CHAPTER 7

Unreliable Witness: Failings of the Narrative in Ammianus Marcellinus

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1 Introduction

Gallus was dead.¹ The nephew of the ruling emperor Constantius, grand-nephew of Constantine, junior emperor of the Roman empire: a disfigured corpse, hands bound together like a bandit, his neck cut through.² Forgotten his once dignified appearance, forgotten the beauty of his face and of his fair blond hair. Forgotten also the terror he once had inspired in cities and provinces (14.11.23). Gallus had been executed on the order of Constantius—at the same place, in the garrison town Pula on the Istrian peninsula, where years before, Crispus, eldest son of Constantine, had been suffocated in a sauna on the order of his father on allegations of adultery with his stepmother (14.11.20).³

Gallus’ rule had been cruel. On his final journey from his residence in Antioch to the western imperial court (where he would never arrive), in his dreams, his victims had appeared as terrifying spectres: amongst them Montius and Domitianus, high-ranking imperial office-holders, dragged through Antioch

¹ The Res gestae are quoted in the Teubner edition by W. Seyfarth (Berlin, 1978). In longer passages, double spaces are employed to indicate breaks between clausulae. Translations are my own, but the Penguin version by W. Hamilton, Ammianus Marcellinus: The Later Roman Empire (Harmondsworth, 1986) has often been consulted with profit.


³ Other sources: see PLRE I s.v. Fl. Iulius Crispus 4.
by Gallus’ soldiers, then thrown into the river Orontes, joints and limbs dislocated, their bodies mutilated beyond recognition (14.11.18, cf. 14.7.15–6). They were not isolated cases. The victims of Gallus were to be found across the entire Roman East, in all social classes (14.7.1). Informers were everywhere (14.1.2 and 1.6), an atmosphere in which even walls were thought to be able to divulge secrets to the emperor’s agents (1.7). Justice had disappeared from the courts: no charges, no accusers were necessary (14.1.4–5, 7.21, 9.3–5). Gallus had been like a wild lion, feeding on human flesh (14.9.9, cf. 1.10 and 7.21). He was a rightly despised criminal whose brutal death seemed an appropriate (and ironic) end.

The text then suddenly seems to refute itself. The sight of Gallus’ headless corpse in Pula evokes pity in the mind of the reader. The narrator rejoices that Gallus’ murderers—executors of Constantius’ orders (14.11.23 eum capitale supplicio destinauit), the unwitting reader would have thought—and the man who had for a long time already made up false charges against him (qui in eum iam diu falsa composuerat crimina)—false charges?—would soon also face terrible deaths (14.11.24). Nemesis, Justice’s daughter, did not rest (14.11.25). In later books, mention is made of the men who had betrayed Gallus and plotted against him (18.3.6 and 22.3.3). And Julian, Gallus’ half-brother, knew the reason for his brother’s fall: Gallus’ weakness and the combined treachery and perjury of certain people (21.1.2 quem inertia mixtæque periuris fraudes prodidere quorundam).

Ammianus Marcelinus’ *Res gestae* is the most important surviving history of the Later Roman empire. It is the only source for many of the events described. For Edward Gibbon, Ammianus Marcellinus was “an accurate and faithful guide, who has composed the history of his own times, without indulging the prejudices and passions, which usually affect the mind of the contemporary.” These views have had a lasting impact, setting the terms for most modern discussions of Ammianus. Many scholars see Ammianus as an almost modern historian, relying on eyewitness reports and even collecting archival material

4 Cf. Tacitus, *Annales* 4.69.3.