GREEK AND ROMAN PARALLEL HISTORY IN AMMIANUS

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Abstract: The main purpose of this article is to collect the comparative examples taken by Ammianus from the Greek and Roman past. The evidence comprises some 30 items. From their analysis it may be inferred that Ammianus 1) appreciated traditional Roman paganism more than the sophistic wisdom of his time, 2) emphasised the common heritage of Greek and Roman rhetorical culture, 3) emphasised the superiority of the Greeks in astronomy and law(!), 4) portrayed Alexander as an ideal model for the Roman emperors, and 5) refused to admit the politico-military inferiority of the Greeks. This collection of ‘parallel’ examples can be compared to the Plutarchean project of ‘Parallel Lives’. Both are chapters in the history of the Greek effort to become an integrated part of the Roman Empire.

Ammianus’ Res Gestae is a work of outstanding historical scholarship. The pleasure with which the author evokes the past, often in the form of exempla, equals his desire to display his learning and erudition in that part of paideia. The vast amount of material in this field that he has passed down to us can be divided into two major categories: a) quotations from Greek and Roman authors, and b) references to events and personalities from Greek and Roman history. Recent research has examined some aspects of Ammianus’ ‘library’, not only concerning the writers he read and/or mentioned such as Homer1 and Cicero (of whom he has preserved a number of otherwise unknown fragments),2 whom he considered the greatest representatives of the two literary cultures, but also Ammianus’ probable sources in the excursus such as Herodotus, Dionysius Periegetes and Timagenes.3 Modern research has

3 Isabella Gualandri, ‘Le fonti geografiche di Ammiano Marcellino XXII,8’, PP 23 (1968) 199–211; Marta Sordi, ‘Timagene di Alessandria, uno storico ellenocentrico
also investigated the relationship of our historian with the history of the Republic, the sources to which Ammianus referred and his personal interpretation of that historical period, with his preferences (those for C. Fabricius Luscinus are obvious) and his dislikes (equally obvious, such as of C. Hostilius Mancinus, who was defeated at Numantia, or of the treatment meted out to Cyprus in 58 BC by Cato). However, Ammianus’ relationship with Greek history does not seem to have been studied so far.

I shall limit myself here to a few general observations that will suffice to introduce the subject of my article. There are at least thirty-two strictly historical references which we will define as legendary, including the Trojan War, eighteen concern the history of the Near East from Ninus and Semiramis through the Persian Kings up to the founder of the Parthian dynasty, Arsaces, and fifteen are devoted to Alexander the Great, conditor altissimus of Alexandria in Egypt. As an educated pagan Ammianus was interested in myth, and as an Antiochene in the Near East, as an inhabitant of the Eastern provinces in Alexander, who is seen as the model of Roman emperors according to a now well-established tradition of thought. As for the history of the poleis of the fifth and fourth centuries BC and Magna Graecia the references are few (four to the two Dionysii and two to Phalaris). There are four references to the Hellenistic monarchies: to Demetrius Poliorcetes (two) and to Cleopatra VII (two).

In what follows I would like to consider in particular a subcategory of b), namely the comparative references to history and, more widely, to Greek and Roman culture. First of all the material to be analysed


4 Hermann Finke, Ammianus Marcellinus und seine Quellen zur Geschichte der römischen Republik (Heidelberg 1904).

5 Mentioned in 24.3.5; 24.4.24; 30.1.22.


7 23.6.2 and 55.

8 22.16.7.


10 Dionysius I: 15.5.37; 16.8.10 and 29.2.4; Dionysius II: 14.11.30; Phalaris: 26.10.5 and 28.1.46.

11 Demetrius Poliorcetes: 23.4.10 and 24.2.18; Cleopatra VII: 22.16.9–10 and 28.4.9.