Aspar relied once more on his trustworthy personal assistant; as Burgess put it, Marcian “was called in and simply given orders.”<sup>21</sup> Of course, we do not know and probably cannot know why Aspar, of all his people, designated Marcian as the future emperor.<sup>22</sup>

However, what was Aspar’s official post in 450? To answer this question, we have to deal with a series of other questions first. For example, in what capacity did Aspar serve in 424–425, and again in 431–434 in Africa? He is attested as a *magister militum* in 441, 443 and 449, but what kind of *magister militum* was he?<sup>23</sup> The sources do not say and our lists of Roman generals in the 5th century are notoriously incomplete, making Aspar’s career difficult to reconstruct. Generally speaking, “Aspar exercised considerable power in his role as *magister militum* between 431 and 471 even though he was an Alan and Arian.”<sup>24</sup> Yes, but what kind of *magister militum*?

For example, some suggest that he might have been a *magister militum vacans* for some time in 430 and 440s.<sup>25</sup> A law preserved in the *Codex Justinianus* testifies that this indeed was the position held by certain Germanus in 441. Germanus was one of the military commanders sent against the Vandals in that year.<sup>26</sup> *Vacantes* are defined by this law as those *qui praesentes in comitatu illustris dignitatis cingulum meruerint* (i. e., the belt of office, as opposed to the *honorarii* who only had the *codicilli* or documents testifying of their rank). Both *vacantes* and *honorarii* were ranked in precedence below *administratores* (that is, all five standard Eastern *magistri militum*), the *vacantes* still ranking above the *honorarii*. The law concedes that in some circumstances, the *vacantes* may rank as the *administratores*, and this perhaps applied to Aspar in Africa in 431–434, because the *vacantes* could be entrusted with the duties of regular *magistri militum*; in contrast, the *honorarii* were not tasked

19 Boak (1915: p. 159).

20 For example, Amm. Marc. XV,6,1 (Proculus); Oros. VII,42,10–11 (Sabinus); Olymp. fr.18 (Belleridus); Procopius, BV I,11,5–6 (Solomon), and others. For the origin of the (*protectores*) *domestici*, see Doležal (2022: p. 112).

21 Burgess (1994: p. 65).

22 In Marcian’s case, his apparent orthodoxy, his undisputed Roman origin, his experience in the army, and apparently his devotion to his master played an important role. Age was also important: Marcian was only a few years older than Pulcheria, and just like her, unlikely to produce an heir.

23 PLRE II, pp. 164–169 (Fl. Ardabur Aspar).

24 Elton (2009: p. 136).

25 PLRE II, pp. 166 (Fl. Ardabur Aspar), Bleeker (2022: p. 72).

26 CJ XII,8,2: *Cur enim aut vir magnificus Germanus magister militum vacans appellatur, cui bellum contra hostes mandavimus?* See PLRE II, p. 505 (Germanus 3).

with such duties.<sup>27</sup> Apart from this Germanus, we know of several other military officers who probably were *magistri militum vacantes* of the Eastern Roman Empire in the 5th century.<sup>28</sup>

So the problem with the title *magister militum vacans* becomes apparent; it seems to involve some sort of special task or an ad-hoc command. It was suitable for the African campaigns in 431–434 and 441, and it may indeed have been the correct Aspar's title in Africa; but it makes less sense in Constantinople or elsewhere in the Eastern Empire in 440s. Constantin Zuckerman suggested that Aspar may have been *magister militum per Illyricum* in 441–447.<sup>29</sup> That is quite plausible. It is worth noting here that Priscus seems to insinuate that the generals Areobindus and Aspar had no influence with Theodosius II in 449. Perhaps their bad standing could be attributed, as Blockley does, to the defeat they suffered from Attila in 447.<sup>30</sup> It would make sense to see in Aspar the *magister militum per Illyricum*, while Areobindus was, of course, one of the two *magistri militum praesentales*.

But there is a reason, I think, to suppose that neither Aspar nor Areobindus kept their posts after 447. The catastrophe at Utus in that year seems to have caused something of a reshuffle in the East Roman military hierarchy. *Magister militum per Thracias* Arnegisclus fell at Utus,<sup>31</sup> and I suggest that Aspar took his place (see the table below). If this was the case, it was only a slight demotion, and Theodosius perhaps took Aspar's long and loyal service into consideration. Another general, Agintheus, is attested as *magister militum per Illyricum* in 449, so it is reasonable to suppose that he took over this post from Aspar in 447.<sup>32</sup> Areobindus may have been sacked; all we know is that he died in 449.<sup>33</sup> His place was taken by the accomplished general Anatolius whose position, in turn, as *magister militum per Orientem* was given to Flavius Zeno.<sup>34</sup> Apollonius was the only general whose career was not touched by Utus.

27 Boak (1915: p. 141).

28 *PLRE* II, p. 1118 (Thraustila 2); pp. 365–366 (Fl. Dionysius 13); pp. 344–345 (Fl. Sabinus Antiochus Damonicus).

29 Zuckerman (1994: p. 171). Both Croke (2015: p. 120) and Bleeker (2022: pp. 72–73) agree with him.

30 *Prisc. fr.* 14 (ed. Blockley 1983: pp. 294–295, and cf. p. 389, note 92).

31 *Jord. Rom.* 331; Marcell. Comes, s. a. 447; *Chron. Pasch.* s. a. 447.

32 *Prisc. fr.* 8. The residence of *magister militum per Illyricum* would be Naissus (Croke 2001: p. 54), but the city was almost empty in 449. *PLRE* II, p. 34 (Agintheus).

33 Kelly (2010: p. 144) suggested that both Aspar and Areobindus were removed from their commands by Theodosius.

34 This is what Bleeker (2022: p. 87) plausibly asserts. The only weakness of his view is that Areobindus, Arnegisclus, and Aspar were replaced “by new men from outside the old military aristocracy, such as Anatolius, Apollonius, and Zeno.” Apollonius served in his position four years before Utus, Anatolius was no new man either, and we know nothing of Agintheus. The only “new man” of this group was Zeno.



	<i>magister militum praesentalis I</i>	<i>magister militum praesentalis II</i>	<i>magister militum per Orientem</i>	<i>magister militum per Illyricum</i>	<i>magister militum per Thracias</i>
430–435	Areobindus 434–447? (died in 449)		Anatolius 433 –probably 447		
436–440					
441–445		Apollonius 443–451		Aspar 441–447?	Ioannes 441 Theodulus 443
446–450			Zeno 447?–453	Agintheus 449	Arnegisclus 447, then Aspar 447–451?
451–457	Anatolius 447? – perhaps about 455?	Aspar 451–457	Ardabur junior 453–466	Anthemius: perhaps Illyricum, possibly Thrace, 454?–467	

**Table 1:** Eastern *magistri militum* in 430s–450s – an attempt at reconstruction<sup>35</sup>

Let us ponder the possibility of Aspar being *magister militum per Thracias* in 450. Marcianople would be his headquarters, a city not too distant from the capital. If summoned to the court, Aspar could cover the distance to Constantinople (which is about 420 kilometers or 260 miles) on horseback in 5–7 days (provided that he changed horses each day). In the spring or early summer of 450, *magister officiorum* Nomus and *magister militum praesentalis* Anatolius negotiated a treaty with Attila. The treaty finally secured peace on the northern frontier and both sides were satisfied with it. Attila, for his part, was probably already planning his Western campaign anyway.<sup>36</sup> For this reason, Aspar's presence in Marcianople was perhaps not necessary at the moment. He may have been summoned to Constantinople in the early summer of 450 for some reason. At any rate, he was present at the deathbed of Theodosius II.<sup>37</sup>

35 *Praesentales*: PLRE II, p. 145–146 (Fl. Ariobindus 2); p. 121 (Apollonius 3); pp. 164–169 (Fl. Ardabur Aspar); pp. 84–86 (Fl. Anatolius 10). *Oriens*: pp. 84–86 (Fl. Anatolius 10); pp. 1199–1200 (Fl. Zenon 6); p. 135–136 (Ardabur junior). *Illyricum*: p. 34 (Agintheus); p. 96–97 (Anthemius 3). Thrace: p. 597 (Ioannes the Vandal 13); p. 1105–1106 (Theodulus 2); p. 151 (Arnegisclus). See Kaldellis and Kruse (2023: pp. 38–47) for a differing view.

36 Thompson (1950: p. 67): “In the early summer months of 450 Theodosius had accomplished what he must have longed for throughout the previous twenty years: he was secure at last on one of his threatened frontiers. In May and June 450, when it became generally known that Attila was turning westwards, many East Romans must have been convinced that a lasting peace had finally settled upon the Danube.” Cf. Kelly (2010: p. 210), Croke (1981) and PLRE II, p. 786 (Nomus 1): “in early 450”.

37 John Malalas XIV, 27. Bleeker (2022: p. 93) gives the reason of Aspar's presence at the Emperor's deathbed by his being *princeps senatus*, or the eldest surviving former consul, which is true for the year 471 (when Aspar himself died; see *Chron. Pasch.* s. a. 467), but demonstrably wrong for 450. Szidat



The time of Emperor's death is another problem. As Burgess pointed out, we cannot be quite sure about how long Theodosius lived after his accident.<sup>38</sup> Most of our sources state that he died two days later;<sup>39</sup> Theodorus Lector, however, asserts that he was injured and died on the same day (28 July 450).<sup>40</sup> Otherwise, the picture is clear. The Emperor was hunting near the river Lycus, fell off his horse and broke either his back or his neck;<sup>41</sup> he was brought back to the city on a litter.

How does Aspar fit into this picture? Burgess<sup>42</sup> asks the right question: "A question which cannot be answered however is how Aspar was able to gain access to the palace and insinuate himself into the good graces of Pulcheria. He was certainly not of any great importance at the time. Perhaps Pulcheria called upon him after the death of Theodosius as an advisor. Perhaps he presented himself at the palace when he heard of Theodosius' death. Perhaps he had been hunting with Theodosius." I cannot answer this question either, but perhaps Pulcheria still felt obliged to Aspar for what he had done for her cousin, the Emperor Valentinian III, in 425. Perhaps she trusted Aspar more than any of her courtiers or generals. Perhaps she realized that an alliance with Aspar meant a way to get rid of Chrysaphius whose religious policy she detested as much as his influence over her brother.<sup>43</sup>

Not only was Chrysaphius a personal enemy of the Empress, he seems to have had very few friends among the generals. We are told that after the death of her brother, Pulcheria surrendered Chrysaphius to Iordanes, whose father Ioannes had been murdered in 441 at the instigation of Chrysaphius.<sup>44</sup> This Ioannes was *magister*

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(2010: p. 119, n. 463; pp. 115–116, n. 437) explains that Florentius, consul of 429, had the honor in 450 (*PLRE* II, pp. 478–480, Fl. Florentius 7).

38 Burgess (1994: pp. 61–62).

39 And this version is usually followed, e.g. Kaldellis (2024: p. 199: "In July 450, Theodosius fell off a horse and died two days later").

40 Theodoros Anagnostes, *Kirchengeschichte*, edited by G. Ch. Hansen, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin – New York 1995, p. 100 (τῇ ἐπιούσῃ νυκτὶ ἐτελεύτησε).

41 If the latter case is true, then Theodosius probably suffered the cervical spinal cord injury which can result in early mortality. In such cases, causes of death included respiratory failure with concomitant hypoxemia and acid–base disorders resulting in cardiac arrhythmia and cardiac arrest, multiple organ failure, sudden cardiac arrest, or acute gastrointestinal hemorrhage. Shao J, Zhu W, Chen X, Jia L, Song D, Zhou X, Yan W, Zhang Y. Factors associated with early mortality after cervical spinal cord injury. *J Spinal Cord Med*. 2011 Nov;34(6):555–562. doi: 10.1179/2045772311Y.00000000024. PMID: 22330110; PMCID: PMC3237281.

42 Burgess (1994: p. 63).

43 Joh. Ant. fr. 220.

44 Theoph. AM 5943 (AD 450/1), p. 160: "The blessed Pulcheria handed over the universally detested eunuch Chrysaphios to Iordanes." Ioannes "had then been treacherously killed by Chrysaphios. Iordanes took Chrysaphios and killed him." *PLRE* II, pP. 620–621 (Iordanes 3).

*militum per Thracias* and his murderer was Arnegisclus who later became *magister militum per Thracias* himself.<sup>45</sup>

Aspar was, then, present in the imperial palace on 28 July 450; but so were both *magistri militum praesentales*, Anatolius and Apollonius.<sup>46</sup> Although both of them outranked Aspar, neither is known to meddle in the matters of imperial succession. We are only informed by Priscus that Apollonius was a supporter of Zeno.<sup>47</sup> They seem to have been independent of Aspar, and they commanded two field armies in the vicinity of Constantinople, which nominally totalled 42,000 men,<sup>48</sup> but which, in reality, must have been somewhat understrength, given the setbacks against Attila in 447.<sup>49</sup> How much influence could Aspar have on either general or their officers and soldiers? And why did they not put forward their own candidates?

Maybe Aspar was not alone in pressing his case. We know that he and his sons Ardabur junior and Patricius had their retinues in 471. John Malalas speaks of “a large band of Goths and *comites* and other followers, and a large number of supporters.”<sup>50</sup> Perhaps Aspar had a similar following in 450 already. Such a pressure group, ready to back his demands, might not have been very large. In 306, when Constantine the Great usurped the imperial power in Britain, he did so “with the consent of Crocus, king of the Alamanni, who, having command of the auxiliaries, belonged to Constantius’ inner circle.”<sup>51</sup> With quick planning, determination and promises, a handful of soldiers may suffice for a coup. It was enough in 306, and may have been just enough in 450. We have reviewed all (rare) occasions of imperial elections in 4th and 5th centuries (see above); and perhaps the hardest question we can ask about the accession of Marcian is whether in his case a real election took place or whether he was rather promoted through a “surrogate usurpation”, which later became a new norm in the West for claimants of the throne.<sup>52</sup> How come that apparently only Aspar’s candidate was taken into consideration? Were it a true elec-

45 PLRE II, p. 597 (Ioannes the Vandal 13). Marcell. Comes s.a. 441; *Chron. Pasch.* s.a. 441.

46 Apollonius 3 (PLRE II, p. 121); Fl. Anatolius 10 (PLRE II, pp. 84–86).

47 Prisc. fr. 18.

48 Treadgold (1997: pp. 105–106).

49 The war of 447 is best described by Bleeker (2022: pp. 78–80); Maenchen-Helfen (1973: pp. 118–124); and Kelly (2010: pp. 132–139).

50 John Malalas XIV, 40: εἶχον γὰρ πλῆθος Γότθων καὶ κόμητας καὶ ἄλλους παῖδας καὶ παραμένοντας αὐτοῖς ἀνθρώπους πολλούς. Translation: *The Chonicle of John Malalas*. A Translation by E. Jeffreys, M. Jeffreys, M. Scott and others, Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, Melbourne 1986, p. 205.

51 *Epitome* 41, 2–3 (*ad patrem in Britanniam pervenit; et forte iisdem diebus ibidem Constantium parentem fata ultima perurgebant. Quo mortuo cunctis, qui aderant, annitentibus, sed praecipue Croco, Alamannorum rege, auxilii gratia Constantium comitato imperium capit*). See Doležal (2022: pp. 253–257).

52 By „surrogate usurpation“ I mean those instances of Western imperial ascensions when Ricimer and

tion, why are we not informed of other candidates? Aspar could not aspire to the imperial title himself<sup>53</sup> and if he wished to nominate someone else, he needed, at least, Pulcheria's approval. This is not to say that Aspar had the same power as Ricimer or Gundobad did; he simply grasped the opportunity to aggrandize himself and to become a power behind the throne.

Who else was present in the imperial palace in Constantinople when Theodosius II died? At the very heart of any imperial court in Late Antiquity was the *consistorium*. It was made up of the most influential dignitaries, wielding powers of empire-wide reach. It appears that the consistory had no fixed structure to speak of. One of the reasons for this was its very wide-ranging and varied agenda, which tended to require the participation of legal and other experts. Its permanent members, in order of importance, were the quaestor (*quaestor sacri palatii*), the chief of the imperial offices (*magister officiorum*), the minister of state finance (*comes sacrarum largitionum*), and the administrator of the emperor's estate (*comes rei privatae*). These offices originated under Constantine or his immediate successors. The quaestor presided over the proceedings of the consistory in the Emperor's absence.<sup>54</sup> Unfortunately, the names of quaestor and both financial ministers in 450 are unknown; and we are not sure about the *magister officiorum* either. It could have been Martialis or perhaps Placitus.<sup>55</sup> Apart from the members of the consistory, we can presume that many other courtiers were present at the deathbed of Theodosius, such as *praepositus sacri cubiculi* Urbicius, *comes domesticorum peditum* Sporacius, or Nomus – a former *magister officiorum*, consul of 445, and *patricius*.<sup>56</sup> None of them is recorded to have any influence on the election. All of them, we are told by several sources, gave their approval to the choice of Marcian.<sup>57</sup> Aspar, then, was very lucky to be on the spot, to be able to offer an acceptable candidate, and he se-

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Gundobad, in turn, chose a new emperor, to wit, Majorian, Libius Severus, Olybrius, Glycerius and Romulus Augustulus, without relinquishing their own power.

53 Bleeker (2022: p. 99) enumerates the reasons which include facts that Aspar was an Arian, but also that he was married. Cf. Croke (2015: p. 109: „as a barbarian, Aspar was ineligible to be emperor himself“) and Croke (2005: p. 150) for the possibility that Aspar himself was offered the throne in 457 – or even 450 – by the senate (and declined).

54 Doležal (2022: pp. 349–355).

55 *PLRE* II, p. 729 (Fl. Areobindas Martialis), p. 891 (Placitus).

56 *PLRE* II, pp. 1188–1190 (Urbicius 1), pp. 1026–1027 (Fl. Sporacius 3), p. 785–786 (Nomus 1).

57 Evagrius *HE* II,1: „accordingly he (sc. Marcian) held the realm as a prize of virtue, not an inheritance, after the senate and others who filled every position had provided the imperial power to him unanimously, on the advice of Pulcheria“ (δι' αὐτὴν καὶ τὴν ἀρχὴν ἀθλον ἀρετῆς, οὐ κληρονομίαν ἔσχε, τῆς τε γερονσίας τῶν τε ἄλλων τῶν πᾶσαν πληροῦντων τύχην ἀπάσαις ψήφοις τὴν βασιλείαν αὐτῷ παρασχομένων, γνώμη Πουλχερίας). Translation: *The Ecclesiastical History of Evagrius Scholasticus, translated with an introduction by Michael Whitby*, Liverpool University Press 2000, p. 60. Cf. Victor Tonn. s.a. 450 (*Marcianus totius rei publicae consensu imperator efficitur*).

ems to successfully pressured, possibly through intimidation, the court into voting Marcian in. A “surrogate usurpation” is perhaps the best term to describe events in Constantinople in July and August 450.

There was one important person, though, that *was not* present in Constantinople and still was a political force to be reckoned with: *magister militum per Orientem* Flavius Zeno. His presence in the capital is often taken as granted in the scholarly literature.<sup>58</sup> This, however, is a wrong assumption. First off, we would expect a *magister per Orientem* in Antioch, not Constantinople. Apparently, the last occasion when Zeno was in Constantinople was during the war in 447, when Zeno, according to Priscus, “commanded a large force of Isaurians with which he had been assigned the guarding of Constantinople during the war”.<sup>59</sup> For this, he was rewarded with the consulate for the year 448. In 449 and 450, Zeno is known to have waged his own private war with Chrysaphius over the strategy towards Attila and his Huns.<sup>60</sup> It was even feared at the court that Zeno would on some occasion attempt usurpation.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, the same Maximinus, with whom Priscus had travelled to Attila’s court in 449, was sent by Theodosius II with an army to Isauria in 450; another army was sent to the East, presumably to Antioch, “to subdue Zeno”.<sup>62</sup> It is immaterial whether these plans were fulfilled or just contemplated, as some scholars assert.<sup>63</sup> What matters is that at the time of Theodosius’ death, Zeno was in the East, being an outlaw or at least a *persona non grata*. Notwithstanding his absence, Aspar’s plans were deeply affected by Zeno. Aspar may have managed to convince the Empress and all the courtiers that Marcian was the best choice; however, he still needed to secure Zeno’s support and avoid a civil war.

To achieve that, Aspar struck a deal with Pulcheria which probably contained the following four points:

- 1) Chrysaphius is to be immediately executed (which pleased Pulcheria but also appealed to Zeno);
- 2) Marcian will be chosen as the new Emperor, and Pulcheria will be asked to formally marry him to lend him legitimacy; in return, a new ecume-

58 Zuckerman (1994: p. 174), Kelly (2010: p. 233), McEvoy (2016: p. 487). Feld (2005: p. 220) opines that “Zeno hat also die Hauptstadt, wenn überhaupt, nur kurzfristig in Richtung Isaurien verlassen, denn für den Aufmarsch größerer Truppenverbände und auch deren Rückberufung wäre die Zeit zu knapp gewesen”.

59 Prisc. fr. 14 (Blockley 1983: pp. 290–291) and 15.2 and 15.3 (pp. 296–297), and 15.4 (pp. 298–299).

60 PLRE II, pp. 1199–1200 (Fl. Zenon 6).

61 Prisc. fr. 16 (pp. 300–301) = Joh. Ant. fr. 223 (pp. 402–403).

62 PLRE II, p. 743 (Maximinus 11).

63 Lee (2013b: p. 92); Kelly (2010: p. 233); Feld (2005: p. 219–220); Zuckerman (1994: p. 173, n. 52). Priscus (fr. 16) seems to suggest that by his wording ὥστε διαβῆναι (“so that he leave”, i.e. Maximinus).

nical council will be held to counter the outcome of the Second Council of Ephesus;<sup>64</sup>

- 3) Valentinian III will not be consulted about the election of the new Emperor, only informed of the result;<sup>65</sup>
- 4) messengers are to be immediately sent to the East to search for Zeno, to inform him of these developments and ask him for his political support. In return, he will be confirmed in his post and made *patricius*; besides, the previous imperial policy of appeasement towards the Huns will be reversed.<sup>66</sup>

This, I believe, is the only logical explanation of the 28-days interregnum. Zeno had to be found, briefed and asked to come to Constantinople. It is obvious that it took some time. While Burgess asserted that negotiations (he called them “extremely delicate”) between Aspar and Pulcheria accounted for the delay of 28 days, I believe such explanation is both unnecessary and misleading; after all, there was not much to be discussed.<sup>67</sup> A new Emperor had to be chosen; either they were willing to defer the decision to Valentinian III (which, it appears, no one ever proposed) or they had to elect a new Emperor themselves. And because we know of no candidate other than Marcian, we may presume that after the death of Theodosius, perhaps even on that very day, there was a conversation between Aspar and Pulcheria, followed by a series of short conversations between Aspar and important courtiers, such as Apollonius and Anatolius. Getting the approval of everyone involved on the terms outlined above could not be a very difficult task and decision could be reached in a few days, not in a fortnight. On the contrary, any delay could be dangerous and Aspar had to act quickly, to build upon the initiative he created, before anyone else seizes the opportunity.

It appears that the accession of Marcian was indeed the work of Aspar, Zeno, and Pulcheria; and “strange though the notion of co-operation between Aspar and

64 That was something Pulcheria cared very deeply about; for her religious interests and beliefs, see Busch (2023: pp. 215–216 and 2015: pp. 110–133). It cannot be denied that their marriage, though formal, was politically beneficial to both parties.

65 This point was probably acceptable to all the courtiers as well; not only would a delay of many weeks create a politically dangerous situation until the Western Emperor decided on a course of action, but the Western Empire was already the less important player of the two entities. That Valentinian III, being offended by what he saw as usurpation in the East, refused to recognize Marcian as Emperor until March 452 was an acceptable temporary detriment to the mutual relations.

66 Lee (2013b: pp. 95–96): “...it has been argued persuasively that Zeno was the general in the strongest position at the time of Theodosius’ death and must therefore also have given his agreement – perhaps in return for his promotion to the rank of *patricius*.”

67 Burgess (1994: p. 65). This is not to mean that Pulcheria was not an important part of the negotiations, as summed up, for example, by Lee (2013a: p. 97: „some of these negotiations were no doubt with Theodosius’ sister Pulcheria, whose subsequent marriage to the new emperor was important in helping to legitimate his rule“).

Zeno may seem, Marcian may in fact have been their joint candidate.”<sup>68</sup> In a way, he was.

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68 Lee (2008: p. 43).



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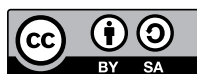
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