A hendiadys in the *Breviarium* of Festus: a ‘literary’ Festus?

The *Breviarium* of Festus is a work little known to anyone who does not study the fourth century AD. It very occasionally crops up as a footnote to corroborate some historical fact, and it has not yet been translated into English. Nonetheless there are a few scholars who have dedicated some time to this author and his intriguing genre.¹

Festus wrote the *Breviarium* in AD 370, probably for the emperor Valens’ eastern campaign against the Persians. There was probably some kind of imperial request:²

*Breuem fieri clementia tua praecrepid. Parebo libens praecipto, quippe cui desit facultas lattus eloquendi; ...*

‘Your Clemency ordered me to be brief. I will gladly comply with your order, since I lack the means of speaking with a wider scope.’


² *Breviarium* 1.1. The year before, Eutropius, as *magister memoriae*, was commissioned to write a *Breviarium* for Valens also. It is possible that this work did not quite fit Valens’ purposes, and so he ordered another.
Unfortunately history has dealt harshly with Festus and (with few exceptions) has not regarded him as worthy of the meanest of glances. W. Den Boer argues that Festus was an author 'not much concerned about the requirements of a literary genre,' and J. Eadie disparagingly considered that Festus wrote in rapid and rudimentary prose. R. Syme considered Eutropius’ and Festus’ Breviaria, together with Aurelius Victor’s De Caesaribus, ‘poor and scrappy productions all three.’ ‘The three epitomators betray the low standard still prevalent in the days of Julian and Valentinian (and an abysmal ignorance about the past history of imperial Rome). Otherwise, who would have made the effort of writing, who would have read these meagre compilations?’ Syme calls Festus a ‘meagre summary.’

Harsh words indeed—but who can hold the wishes of the emperor (certainly in the case of Eutropius) against men in his employ? And it seems futile to abuse the literary taste of the time when our purpose should be to understand. We undermine our purpose if we abuse what we are studying as unworthy of study.

What is more, Festus goes on in his introductory chapter to tell his readers and the emperor that he will not treat his subject in any detail or go into depth:

\[ ac\ m\ o\ r\ e\ m\ se\ c\ u\ t\ u\ s\ c\ a\ c\ u\ l\ o\ n\ u\ m,\ q\ u\ i\ i\ n\ g\ e\ n\ t\ e\ s\ s\ u\ m\ m\ a\ s\ a\ e\ r\ i s \ b\ r\ e\ u\ i\ o\ r\ i\ b\ u\ s\ e\ x\ p\ r\ i\ m\ u\ n\ t,\ r\ e\ s\ g\ e\ s\ t\ a\ s\ s\ i\ g\ n\ a\ b\ o,\ n\ o\ n\ e\ l\ o\ q\ u\ a r. \ A\ c\ c\ i\ p\ e\ e\ r\ g\ o,\ q\ u\ o\ d\ b\ r\ e\ u\ i\ t\ e\ r\ d\ i\ c\ t\ i\ s\ b\ r\ e\ u\ i\ u\ s\ c\ o\ n\ p\ u\ t\ e\ t: u\ t\ a\ n\ n\ o\ s\ e\ t\ a\ e\ t\ a\ e\ t\ e\ m \ r\ e\ i\ p\ u\ b\ l\ i\ a\ c\ e\ p\ r\ a\ e\ t\ e\ r\ e\ t i\ f\ a\ c\ t\ a\ t\ e\ m\ p\ o\ r\ i\ s\ n\ o\ n\ t\ a\ m\ l\ e\ g\ e\ r\ t\ i\ b\ i,\ g\ l\ o\ r\ i\ s\ s\ i\ s\ s\ i\ m e\ p\ r\ i\ n\ c\ e\ p,\ q\ u\ a\ m\ n\ u\ m\ e\ r\ a\ r e\ u\ i\ d\ e\ a r i s. \]

‘... and having followed the habit of accountants, who express huge sums of money with contracted [sums], I will outline events, and will not go into depth. Therefore accept a thing which having been briefly said can be more briefly summed up below: so that you may

\[ B\ r\ e\ v\ i\ a\ r\ i\ u m\ 1.1-2. \]

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3 Den Boer, Minor Roman Historians, 219.

4 Eadie, Breviarium of Festus, 17. See also Bird, li.


6 Breviarium 1.1-2.
FESTUS BREVIA RIUM

seem, O most glorious Emperor, not so much to read to yourself the years and ages of our state and the deeds of past time, as to count them off.'

We cannot hold Festus’ intentions against him, since he has told us he is going to refrain from ‘being literary.’ However, Festus can be shown not to have represented his authorial intentions with strict accuracy when we look at two passages of his Breviarium where he does indeed seem to enter into consciously literary activity.

Maneat modo concessa dei nutu et ab amico, cui credis et creditus es, numine indulta felicitas, ...

Thus begins the benediction of the final chapter. This seemingly ambiguous passage has caused consternation for scholars, and has, by its apparent ambiguity, provided for myriad interpretations of its meaning. The problem lies in the author’s use of both dei nutu and numine.

The most common interpretation of the passage is that it is evidence that Valens was a Christian and that the author, Festus, was a pagan: in this interpretation dei nutu refers to the pagan god of Festus and numine to the Christian God of Valens. This argument is convenient because the assumption is normally made that the author Festus was a pagan. On the other hand, the only prominent Festus of the period is Festus of Tridentum, who has occasionally been identified with the writer of the Breviarium: and this Festus of Tridentum is almost universally considered a Christian.

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7 Den Boer, Minor Roman Historians, 175, for instance, translates this passage ‘long last the happiness that was granted to you by the will of my god and by the friendly god whom you trust and to whom you are entrusted.’

8 The two exceptions are Garroni, ‘Rufio Festio Avieno,’ 123, and Baldwin, ‘Festus the Historian’ (as in n.1).

9 See Den Boer, Minor Roman Historians, 179-181. The reasons for Festus’ being a popular choice as the author of the Breviarium, apart from his name, are that he was a magister memoriae like Eutropius and he succeeded Eutropius to that post. It was as magister memoriae that Eutropius was asked in 369 to compose the first Breviarium. However as proconsul Asiae in 370s Festus of Tridentum persecuted prominent pagans, and his death is recorded as a triumph for paganism by Eunapius (Vitae Sophistarum 481).
Eadie considered that Festus of Tridentum was the same as the author, and was a pagan, for three reasons: the lack of allusion to Christianity in the Breviarium; Festus' fair and lengthy treatment of the pagan emperor Julian; and the apparent reference both to a pagan god (dei nutu) and the Christian God (amico ... numine) in the final benediction. Eadie did not discuss the faith of Festus of Tridentum as a separate issue, and concluded he was pagan on the evidence of the Breviarium.

Eadie's argument turns on just one thing—the sentence at the end in which Festus uses both numine and dei nutu; and the mention of Christianity in the phrase amico ... numine would seem to negate Eadie's argument that Festus did not allude to it.\(^{10}\)

It has been argued that secular histories of the fourth century did not normally refer to Christianity on grounds of style.\(^{11}\) This, as a generalization, is persuasive. But in Festus' Breviarium the phrase amico ... numine—on any interpretation—does refer to Christianity; we are dealing with an exception to the rule.

Why then did Festus refer to Christianity in his final chapter? The answer is possibly that in the main text of a work like the Breviarium, more than three times shorter than the Breviarium published by Eutropius the year before, there was no space for Festus to do so.\(^{12}\) The main purpose of the text was to give a rapid account of the Roman empire; such

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\(^{10}\) There are other instances in the Breviarium where an allusion to Christianity can be seen. See Baldwin, 'Festus the Historian,' 202, referring to Breviarium 24.2: Cari imperatoris victoria de Persis nimium potens superno numini visa est. Nam ad invidiam caelestis indignationis pertinuisse credendum est. 'The emperor Carus' victory against the Persians seemed excessively powerful to the deity [numen] who is above. For it is to be believed that this was connected to the ill-will arising from heavenly indignation.' Baldwin's comment is that the passage could well be taken to imply Festus was Christian.

\(^{11}\) A. and A. Cameron, 'Christianity and Tradition in the Historiography of the Late Empire' Classical Quarterly 14 (1964), 316; Cameron, review of Eadie, 306; and Baldwin, 'Festus the Historian,' 203.

\(^{12}\) Eutropius' Breviarium is 77 Teubner pages long, whilst Festus' only takes up 20.
brevity did not allow Festus opportunity for literary elaboration. He was recounting the acquisition of provinces in both the west and east of the empire, and the history of Rome’s conflict with Persia. The places for relevant reference to Christianity were few. The only places where Festus felt he could afford the luxury of a less strict procedure were in his first and last chapters and in his bridging chapter (XV) between the accounts of the western and eastern provinces and the account of Rome’s conflicts with Persia. He seems to have taken full advantage of this luxury. Therefore the suggestion can be made that Christianity was not often referred to in the Breviarium because of the restriction of space and a lack of relevance to what Festus was trying to achieve. What is more, if Festus had chosen to include Christian allusion, he could not have avoided the quagmire of referring to a predominantly pagan past in Christian terms, which he had not the space to do.

13 Chapters 1-9 deal with the western provinces, 10-14 with the eastern provinces, and 16-30 with Persia.

14 Peachin argues (‘Purpose of Festus’, 159), that the passage in chapter 15 can be interpreted to show that the composition of the work may have been of Festus’ own initiative. Scio nunc, inclyte princeps, quo tua pergam intentio. Requiris profecto, quotiens Babyloniae ac Romanorum arma conlata sint et quibus vicibus sagittis pila contenderint. ‘Now I know, distinguished Emperor, in what direction your thoughts are running. Obviously you are asking “On how many occasions have Babylonian and Roman forces come into conflict? And with what success on each side have [our] spears striven against [their] arrows?”’ According to Peachin the word intentio can be interpreted two ways: either that Valens requested a book for the coming war, or that Festus presented what he thought Valens wanted. Secondly, intentio may mean that Festus was aware of plans for a Persian war and decided to prepare a voluntary work. However, given the closeness of Festus’ Breviarium in time and purpose to Eutropius’, and Festus’ opening sentence, it would be a better scenario to consider some kind of request. A consideration which seems to have missed Peachin’s attention is the possibility that Festus is employing a simple trick. By stating that he knows what the emperor is thinking he would make his work intriguing to the emperor. This would seem an attractive interpretation of scio nunc ... quo tua pergam intentio. Peachin’s arguments can still be applicable to an imperial request, especially if that request was unspecific—perhaps only that Festus’ work should be much shorter than Eutropius’ and concentrate more on the east.
The argument that Festus is shown to be pagan by his account of the emperor Julian may be quickly negated. Festus wrote to encourage Valens’ Persian campaign of 370 by referring to the pagan past. Festus’ heroes against the Parthians were those who had carried out an aggressive foreign policy, especially (the pagans) Trajan and Aurelian. Constantius and Jovian, Christian emperors, had had little success in the east, but Constantine had done well: ‘therefore’, (as Baldwin says) ‘it was best to minimise the role of the divine.’ Julian’s Persian campaigns could not be neglected in a history with the focus of Festus’, especially since they would be too fresh in Roman minds to avoid. As Baldwin points out, relative amounts of space in the *Breviarium* prove nothing; hence an argument based on Julian is ‘feeble’ in proving the paganism of Festus. The chapter on Julian focuses on Julian’s loss of luck during his campaign, and ‘luck is something everyone needs.’ Festus may simply have used Julian to reinforce an advisory commonplace—Valens would need luck for his campaign to succeed. We can look for an apt comparison in the Theodosian Code. When Valentinian and Valens restored the laws of Constantius (*C.Th.* 16.2.18) there was no hostile reference to Julian personally. It was not in an emperor’s interest to attack a legitimate predecessor, even if he was a pagan. Consequently it would not suit an author trying to impress an emperor in a work dedicated to justifying an aggressive policy against the Persians, to ignore the most recent emperor to carry on such a policy. It would be extremely unlikely that Festus would abuse a legitimate imperial predecessor, pagan or not; and also

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15 Hence the many references to Pompey, who is mentioned 9 times in the *Breviarium*, more times than any other individual.

16 See Den Boer, *Minor Roman Historians*, 199, 200, and 206-211.

17 Baldwin, ‘Festus the Historian,’ 204.

18 The initial success of Julian was also used as late as the sixth century by the historian Agathias to condemn the ceding of Nisibis by Jovian: something that Festus himself deprecates in chapter 15. Baldwin, ‘Festus the Historian’, 204, citing Averil Cameron, ‘Agathias and Cedranus on Julian’ *Journal of Roman Studies* 53 (1963), 92.

19 The chapter on Julian is 22 lines long.

unlikely that he would abuse pagan generals and emperors who had been successful against the Persians in the past.

The most (seemingly) substantial, and most often used, argument for the paganism of the author Festus is that based on the final benediction. Den Boer uses it as the basis of his argument for Festus' paganism;21 and even Arnaldo Momigliano read the text in that way.22

Baldwin interprets the passage differently, as the application of an honorific title, *numen*, to an emperor: he argues that Festus intended to apply the word to Valens.23 He adds that there 'is no need to perceive a subtle distinction between *deus* and *numen*. Festus is reproducing commonplaces of flattering vocabulary.'24 Baldwin’s argument is also that both the author and the emperor are Christian: ‘with *dei nutu* representing the support of the Christian god and the friendly *numen* indicative of the special position of an emperor vis-à-vis his god and of the peculiar quality of his own *genius*.’25 However, Baldwin also argues that *numen* ‘is clearly an all-purpose word in the language of panegyric.’26

This need not be the case. Both *dei nutu* and *numine* can indeed refer to one, Christian, God without the necessity of seeing *numen* as an honorific title. *Dei nutu* ‘by the will of God’ is a Christian phrase—if Festus had intended a pagan reference he could more easily have used *deorum*. The friendly *numen* is also the Christian God and the final

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21 Den Boer, *Minor Roman Historians*, 178: ‘Festus was a pagan, as he makes clear in chapter 30 ... He could hardly have been more subtle. Great tact was expected from a pagan civil servant employed by a Christian emperor, but Festus was obviously able to meet this challenge.’

22 Momigliano, *Conflict between Paganism and Christianity*, 95.


26 Baldwin, ‘Festus the Historian’, 203.
benediction is therefore not a tactful mention of both pagan and Christian gods. The repetition does not naturally mean that more than one god is being referred to. *Numen* is etymologically related to *nutus*—both words with an etymological or root meaning of ‘a nod of the head.’ Therefore *nutu/numine* connect the phrases and constitute a hendiadys.

The more correct translation should be along the lines:

*maneat modo concessa dei nutu et ab amico, cui credis et creditus es, numine indulta felicitas.*

‘May the happiness granted by the grace of the gracious God in whom you believe and to whom you are entrusted, be enduring.’

Baldwin comes close to this conclusion but without observing the hendiadys. The idea of hendiadys complements and strengthens Baldwin’s arguments and also shows that Festus was not an uncomplicated imbecile, nor a simple ‘cut and paste’ author. However, for Festus to be meagre, rapid, rudimentary, and not overly concerned with literary style—i.e. to display the features for which he is criticised—was what his genre required.

A work of such deliberate brevity could not help but be written in ‘rapid and rudimentary’ narrative. Festus allowed himself few opportunities to ‘be literary’; what the final benediction shows us is that when he did, Festus was capable of relatively complex literary expression even in such a restrictive genre. For that he should be recognised and appreciated, not dismissed. The purely Christian interpretation of the final chapter of the *Breviarium* suggested here removes the only real obstacle to identification of the author as Festus of Tridentum.

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27 Baldwin, ‘Festus the Historian,’ 202-203. He argues that the collocation of *numen* with *deus* was as old as Pliny: *Panegyricus* 2.3: *nusquam ut deo, nusquam ut numini blandiamur,* ‘nowhere should we flatter him as a divinity, nowhere as a god.’

28 If the above interpretation of *intentio* is correct he can be shown to have ‘been literary’ more than once.