CHAPTER 10

Introduction

In this chapter Ammianus gives a detailed account of Valentinian’s campaign against the Alamanni in the year 368. He opens his report with two incidents, which, although they are not directly related to the campaign, are relevant because they illustrate the audacious and aggressive nature of these enemies of Rome. In § 1–2 Ammianus reports a raid on the city of Mainz by the Alamannic prince Rando, who in a surprise attack carried off men, women and a large booty while many citizens were celebrating a Christian festival. In § 3–4 the historian presents the elimination of another Alamannic war monger, Vithicabius, as a great and unexpected success for the Roman cause, despite the fact that the Romans had to resort to bribery and murder to reach their end. The actual preparations and the first stage of the campaign are described in § 5–6. Ammianus emphasizes the unprecedented scale of the expedition and the care with which Valentinian assembled and equipped his large army. After crossing the Rhine, the emperor, accompanied by his young son and co-ruler Gratian, advanced cautiously into enemy territory. The Alamans, however, avoided open battle, which irritated the soldiers, who wanted to settle the score with these elusive adversaries. In their frustration they set fire to houses and crops (§ 7). Finally, the enemy decided to face the Romans near a place called Solicinium. The Alamans took up position on the flanks of a mountain. The Roman commanders ordered their men, who were spoiling for a fight, to wait for the pre-arranged signal (§ 8–9). Before describing the actual battle, Ammianus pauses to relate how Valentinian ordered one of his commanders, Sebastianus, to take up position behind the enemy lines in order to crush the Alamans as soon as they would take flight. Valentinian himself surprised everyone by suddenly disappearing, while inspecting his troops, in order to discover better approaches to the mountain held by the Alamans (§ 9–10). This unexpected decision, taken without consulting the other commanders, proved almost fatal. The emperor’s party was ambushed and Valentinian narrowly escaped. He escaped with his life, but lost his helmet, which was carried for him by a body-guard, who disappeared
without a trace during the skirmish (§ 11). The description of the battle itself in § 12–15 is a mixture of topical elements, such as the fighting skill of the Romans in man-to-man combat versus the temerity of the Alamans, and on the other hand very precise details, e.g. concerning the leading role played by two young officers during the uphill fight. When the Alamans finally had to give way, they were slaughtered by Sebastianus, who had been waiting for them on the other side of the mountain. In § 16 Ammianus draws up the balance sheet. It had been a costly victory, because the Romans had lost some prominent fighters, who are mentioned by name. After the battle Valentinian and Gratian returned to Trier.

The chapter offers a good opportunity to study Ammianus’ assessment of Valentinian as an army commander. The detailed nature of the information contained in this chapter, e.g. the name Solicinium, the lost helmet, the names of the brave officers and of the fallen, and the role of Sebastianus makes the opinion of Sabbah 209 that Ammianus based himself on an official report, as he had done in chapter 2, very plausible. Such a report was by its very nature highly complimentary to the emperor. Ammianus, however, manages to present the facts in such a way that doubt is cast on the military qualities of Valentinian. The cautiousness on which he prided himself is subverted right from the start in section 1 by the sceptical comment *ut rebatur ipse*. The story of the emperor’s reconnaissance ride and the mortal risk he ran in the course of it, was in its original form probably a tale of pure heroism. In the version of Ammianus, however, it showed up the emperor as a man who acted on the spur of the moment and without considering what the consequences might be for the army and the state, should anything happen to him. Without changing or subverting the facts Ammianus presents his personal view of Valentinian to the reader by means of casual remarks and a clever arrangement of the narrative.

10.1 *Sub idem fere tempus Valentiniano ad expeditionem caute, ut rebatur ipse, profecto* Amm. starts to relate the military events on the German frontier which he had broken off at the end of chapter two and only hinted at in 27.8.1 (*Profectus itaque ab Ambianis Treverosque festinans, q.v.*). *Sub idem fere tempus* must refer to the spring of 368, for, firstly, the last chronological clue Amm. had given was the reference in 27.9.8 (q.v.) to Praetextatus’ urban prefecture (which is attested for the period between 18 August 367 and 20 September 368) and, secondly, in § 6 he tells his readers that it was *anni tempore iam tepente* that the emperor and his son crossed