

Michael Hanaghan, David Woods (eds.), *Ammianus Marcellinus from Soldier to Author*. Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2022, xii + 420 pages, maps, pictures, ISBN 978-90-04-52529-0 (hardback), 978-90-04-52535-1 (ebook).

The 4th century CE classicizing historian Ammianus Marcellinus and his *Res gestae* remains our most authoritative source for the events that took place between 353–378. The amount of detail the work supplies for the reigns of Constantius II (at least for the late part of his reign), Julian, Jovian, Valentinian I, and Valens is unrivalled. The Antiochene *miles quondam* tells the stories of these autocrats by taking his audience to a journey from the walls of Amida to Paris, from Constantinople to the prized Ctesiphon that entails not only military heroics but also imperial intrigues, constructed with high level of rhetorical skill and presented with a literary style that is comparable to the grand historians of the past such as Tacitus. As Ammianus was also a contemporary, if not an eye-witness, to the many events that he relates, it makes the *Res gestae* a much more interesting, besides controversial, reading that puts it above the time and space it was written for. As such, the *Res gestae* still attracts a great amount of attention from scholars who are still able to make novel and original observations about the work and its author. *Ammianus Marcellinus from Soldier to Author* is one such contribution to the studies of Ammianus and Late Antiquity.

The work contains thirteen papers, whose contributors include big guns of late antique studies such as Gavin Kelly and Philip Rance. The study opens, as expected, with an introductory chapter co-written by the editors Michael Hanaghan and David Woods, who state the purpose of the book as exploring “the tension between Ammianus the former Roman soldier and Ammianus the highly educated author” (p. 4) and “exploring how his direct experience of military life affected his writing of history and conversely how his knowledge of classical literature may have influenced what or how he wrote about the conduct of the Roman army” (pp. 4–5). The papers that otherwise comprise the core of the book are grouped into three sections: “Ammianus’ Text”, “Ammianus’ Military Experience” and “Ammianus’ Literary Aims and Models”. While the second and third sections have contributions emphasizing and tackling Ammianus’ two salient identities as the historian himself explicitly gives away in the work (*miles quondam et Graecus*), the first section consists of a lone paper written by Gavin Kelly that strongly justifies the need for a new edition of Ammianus Marcellinus (pp. 19–58). In doing so, he reminds us of the unstable nature of reading the text and interpreting Ammianus and moves on to a lengthy discourse on why a new edition is necessary. His discussion also entails an informative section on Ammianus’ prose rhythm and its significance for “understanding and improving Ammianus’ text” (p. 35).

The second section, “Ammianus’ Military Experience”, opens with the chapter entitled “Ammianus and the *dignitas protectoris*” by Maxime Emion (pp. 61–82). Emion tackles the polemical subject of *protectores* of Late Antiquity, establishes the difference between the plain *protectores* and *protectores domestici*, to the latter of which Ammianus belonged. This is followed by a discussion on the dignity and the prestige the *protectores domestici* soldiers possessed which mattered a lot for the strictly class-based late Roman society and which must have contributed to the sometimes nauseating and explicitly elitist manners and views Ammianus exhibited in his history towards the others (Amm. XVII, 13, 9;

XIX, 8, 5–7; XXIV, 8, 2). Emion only scratches the surface of this last point and the chapter ends just as it was about to get interesting.

The third chapter, entitled “*Simplicitas militaris: Ammianus Marcellinus and sermo castrensis*” by Philip Rance (pp. 83–139), examines the “evidence for Ammianus’ knowledge and use of so-called *sermo castrensis*, the demotic idiom created and spoken within the army” (p. 87). The author conducts here a satisfactory philological inspection of select military slang examples in Ammianus, such as *caput porci* and the well-known *barritus*, which is looked at under the heading of Germanic loanwords in the *Res gestae*.

The fourth chapter, entitled “Ammianus’ Identification of Named Legions and Its Literary Significance” by Conor Whately (pp. 140–169), focuses on the employment of the word *legio* in Ammianus, his references to specific legions in the *Res gestae* and their accuracy, and finally, what those references and their accuracy might tell us about him as a historian. The chapter, which will no doubt be welcomed by authenticity-oriented wargaming communities for the paper’s authoritative declaration of whether a legion such as the *Magnentiaci* should be considered a part of the *limitanei*, *comitatenses* or *palatini* type, draws the curtains by pointing out that the employment methods of the word *legio* signify Ammianus’ balanced treading between his soldier and historian identities that aimed at both for authenticity and an engaging storytelling (p. 164).

The fifth chapter, entitled “*Religionibus firmis iuramenta constricta? Ammianus and the sacramentum militiae*” by Michael Wuk (pp. 170–203), delves into the subject of military oath in Late Antiquity and what this oath meant not only for the soldiery but also for a former soldier like Ammianus. The chapter makes it clear the oath is understood differently by civilians and soldiers, the former assuming some sort of declaration of dedication-until-death to emperors whatever they do, while the latter group, which included Ammianus, understood it (and practiced accordingly) as an oath first and foremost taken to enhance “the camaraderie”, and although breaking it was an insult to other soldiers, it could still be broken under special circumstances without bringing dishonor (p. 172). The arguments of Wuk are strengthened by historical instances from the *Res gestae*, the interpretations of which correlate with his claims made earlier in the chapter. I would, however, have reservations about bringing neoliberal vocabulary such as “corporate identity” into the framework of late Roman military and using it thirteen times to emphasize a point, especially when the author has already used a much more suitable word for the context, “the camaraderie”.

The sixth chapter, entitled “Ammianus on Mallobaudes and Magnus Maximus: A Response to Theodosian Discourse?” by Jeroen W. P. Wijnendaele (pp. 204–227), tackles the late antique dynamics between barbarian kingship and Roman military commandership (one of which could be taken as a career path depending on the fortunes of barbarian figures within and without the empire) via the example of Mallobaudes in Ammianus, whom Wijnendaele defines as offering “the earliest clue that ‘kingship’ could be an emergency solution for former imperial officers who found themselves stranded outside their command” (p. 219). Wijnendaele continues with this paper his method of re-interpreting the military figures of Late Antiquity by successfully turning the scholarly arguments offered earlier upside down, which allows him to advance forward new perspectives and insights on “old” subjects for potentially stimulating discussions for the future.

So ends the second section of the study, comprising five papers focused on the military aspect of Ammianus and the *Res gestae*, all of which are, I think it would not be wrong to define in Nietzschean terms, of Antiquarian type.

The seventh chapter, entitled “The Face of Convention: Battle and Siege Description in Ammianus Marcellinus” (pp. 231–261), opens the third and last section of the study “Ammianus’ Literary Aims and Models”. The author of this paper, J. E. Lendon, argues that, in contrary to the scholarly opinion that what Ammianus relates in his battles and sieges in the *Res gestae* is kind of examples of *Face of Battle*, Ammianus was writing within the conventions of ancient literature. The author chooses the Battles of Strasbourg and Adrianople and a few examples of sieges and assaults from the *Res gestae* to augment his arguments, which convincingly exhibit that Ammianus owed more to the likes of Vergil, Lucan, and Thucydides than a desire to be a sort of proto-John Keegan. Ammianus’ sometimes over-the-top emphasis of auditory, visual and emotive details in his battle narratives were also in accord with the conventions of ancient literature, according to the author. Lendon’s study also argues that Ammianus should be seen as a historian of military campaigns rather than battles, as it is exemplified in Julian’s *katabasis* into Persia. All in all, this chapter reminds us of the futility of trying to extract details of battles on tactical level from ancient authors such as Ammianus and instead of approaching them as if we are approaching World War 2 after-action-reports, we should read and try to interpret them through the lens of literary theory.

The eighth chapter, entitled “The Literary Function of Ammianus’ Criticism of Military *luxuria*” by Álvaro Sánchez-Ostiz (pp. 262–286), tackles Ammianus’ critical approach to *luxuria* among the soldiery in select passages with an aid from narratological and intertextual analyses. The author argues that Ammianus’ critical statements are not wholly in line with literary conventions that serve artificial purposes, but they should be read as actual criticisms of a former soldier who harshly judges his comrades on account of their love of luxury.

In the ninth chapter, entitled “*Coturni terribilis fabula* (Amm. Marc. 28.6.29): The Goddess of Justice and the Death of Theodosius the Elder” by Sigrid Mratschek (pp. 287–324), we are invited to read between the lines in Ammianus’ relation of the murder of the commander Theodosius the Elder and his implicit criticism of it via the employment of Goddess Justice. The value of this paper rests in the fact that, because ancient historians mostly passed over in silence the events that could have ramifications for the emperors under whom they were writing, Mratschek’s reading offers us an example of how such silences could actually be broken through literary means at the hands of a skillful author such as Ammianus.

The tenth chapter, entitled “*Ille ut fax uel incensus malleolus*: Ammianus and His Swift Narration of Julian’s Balkan Itinerary in 361 CE” by Moysés Marcos (pp. 325–356), treats the use and importance of speed (*celeritas*) within the narration of events by Ammianus. The author persuasively argues that Ammianus employed the same tactic in his relation of Julian’s descent into the Balkans in 361 and so acted within the literary conventions to which the likes of Sallust and Tacitus also subscribed for both dramatical and structural purposes. Yet his swift storytelling, when read closely, was not bereft of details, argues the author, for Ammianus’ quick strokes still contain nuclei of Julian’s actions and decisions in this critical period of his civil war against Constantius II.

The eleventh chapter, entitled “The Depiction of the Common Soldier (*miles*) in Ammianus and Tacitus and the Intertextual Background of the *Res gestae*” by Agnese Bargagna (pp. 357–376), compares the two grand historians who belonged to different eras on account of their intertextual relationship. The author’s approach to this intertextuality is based not on the shared lexical allusions but instead on another level, by focusing on the treatment of *miles* in both authors. Bargagna posits that, despite the similarities on thematic and intertextual level, Ammianus should not be considered an imitator of Tacitus, as this would have meant ignoring other earlier historians’ influence on Ammianus.

The last and twelfth chapter, entitled “Xenophon and Ammianus: Two Soldier-Historians and Their Persian Expeditions” by Guy Williams (pp. 377–402), argues the similarities on both textual and personal level between Xenophon and Ammianus, two former Greek soldiers turned historians. Williams argues that Julian’s failed expedition into Persia was portrayed by Ammianus not as a “failed mission” but a “successful march” (how the Wagner Group’s Prigozhin would have agreed with the historian’s inversion!) and to understand this narrative technique Xenophon’s *Anabasis* and his portrayal of events there could be invoked. This invocation makes a much entertaining reading as the present reviewer cannot but agree with the author on the narrational and personal (identity) links persuasively advanced forward between Ammianus – Xenophon and the parts of the *Res gestae* – *Anabasis*. The author gives significant amount of attention also to the death narratives of Julian in Ammianus and Cyrus in Xenophon by emphasizing that both marches in both texts “hinge on a death” but a deep dive into the important and intriguing link between Ammianus and Xenophon does not occur by taking advantage of recent intertextual research between Ammianus and Xenophon.¹ Of course, this overlook may have stemmed from the fact that there was little time between the publications of said recent research and Williams’ study. So the third section and the study concludes.

Ammianus Marcellinus from Soldier to Author is a very satisfactory study that entails some highly intriguing arguments that can lead to stimulating discussions among late antique scholars. Not only document-oriented but also literary theory-oriented researchers will no doubt draw insights that should prove invaluable for their own research.

Besides the shortcomings of the second section I briefly mentioned above, I would have expected that the contributions in the third section took more bold and radical steps rather than adopting a secure methodological approach in the interpretation of an ancient literary texts such as the *Res gestae*.

The other shortcoming of the study lies in its Antiquarian approach to Ammianus Marcellinus and his text which has blunted the critical edge of the volume as a whole and its potential real-world impact. Although contemporary arguments, theories and scholars are justly, where appropriate, criticized, a captivating and updated critic of Ammianus Marcellinus and his identities either as a historian or as a soldier is missing, despite the fact that Ammianus offers plethora of examples to criticize. What is there, instead, is the

¹ For instance: T. Türel, ‘Decoding a Narrative Allusion: The Death Narratives of Ammianus’ Julian and Xenophon’s Cyrus’, *Mnemosyne* 74, 2021, 1015–1033.

celebration of Ammianus' historian and soldier identities as they are artificially fashioned by the historian for his own interests. The lack of a truly critical contribution is especially surprising, for some authors make a reference in passing to Ammianus' elitism and snobbery displayed in the *Res gestae* and owed to his higher-class status, for instance in the second and third chapters. In the third chapter, Rance, although he mentions Ammianus' claim to superiority due to his class status by referencing to the historical anecdote of how Ammianus, among a group of three people who had survived an enemy siege, had the sole right to mount a horse for travel on account of his class while the others deserved walking besides him, he mentions this only for the sake of finding pieces of evidence for *sermo castrensis* (p. 91).

Likewise, a statement made by Rance on p. 89 can be read as betraying the underlying lack of genuine criticism towards historical figures such as Ammianus in favor of an unreflective liberalism. There, Rance, without substantiating his point of view, declares that Edward Thompson's evaluation of Ammianus from a class-perspective could find only few adherents today and treats Marxism like a dead dog. There is no denying that after the disintegration of the "real socialism" in the East there are many people who would love to see Marxism dead. But I would ask, like Wolfdietrich Schmied-Kowarzik asked in his review of the first two volumes of *Historisch-kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus*,² how can Marxism as a critical thought – and it needs to be added, as a revolutionary praxis – die, while the oppressing socioeconomic conditions linger on, while the environmental issues slowly reach the point-of-no-return, and while democracy and equality can never be fully realized in practice under a profit-oriented system? And is academia a land where milk and honey flow? By no means. For I am sure everyone is familiar with how academics, especially younger academics, are exploited and suffer under the highly competitive job market in academia, because in order to survive they need to find a job, and therefore, they are forced to inflate their CVs in order to increase their academic profiles with research articles, the rights of which are frequently given up to non-open-access high impact publishers, or hunt year round after extremely competitive fellowships, the emotional toll and stress of which can only be negative for health? But I digressed.

The point is, without a *genuine* critical conceptual tool as Marxism is, historical themes and subjects that call for criticism like Ammianus' behavior and contempt for the people manifested in his *Res gestae* will always be overlooked and end up being replaced with a celebration of his individuality. Such studies might have scientific impact yet either none or very little *practical* and *social* impact. The present reviewer thinks that we, ancient historians, need to start implementing a subversive critical edge into our works today more than ever to increase the public's understanding from which they could draw insights to critically engage with ancient figures and their elitist and patriarchal conducts. The public then can apply this approach to other historical figures and finally (and this is the most important part) to the political actors of their own day. A critical paper that

² See W. Schmied-Kowarzik, 'Ein anregendes Nachschlagewerk, das eine Lücke schließt und Impulse für die Zukunft eröffnet', <https://www.inkrit.de/mediadaten/pdf/schmied-kowarzikzuhkwmlund2.pdf> [accessed January 11, 2024], here at p. 4.

could build on, or draw insights from, Thompson's early study could have really made a great addition to this volume and reminded the scholars and interested readers alike that although we might be dealing with people that lived in another age, class-based inequalities and elitism have survived Antiquity to this day.

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