

A Poor Man's Alexander: Ammianus Marcellinus, Julian, and the Greco-Roman Ethnographic Tradition

The ethnographic excurses of Ammianus Marcellinus's *Res Gestae* have long been a source of controversy among scholars of late antiquity. How much these excurses rely upon the accounts of earlier Greek and Roman historians—and how well Ammianus understood those accounts—have attracted the most attention (de Jonge, 1972; Fornara, 1992). Yet the scholarship on the *Res Gestae* seems so focused on where Ammianus got the material for his excurses that other questions, like why Ammianus includes the information he does when he does, are rarely addressed.

Perhaps these larger questions have been neglected because of a stark divide among scholars regarding Ammianus's skill as a historian and the deliberateness of his use of sources. Some view him as a weak author who, lacking the skill and intelligence of his predecessors, is compelled by the conventions of the genre and a somewhat dim recognition of his own inadequacies to include every scrap of information on a given topic to construct a facade of erudition for his readers (Barnes, 1998; Fornara, 1992). Others, myself among them, see a more deliberate *modus operandi* at work in the *Res Gestae*, particularly with regard to its structure and the relation between the geographic and ethnographic excurses to Ammianus's main historical narrative (de Jonge, 1972; Matthews, 1989; Sundwall, 1996). Although Ammianus does include many familiar historiographical *topoi* in his geographic and ethnographic excurses and the sources of these excurses can often be traced to earlier Greco-Roman authors, the ways in which Ammianus's ethno-geographies of the Gauls, Scythians, Thracians, Egyptians, and Persians relate to one another and the rest of his narrative show that he used—and knowingly omitted—

ancient source material to craft a very specific image of the Roman empire of his day, which is often in conflict with historical reality.

In particular, Ammianus seems to have purposely altered his portrayal of Gaul and Persia. Relying on a rather easily-traced assembly of ethnographic sources from the 1st centuries B.C. and A.D., Ammianus attempts in Book 15 to depict the heavily Romanized Gaul of the 4th century A.D. as if it were the tumultuous Gaul of Caesar or wild Germany of Tacitus. Later on in Book 23, Ammianus begins an ethnographic digression on the Persians with how their Parthian rulers were descended from Arsaces and had won their dominion from the successors of Alexander the Great—completely unaware, it seems, that the Arsacid Parthians had been ousted by the Sassanid Persians more than one hundred years earlier. These errors might be forgiven of an armchair historian, but well-traveled Ammianus was himself present in both Gaul and Persia during the campaigns he describes, making it rather difficult to explain his apparent ignorance of simple historical facts in these passages.

These ethnographic mysteries become more understandable, however, in light of their connection with the emperor Julian, whom Ammianus admired and depicted in heroic fashion with near uninterrupted enthusiasm. The strangely anachronistic digressions on the Gauls and Persians are first introduced in Ammianus's narrative when Julian arrives in their respective regions, and the digressions on the Scythians, Thracians, and Egyptians are likewise presented when Julian passes by their territories in an order as close to that of Alexander's *anabasis* as possible. Ammianus's accounts of Julian's military exploits in these regions are also filled to the brim with historical allusions to great generals and conquerors—Julius Caesar and Alexander foremost among them (Lane Fox, 1997; Szidat, 1988). This paper will argue that, based on these similarities, it seems the best explanation both for Ammianus's use of ethnography and historical

allusion is that he sought to depict Julian as one of the great conquering heroes of antiquity. As such, Julian likely did not imitate these figures (Lendon, 2005), but Ammianus depicted him doing so for his own ends, warping his narrative and its image of history around Julian as he traveled from the furthest reaches of savage Gaul to the inner reaches of the Persian empire.

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