

Ammianus Marcellinus, Priscus, and (De)humanizing the Huns

In the popular imagination, the Huns are violent killers bent on destruction and looting. Much of that image stems from late ancient Roman historians. Ammianus Marcellinus famously says that “one might think [the Huns] are two-legged beasts” (31.2.2) who “burn with a great desire for gold” (31.2.11). About 70 years later, though, Priscus of Panium, wrote a history of his times which included his recollections of accompanying an embassy to Attila and the Huns around 450. In this account, Priscus describes the Huns as being relatively civilized, having customs and values that make sense to the Roman envoys. They are far from being the beasts depicted by Ammianus. This paper will not argue for or against the historical accuracy of these two portrayals. Rather, it will attempt to make sense of these differing portrayals by taking inspiration from recent psychological studies on the impacts of using dehumanizing language. Ammianus dehumanizes the Huns to convince his readers that they are an existential threat to the Romans which must be militarily resisted. In reaction to negative portrayals like Ammianus’, Priscus rehumanizes the Huns to justify for his readers why Theodosius II’s policy of appeasement in 449-450 was necessary and beneficial for the Romans.

Ammianus describes Huns as lacking permanent dwellings (31.2.4), “hearth or law or stable form of life” (31.2.10), and knowledge of agriculture (31.2.10). Furthermore, he writes that the Huns, “like unthinking animals, are completely ignorant of what is a virtue and what is not” (31.2.11). Much scholarly research has shown that Ammianus’ ethnography has little basis in historical fact (King 1995), is indebted to tropes found in earlier Greek and Roman ethnographies of nomadic steppe peoples (Shaw 1982/1983), and is written to construct an Other against which to define Roman identity (Burgersdijk 2016).

This paper extends these discussions in a new direction by drawing on psychological studies of how dehumanizing language can shape perceptions and influence an audience's actions. It can "enable violence" which is "instrumentally beneficial" for the group using dehumanizing language (Rai et al. 2017). It can reduce sympathy towards the target group (Cooley et al. 2017). It can even provide motivation and legitimization of genocide (Savage 2013). To be sure, Ammianus does not propose committing genocide against Huns, but these modern studies can provide a lens through which to view the impact of his work. They suggest that Ammianus' readers would be less likely to sympathize with the Huns and more willing to commit instrumentally beneficial violence against them.

In contrast, Priscus highlights positive qualities of the Huns: their well-made and beautifully decorated structures (fr. 8), their hospitality when the Roman embassy is caught in a violent rainstorm (fr. 8), and their ability to read, write, and understand the basic rules of diplomacy (fr. 8). Admittedly, the fragmentary nature of the survival of Priscus' history could be skewing our understanding of it. Nevertheless, in what survives, we see a more positive portrayal of Huns. Kim (2015) has explained this difference as due to Priscus' first-hand observation of the Huns, in the manner of Herodotus' ethnographical sections. While this is certainly true, I offer another, complementary explanation: drawing on his experience as a member of the Roman embassy to Attila, Priscus rehumanizes the Huns to convince his readers that the Huns are people not too different from Romans; that Theodosius was right to seek accommodation with them; and that the Huns, as fellow humans with an understanding of honor and customs, could be trusted to uphold the peace treaty Priscus helped bring about. In short, then, this paper argues that Ammianus denies Huns human traits in his history to inspire Roman resistance to them while

Priscus emphasizes their humanity as a way to build support for a lasting peace between Romans and Huns.

Works Cited

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