AMMIANUS ON VALENTINIAN.
SOME OBSERVATIONS

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Abstract: In 1992 François Paschoud tried to show that in his Res Gestae Ammianus sketched a perfidiously and maliciously distorted portrait of the Pannonian emperor Valentinian I (‘Valentinien travesti, ou: De la malignité d’Ammien’). Against this view it is argued here that Ammianus, though he heartily disliked Valentinian and abundantly criticised him, was sufficiently fair to acknowledge his merits, not only in that part of the epilogus which is specially devoted to the emperor’s virtues (30.9), but also elsewhere in the narrative.

I. François Paschoud, Ammianus, and Valentinian

According to Ammianus Marcellinus, the emperor Valentinian I “was of a good height and perfectly well built, and all in all presented a splendid figure as an emperor” (pulchritudo staturae liniamentorumque recta compago maiestatis regiae decus implebat; 30.9.6). With these words Ammianus ends the elogium of Valentinian in book 30 of his Res Gestae. The concluding clause of Valentinian’s obituary mentions a feature which Valentinian had in common with the emperor Julian (liniamentorum…recta compago; cf. 25.4.22) and which is, to put it mildly, not unflattering for the emperor who ascended the throne in Nicaea on February 25, 364 and died in Brigetio on November 17, 375. It is in any case hard not to regard maiestatis regiae decus implebat as complimentary.

1 Thanks are due to Ines van de Wetering, who corrected my English.
2 Translations put between double inverted commas are borrowed from Walter Hamilton, Ammianus Marcellinus. The Later Roman Empire (A.D. 354–378) (Harmondsworth 1986). There is one exception, for which see note 16.
3 Roger C. Blockley, Ammianus Marcellinus. A Study of his Historiography and Political Thought (Brussels 1975) 37: ‘Within Ammianus’ elogia the illustrations of vices and virtues are of supreme importance. Even some of the physical details…are relevant to the writer’s moral purpose when a physiognomical interpretation is placed upon them. Thus both Julian and Valentinian I are described as well proportioned, an important indication of a good ruler’.
François Paschoud, who deals with the physical aspect of Ammianus’ portrait of the Pannonian emperor in the opening section of the lively and stimulating paper he gave at the Amsterdam Colloquium on Ammianus in 1991, refers to the words just quoted only in a footnote, and apparently attaches little value to them. Instead, he dwells on the rest of Ammianus’ description of Valentinian’s appearance: “His frame was strong and muscular, and he had gleaming hair and a high complexion. His eyes were grey, with a stern sidelong glance.” (Corpus eius lacertosum et validum, capilli fulgor colorisque nitor, cum oculis caesiis, semper obliquum intuentis et torvum; 30.9.6). Paschoud quotes Otto Seeck, who, on account of Ammianus’ words, wants us to believe that Valentinian’s physiognomy betrayed his ‘barbarische Abstammung’. To me Seeck’s conclusion seems to be a textbook example of ‘hineininterpretieren’ on the part of the scholar to whom we owe inter alia the still readable Geschichte des Untergangs der antiken Welt. Paschoud, however, does not put the blame for this interpretation on Seeck cum suis, but on Ammianus: ‘Ne jetons cependant pas la pierre à Seeck et à A. Nagl: c’est Ammien qui leur a suggéré le Barbare dépeint dans leurs lignes’, and: ‘Le portrait physique de 30.9.6 est un bon exemple de l’art d’Ammien de choisir des mots qui suggèrent beaucoup plus qu’ils ne disent réellement.’


6 Otto Seeck, Geschichte des Untergangs der antiken Welt, 6 vols. (Stuttgart 1920–19232–4) 5.2. Cf. for Valentinian and his brother Valens further Seeck’s pp. 7 (‘germanischen Blutes’) and 11 (‘echte Germanen’).


8 Paschoud, ‘Valentinien travesti’, 68 (cf. 67 with n. 4) and 83.