THE SPHRAGIS AND CLOSURE OF THE RES GESTAE

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Abstract: The closing sentence of the Res Gestae has been interpreted both as a recommendation that qualified successors should continue Ammianus’ history in the same grandiose and allusive manner, and also as a warning that events after Theodosius’ accession can only be narrated in the medium of panegyric. This article argues that, though in some ways contradictory, both interpretations should be accepted. An equivalent tension exists in the closure of the Res Gestae as a whole: the final book neatly closes the story of Valens, but leaves the story of the Gothic war abruptly unfinished. This open ending is reinforced by the implication in several places that Ammianus was unimpressed by Theodosius’ prosecution and conclusion of the war.

I. The Sphragis

Haec ut miles quondam et Graecus, a principatu Caesaris Nervae exorsus ad usque Valentinis interitum pro virium explicavi mensura, opus veritatem professum numquam, ut arbitror, scens silentio ausus corrumpere vel mendacio, scribant reliqua potiores aetate, doctrinis florentes. quos id, si libuerit, aggressuros, procedere linguas ad maiores stilos.

These events, beginning from the principate of Nerva Caesar up to the death of Valens, I, a former soldier and a Greek, have unrolled to the best of my strength: it is a work which claims truthfulness and which, so I think, I have never knowingly dared to warp with silence or falsehood. Let the rest be written by men with youth on their side, in the bloom of learning. To those who would embark on this, if it please them, I give the advice to forge their tongues to grander styles.

Ammianus Marcellinus 31.16.9

Where Ammianus ends, our scholarship begins.1 The closing words of the Res Gestae are eminently quotable and widely quoted. The prologue of the work is lost to us, but this brief sphragis, or authorial ‘seal’, offers

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1 The bibliography on the sphragis is considerable: for guidance see the surveys of G. Calboli, ‘La credibilità di Ammiano Marcellino e la sua arte espositiva’, BSL 4 (1974)
some compensation, exhibiting in miniature several features conventional in historiographical prefaces: the historian’s origins, the extent of the work, the claim to be truthful, and the claim to a place in the canon. In the absence of a preface, this passage has been remarkably successful in dictating the terms of the reception of the *Res Gestae* in literary history, and in raising questions central to the interpretation of Ammianus—the purpose of the lost books, whether and in what sense he was the heir of Tacitus, the impact of the Greek language on his Latinity and of the Greek tradition on his historiography, and whether his silences warp his claim to truthfulness. But the sphragis does not dictate the answers, which have been sharply divergent. Scholarly disagreements have centred above all on the interpretation of his claim to write ‘a former soldier and a Greek’ (*ut miles quondam et Graecus*). Some have seen an expression of modesty, with *ut* to be translated ‘although’; others think that there is an unabashed claim to expertise and learning; modest or not, the claim is also seen as a paradox, in that a simultaneous combination of soldier, Greek, and Latin historian is wholly unexpected. *Miles* has been seen as a claim of allegiance to the tradition of active historians such as Thucydides, Xenophon and Polybius, *Graecus* as a stand for civilisation against barbarism and paganism.