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978-0-521-84299-0 - Ammianus Marcellinus: The Allusive Historian

Gavin Kelly

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PART I

THE ELUSIVE HISTORIAN

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INTRODUCTION

The historian of the Roman Empire's decline and fall called Ammianus Marcellinus 'an accurate and faithful guide', who had 'composed the history of his own times, without indulging the prejudices and passions, which usually affect the mind of a contemporary'.¹ Ammianus' *Res Gestae* was originally not a wholly contemporary work. It began with the emperor Nerva's accession in AD 96, the end-point of Tacitus' *Histories*. But like the closing books of Tacitus' work, Ammianus' opening books no longer survive. If we go by the book-numbers found in the manuscript tradition, the first thirteen books have been lost, covering over 250 years.² The remaining eighteen books (14–31) cover only twenty-five years, from 353 to the battle of Adrianople in 378: the latter part of the reign of Constantius II, the rise and usurpation of his more talented deputy, the Caesar Julian, Julian's sole rule, culminating in the tragic failure of the Persian campaign, and his inferior successors, Jovian and the brothers Valentinian and Valens. Over that short span, the breadth of Ammianus' learning, his geographical range across the whole empire, and his huge and characterful cast-list set his *Res Gestae* apart from everything else from the period. His uniqueness lies not only in the massive quantity of information but in the ability to capture individuals and scenes with an arresting image: a Prefect of Rome standing against a riotous mob who hissed like snakes, a low-born imperial favourite so exultant

¹ Gibbon (1776–88) [ed. D. Womersley, 1995], 1.1073.

² See Reynolds (1983), 6–8, on the manuscript tradition. The only fully authoritative manuscript is V, the *Fuldensis*, itself a copy of M, the lost *Hersfeldensis* (Robinson (1936)). A few pages of this were discovered in the nineteenth century, and some fragments have been found since (see Broszinski and Teitler (1990)). Readings from M were also haphazardly incorporated into the 1533 edition of Sigismund Gelenius (G): unfortunately it is rarely possible to tell for sure that G's readings come from collation against M, rather than an earlier edition or independent conjecture. For the possibility that a third independent manuscript survived to the Renaissance see Cappelletto (1983) and Cameron (1989).

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in treason trials that he seemed to walk in the air like a Brahmin, a battlefield long afterwards white with bones.³ Gibbon was certainly right to lament when the last surviving secular Latin history could no longer serve him as a source, and by contrast to bemoan the inadequate collation of partial narratives which was forced on him for the years after Adrianople.

Since Gibbon's regretful leave-taking, Ammianus has appealed to many historians of late antiquity as a faithful guide for that quarter-century up to 378, and the most important historian by far of the fourth century as a whole. His eye for memorable detail and his ear for anecdote, and his appearance of 'sincerity and moderation',⁴ have ensured that Ammianus' version of his age has become canonical. Most historical scholars have identified with, and forcefully maintained, his self-image as an honest and independent historian. For those whose concern has been more specifically with Ammianus, the central issue has been and remains the support, refutation, defence, or revision of his reputation for accurately and faithfully representing the Roman Empire which he knew.

Such a concern certainly dominates the two most important studies of Ammianus in recent years, John Matthews' *The Roman Empire of Ammianus* (1989) and Timothy Barnes' *Ammianus Marcellinus and the Representation of Historical Reality* (1998). Together they saved me from much toil and error, and have made writing this book a far more agreeable and less solitary labour than it could otherwise have been. Matthews' book, which appeared when I was first gripped by ancient historical writing and by the allure of the later empire, 'conveys its main message in its very title'.⁵ Fully appreciative of Ammianus' range, Matthews fills out a prodigiously broad canvas around him, demonstrating his author's virtues and uniqueness without panegyric. His Ammianus is tolerant, inquisitive, gentlemanly, and ultimately optimistic. (It was also in an unassuming way an iconoclastic book, painlessly putting to sleep several long-lived canards.)⁶ Matthews' Ammianus

³ 15.7.3–5, with Auerbach (1953), 50–60, Matthews (1987), Barnes (1998), 11–16; 28.1.13; 31.7.16 and Ch. 1 below.

⁴ Gibbon (1776–88), 1.1074. ⁵ Barnes (1998), 7.

⁶ For example, the work's publication in instalments, the significance of Tacitus as an influence, and the curial status of the historian.

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was extremely well-received, and his approach remains dominant: arguably most of the papers in the volume edited by Drijvers and Hunt in 1999 belong to the school of Matthews.

Barnes' very different book appeared in 1998, the first year of my doctoral studies: it was immensely stimulating for me to read (in one sitting) a self-consciously revisionist reinterpretation. Typical of this is the consideration of whether Ammianus wrote thirty-one books, as the transmitted book-numbers suggest, or thirty-six. Barnes argues convincingly that the existing books are divided into three groups of six books ('hexads'); furthermore, he argues that the contents of the lost books were so expansive that they must also have included three hexads, making thirty-six books in total, and that the transmitted book-numbers are out by five – a theory which to my mind is neither impossible nor proven.⁷ More importantly, evidently provoked by Matthews, Barnes is concerned as to whether Ammianus' picture of his world is really an unmediated and authentic representation of his age. He sees Ammianus as belonging to the company of the truly great historians not because he was 'an accurate and faithful guide' but because 'his *Res Gestae* exhibit the creative and imaginative powers of a novelist'.⁸ In countless places he convicts the historian of misrepresentation and bias, or as Gibbon put it 'prejudices and passions'. In particular, he focuses mercilessly on a blind spot in Matthews' study: religion.⁹

For nothing has the pagan Ammianus been more praised than for his tolerant attitude to Christianity, in an age of intolerance and fanaticism. Tolerance comes more naturally to those on the losing side, but even then is a rare commodity in the late fourth century. Contrast him to the likes of Libanius, Eunapius, or even Symmachus, and Ammianus appears exceptional, with his willingness to criticise the religious fervour of the only pagan emperor of the period, Julian, and his praise for Christian meekness. Richard

⁷ Barnes (1998), 20–31. ⁸ Barnes (1998), 198.

⁹ Matthews has many perceptive remarks on Ammianus and religion, but I cannot agree with his overall conclusions (see esp. (1989), 442–51). It is understandable but regrettable that he did not devote more time to the arguments of Roy Rike's book of 1987 (Matthews (1989), 545 n. 10). See Ch. 3, Section v below. For other important recent discussions of religion in Ammianus see Neri (1985) and (1992), Hunt (1985) and Davies (2004), who has the virtue of exploring Ammianus' attitude to religion in continuity from Livy and Tacitus.

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Porson, in an early reaction to Gibbon, wrote that he showed ‘so strong a dislike to Christianity, as visibly disqualifies him for that society, of which he has created Ammianus Marcellinus president’.¹⁰ Gibbon, it appears, has not been so faithful to his faithful guide. But in fact, as many have suspected, and as Barnes has proved, Ammianus was a militant pagan. He denigrated Christianity and Christians not through open criticism but through ironic juxtapositions and polemical silence. He praises provincial bishops, certainly, but for their humility and in order to attack the opulent bishops of Rome; he praises the glorious deaths of martyrs, but at a point when he has just described the lynching of a couple of villains.¹¹ His strategy has been remarkably successful in ensuring that his versions both of his own fairness and of the later fourth century have dominated subsequent historiography.

Ammianus’ religious persuasions are an occasional refrain in my work, after the manner of the elder Cato,¹² rather than its subject (Barnes’ book precluded that, for which I am grateful). And yet the still controversial re-evaluation of his religious position has spurred me on and has encouraged my general approach. This is founded on a belief that Ammianus is a subtler and more manipulative author than has sometimes been assumed, and that elements of his text that do not appeal to modern tastes, his digressions, allusions and historical *exempla*, are more meaningful than has been allowed. This is partly, no doubt, because I have been strongly influenced by recent scholarship on earlier Latin historiography and on intertextual relationships in Latin literature more generally. The approaches of (for example) Tony Woodman to Tacitus, or Richard Thomas to Vergil, were part of my education, and it always seemed plain to me that Ammianus, striking both for his high-minded attitude to his historical calling and for the degree of his allusive engagement with earlier Latin and Greek texts, could benefit from similar scholarship. And accordingly this book is focused in part on viewing him as belonging to a great bilingual tradition of classical historiography (especially in

¹⁰ Porson (1790), xxviii, quoted in Cameron and Cameron (1964), 316 n. 2.

¹¹ 27.3.15, 22.11.10.

¹² For this refrain see the closing remarks of Kelly (2003), (2004), (2007).

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Chapter 2); and to a rather greater extent it is focused on Ammianus' intertextual relationships.¹³

Ammianus is an extraordinarily allusive author, and a considerable amount of scholarship since the seventeenth century has been devoted to the questions of what he read and disgorged in his *Res Gestae*. Rather less attention has been paid to how he read what he did and what impact his allusions to other texts might have upon the interpretation of the *Res Gestae*, and when it was, his allusiveness tended not to be held in high esteem. It was a sign of derivativeness and pretentiousness, or it showed an extraordinary and eccentric aesthetic.¹⁴ Allusion is not of course invariably meaningful, but I argue that Ammianus deploys it with a consistent and controlled aesthetic, and that it very often imports meaning from the source-texts (Chapter 4 below). Also under the heading of allusion I consider how Ammianus used his sources: here focusing less on the grand-scale use of previous historians, as divined by scholars a century ago,¹⁵ and more on the often short-term and always independent use of a diverse range of contemporaries. This aspect of Ammianus' work, highlighted in Guy Sabbah's outstanding study *La méthode d'Ammien Marcellin* (1978), has still not fully been appreciated.¹⁶ The juxtaposition of these source relationships with those of traditional allusions turns out to be justified (Chapter 5). I then turn to look at two other forms of intertextuality: Ammianus' use of classical *exempla* in Chapter 6 (extremely close to textual allusions both in their aesthetic and their capacity to create meaning), and internal allusions in Chapter 7.

Alongside my belief in the importance of allusions, I am also deeply sceptical about the potential value of a biographical approach to the author. These four chapters on allusion are preceded by three chapters which confront the dominance of biographical interpretations. In Chapter 1, I introduce the tension

¹³ Ammianus' historiographical roots have been examined by many. See in particular the abundant discussion of his links to Tacitus (Ch. 4, Section 1 below) and the focus on the influence of the Greek tradition in Matthews (1989), 452–72. The most valuable publication on this subject in recent years has been John Marincola's book on ancient historiography (1997), in which Ammianus plays the full role that many earlier studies of that sort had denied him.

¹⁴ Hertz (1874a), discussed below in Ch. 4, Section II. ¹⁵ Seck (1906a).

¹⁶ I also follow a lead which I can trace to a short passage in Kraus and Woodman (1997), 97–102, on interpreting source relationships in Tacitus as intertextuality.

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which subsists between these two methods of interpretation; in Chapter 2, I argue that the remarkable autobiographical passages are frequently complicated by allusion, and that, rather than being incomparably revealing, they are calculated to show openly or imply metaphorically the qualities which made Ammianus the definitive historian of his age. The third chapter follows up the implications of the previous two, and argues that the types of biographical reading which are common (and which, among many others and for all their differences, Matthews and Barnes share) are simply too speculative to be relied on. I am happy to believe that he wrote with anger and partiality, less happy that we can identify the causes of his every opinion in personal resentments. It is time, I suggest, that scholarship on Ammianus moved away from the figure of the author. A passage encapsulating what is different about my argument is the brief prologue which opens the second extant book of Ammianus (15.1.1):

Vtcumque potui ueritatem scrutari, / ea, quae uidere licuit per aetatem / uel perplexe interrogando uersatos in medio scire, / narrauimus ordine casuum exposito diuersorum; / residua, quae secuturus aperiet textus, / pro uirium captu limatius absoluemus, / nihil obtrectatores longi, ut putant, operis formidantes.

As far as I have been able to search out the truth, I have narrated those events which it was possible to see through the course of my lifetime or to know by rigorous questioning of those in the thick of things, setting out the diverse events in order. The remainder, which the following text will reveal, we shall complete with greater polish, fearing nothing from the detractors of a work which, in their view, is long.

Much could be and has been written on this important passage. Many of its themes and much of its vocabulary, including above all the prominent claim to *ueritas*, truthfulness, are echoed by other programmatic statements later in the work. Ammianus has substantial comments on the nature of history at a number of points between the preface to Book 26 and the epilogue that closes Book 31, but this is the only such passage in the first two extant hexads. This prologue also stands out for the description, not found elsewhere, of the matter narrated in the *Res Gestae* as ‘those events which it was possible to see in the course of my lifetime or to know by rigorous questioning of those in the thick of things’. And this

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self-proclaimed dependence on what he himself had seen (autopsy) and on interviews with important eyewitnesses has struck a chord with many of Ammianus' readers. For Edward Thompson, writing *The Historical Work of Ammianus Marcellinus* in the 1940s, this passage in particular offered an escape from Otto Seeck's characterisation of the historian as closely and unintelligently combining written sources, a distasteful and eminently attackable portrayal. It promised an authentically first-hand view of fourth-century history, an unequivocally *primary* source. In the vast range of characters found in the *Res Gestae* it was not hard to identify those who might have served as Ammianus' informants, even if none are specifically claimed as such, and I have already mentioned the frank and exciting passages of autopsy, found in small-scale interventions throughout the work, but in particular in a series of episodes from his military career between the years 355, when Ammianus was in his early to mid-twenties, and 363.

The preface to Book 15 was not, of course, the first time that a classical historian had proclaimed the centrality to his work of his own experience and of rigorous interviews with those involved. For Thompson, Ammianus' echo of Thucydides (not to mention countless other ancient historians) merely served as further proof of his quality. But for a generation which no longer considers Thucydides the father of modern scientific history, the comparison may be less reassuring. Autopsy, beyond being a description of specific places or events allegedly seen by the historian, is an established way of arguing for the expertise and authority of the historian, not only in describing particular times and places, but also for writing history at all. I shall argue below that it may be dangerous to rejoice in the authenticity, rather than the artistry, of Ammianus' autobiography. The value of allusion, by contrast, is that though its interpretation may be open, its existence is often relatively secure and objective. For example, to me it seems more obvious and more significant that Ammianus read Libanius than that he knew him.

The argument and structure of this work is, in common parlance, more 'literary' than 'historical' (I dislike the antithesis), but it is firmly grounded on historical foundations and some of its conclusions are significant in historical terms: for example, the dubiety of biographical reconstructions (Chapter 3) and the manner in

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which the historian used written sources (Chapter 5, in particular). Throughout, it is consistently maintained that the work engaged not only with the times which it covered but with the times in which it was written, the 380s AD. I follow the emerging consensus that the work was published as a whole at some point between late 389 and mid-391.¹⁷ The overwhelmingly dominant figure in the imperial college, following the overthrow of the western usurper Magnus Maximus, was Theodosius I, and Ammianus' attitude is one of equivocation, both related to the emperor's intolerant instincts in religious policy, and, for all the assertions of victory, to his appeasement of the Goths.¹⁸ It used to be held that Ammianus published his last six books towards or after the end of Theodosius' reign. No real justification for this exists. The dating indications of the earlier surviving part of the work bunch around the late 380s, and there are a cluster of references to that period in the later books and none which point any later. Typically these are the names of later office-holders.¹⁹ Ammianus published after the name of the junior consul of 390, Neoterius, was known (26.5.14), presumably late in the previous year, and after Sextus Petronius Probus was dead (27.11.2), perhaps in 389. He published before Valentinian II had killed himself in 392. That is the best explanation for the forceful defence, against most logic, of the legitimacy of the four-year-old's acclamation in 375 (30.10.5–6).²⁰ And though this aspect of the question tends not to be considered, I would also argue that many intra-textual features, from cross-references to the use of common themes, suggest that the work was conceived, written, and very probably published, as a unity.²¹

¹⁷ See Cameron (1971), 261–2, Naudé (1984), Matthews (1989), 22–7, and Rike (1987), 110–11 n. 113, 137, Barnes (1998), Lizzi (2000). For a recent and thorough assertion of the alternative viewpoint (publication of the last six books in the mid-390s) see Sabbah (1997).

¹⁸ Ch. 1, Section II below. See also Kelly (2007), Section III.

¹⁹ There are also some 'missed opportunities' to name office-holders of the early 390s.

²⁰ Ammianus missed an opportunity to attack Probus, one of those responsible for the elevation of the younger Valentinian (see Barnes (1998), 119). For a different interpretation see Paschoud (2005a).

²¹ I give just one example, which appears to have been overlooked: that at 17.3.3 Ammianus notes his intention to describe the later misgovernment of the Praetorian Prefecture of Illyricum (*ut docebitur postea*, 'as shall be told later'). Most commentators refer to 19.11.2, but that is a reference to the good government of Anatolius in the later 350s. The reference can only be an oblique one to the prefecture of Probus in the 360s and

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The text of Ammianus which I have generally followed is Seyfarth's fine Teubner. Though Seyfarth is reluctant to fill lacunae and occasionally prone to defend indefensible or unlikely readings in V (in which case I have printed an emended text),²² this is a fundamentally sensible edition, more accurate and better presented than any which has preceded it. A particular virtue is its punctuation, the clausula being marked either by a double space or, at the end of the line, a hasta (/). The clausulae in Ammianus are almost entirely regular (simply put, there are two or four unstressed syllables between the last two stressed syllables of each colon); because they function within as well as at the end of sentences, they provide a guide to understanding quite as helpful as modern punctuation.²³ I have marked clausulae in virtually every quotation from Ammianus, as well as inserting normal punctuation more generously than Seyfarth. Unless otherwise stated, I am responsible for the translation of all Latin and Greek quotations, though I consulted the various published versions. My renderings are generally quite literal, in the case of Ammianus closer to the style adopted in J. C. Rolfe's Loeb than to that of the more accurate but sometimes bloodless Penguin Classics translation of Walter Hamilton. I have also translated all quotations in modern European languages.

370s, as described in most detail at 30.5.10. If one wished to argue that the *Res Gestae* was composed in sequence, one could assume that the earlier references at 17.3.3 and 19.11.2 showed Ammianus waiting for Probus to die before being more explicit. But at any rate, Ammianus plainly intended to continue beyond the death of Jovian.

²² The text is notably more conservative than his earlier version with parallel German translation, where Seyfarth was constrained by the need to print something he was able to translate.

²³ See Harmon (1910), and the edition of Clark (1910–15); Oberhelman (1987); Barnes (1998), 225–30, with Paschoud's review (1999a).