
Recent years have witnessed an upsurge in the interest for the later Roman empire in general, and the fourth century in particular. Concurrently, the interest for the work and person of the great historian of the period, Ammianus Marcellinus, has been growing as well, its high-water mark to date being represented by the important and highly evocative study by John Matthews, The Roman Empire of Ammianus (London 1989). The editors of the present volume, a collection of articles resulting from the Colloquium with the same title held in Amsterdam on August 26-28, 1991, are themselves well acquainted with the period through their work on a new commentary on Ammianus’ Res Gestae (Den Boeft/Den Hengst/Teitler, Philological and Historical Commentary on Ammianus Marcellinus, Groningen 1987—). They have brought together some twelve articles in English, French and German relating to various aspects of the work of this greatest of later Roman historians. The articles are arranged alphabetically by the names of the authors, among whom can be found many of today’s leading scholars in the field.

Both subject and scope of the contributions vary greatly, but the reader is invited to observe a common approach, as stated by the editors in their introduction, in “the sustained effort to detect how the complex historical reality which the author had witnessed with great personal involvement was reflected in the equally complex work of art which he created, the Res Gestae”. Needless to say, however, that the authors of the articles predictably vary greatly in their approach to Ammian, depending on their own scholarly background.

A minority of the articles concern themselves with philological aspects of Ammian’s work. J. den Boeft discusses Ammian’s supposedly “grecizing” style in the light of modern research on bilingualism. He shows, that although Ammian evidently was very proud of his Greek descent, it is nevertheless difficult to find fault with his handling of Latin, and proposes to view him as a “dominant bilingual” with equal proficiency in both languages but inclining towards the Greek. It does seem to me, though, that Den Boeft has missed an opportunity to place his findings in the larger
context of Ammian’s cultural identity; and even then it would not seem that anything could have been added to Matthews’ chapter on the historian’s personality.

Further philologically oriented articles include contributions by J. Fontaine, who argues that Ammian’s elaborate style fits the established taste of the period he was writing in, the era of Theodosius, and by D. den Hengst, on the scientific digressions in Ammian’s work. He convincingly argues that these digressions are of paramount importance to the structure of the historian’s narrative, marking a change of subject or place, or representing the deeply-felt anxiety and sense of foreboding natural phenomena brought about in Antiquity. This brings us to the other articles in the book, which generally occupy themselves in one way or another with the problem of Ammian’s credibility.

Nearly all articles suffer to some extent from the tendency, which is understandable but not, perhaps, always a priori justifiable, to try and defend Ammian from the criticisms voiced by other scholars. An example is Teitler’s contribution on Ammian and Constantius II, which is mainly an exhortation to test Ammian’s opinions of the emperor by comparing them to the findings of both ancient sources and modern scholarship, but then generally fails to do so by disqualifying our other ancient sources on the grounds that they were by no means impartial (although usefully indicating the direction such research might take) and meekly concludes by stating that Ammian may have been right after all and that he does not “aim at an Ehrenrettung of Constantius”. The article does show the need, however, also emphatically acknowledged by Teitler, for a biography of Constantius II. The exception proving the rule is the long article by F. Paschoud (Valentinien travesti ou De la malignité d’Ammien), in which Paschoud shows that Ammian deliberately painted the personalities of both Valentinian and Constantius II in much darker colours than would have been justified by his sources, because he wanted to show his hero Julian in as favourable a light as was possible.

T.D. Barnes assesses Ammian’s technique when telling the story of Julian’s reign. The historian does not usually date the years by their consuls, but the books on Julian’s reign form an exception to the rule: in several instances Ammian does name them, which usually gives him the opportunity to show his favourite emperor in a favourable light. Since, however, Ammian occasionally gives us information which is less than complete, he has been accused of in-