CROSSING THE FRONTIERS: IMPERIAL POWER
IN THE LAST BOOKS OF AMMIANUS

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Abstract: This paper explores some of the differences in compositional strategies and the disposition of subject matter which mark off books 26–31 from the rest of Ammianus’ history. Its focus is the magic and treason trials in Rome (28.1) and Antioch (29.1–2). These accounts have long been recognised to be ambiguous, disjointed, highly selective, chronologically vague, and difficult to follow. It is argued here that these are deliberate devices. Ammianus’ text artfully mirrors the events which it narrates. In the account of these trials the reader experiences something of the oppressive uncertainty, the destructive unpredictability, and the cruel whimsicality of autocracy.

History written under autocracy about autocracy hands readers a role in the poetics of suspicion: they should be too sophisticated to chase a hint, too alert to be content with any narration; and ready to jump to conclusions, to follow the author beyond what can be documented. And not to trust the narrator too far.

After the death of Julian, the Roman Empire was a different place.

I. Failure of Empire

Julian is wounded. The stray thrust of a Persian cavalryman’s spear has pierced his unprotected chest. The confused heat of battle gives way to the stillness of a lingering death-bed scene. Like the great suicidal philosophers of old, Julian is in no hurry to die; not at least until he has

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taken time to ruminate on the nature of the soul and to reflect, at some length, on his *Res Gestae*. Julian is warmly generous in praise of his own greatness. He singles out for particular note his moderation in times of peace and his refusal to be hot-headed in the prosecution of war. All is much as might be expected. Yet for all his foresight and deliberation, the expiring Julian fails to name a successor. He is more concerned to discuss philosophy than to resolve the pressing question of the moment. His last official utterance is little more than a pious platitude: *opto bonum post me repaperi rectorem*—‘I wish that a good ruler may be found to follow me’ (25.3.20).4

The final books of Ammianus’ history, which stretch from one imperial death in Mesopotamia to another in the dust-choked mêlée of Adrianople, offer the reader one way of following Julian’s inconclusive last testament to its unsatisfactory end. Nor at Adrianople did Valens get the opportunity to reflect on his own achievements. According to some, he fell wounded by an arrow and died almost immediately. His body was never recovered. According to others, the emperor was taken to an upper room in a nearby farmstead which was then set ablaze by enemy troops unaware of his presence (31.13.12–17). In the absence of any explicit imperial guidance, the reader—as Ammianus brings his *Res Gestae* to a close—is left to reflect on the fate of princes in the fifteen years since Julian’s more eloquent death.

As has long been noticed, there is something rather disjointed about Ammianus’ final books. They have (to quote John Matthews) ‘a less cumulative, more episodic, air than those of their predecessors.’5 It is as though the focus and coherence of a grand imperial narrative, particularly marked under Julian, is somehow steadily eroded. The final books lack the panoramic sweep of the Persian campaign or the interlocking tensions of the fatal contest between Constantius and Gallus. Narrative time, which has slowed to accommodate a detailed

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