

Truth and Community in Ammianus' Narrative of Maximinus' Roman Trials

Ammianus Marcellinus' Book 28, describing events in the west early in Valentinian I's reign (364-375), begins with an extended narrative of a judicial reign of terror that a prefect named Maximinus ostensibly imposed on the City of Rome during the period 368-372 (Amm. Marc. 28.1). This long section, running to more than ten pages, relates a series of trials for treason and magic whose common thread is that they involve Maximinus as a harsh judge attacking senior Roman aristocrats. It has been studied in terms of its chronological accuracy and its portrait of relations between the court and aristocracy (e.g. Barnes 1998; Coşkun 2000, 2003; Matthews 2007; Kelly 2013) but can also yield insights regarding Ammianus' narrative technique and self-presentation as a historian.

This paper will argue that Ammianus uses the episode as an opportunity to explore the role of truthful narratives in generating or destroying group identity. Ammianus' narratorial comments (28.1.1-4, 15, for which see Den Boeft 2007, Lizzi Testa 2022) emphasize his sensitive negotiations with an audience in the 390s for whom these events remain a traumatic memory from two decades earlier. Ammianus portrays himself as caught between the tasks of, on the one hand, telling the Roman aristocracy's community-defining story of collective persecution and, on the other, offering a truthful critique of individuals' actions. His scrupulous but sometimes reticent narratorial persona stresses the moral utility of his tale. This contrasts with the behavior of the characters in the story, many of whom pursue or retail stories that may well be true, but for vicious motives. Maximinus and his agents want the truth because it allows them to inflict cruelty: many Roman aristocrats inform on one another for reasons of self-

defense, advantage or score-settling. Both of these are destructive of the social fabric that Ammianus' persecution narrative is supposed to maintain.

Ammianus' portrayal will be considered for its own rhetorical content and in its structural context, including the satirical tirade that Ammianus includes a few pages later (28.4) against the same Roman aristocracy whose victimization by Maximinus he has just lamented. The satirical section positions Ammianus as a very different kind of truth-teller (see Ross 2015), but also resonates ironically with the many sordid anecdotes of aristocrats that he had ostensibly been forced to tell in the Maximinus narrative.

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