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The Hellenism of Ammianus Marcellinus

Introduction

Writing towards the end of the fourth century AD, the historian Ammianus Marcellinus, a Greek writing in Latin (probably in Rome), demonstrates for us in several ways the strength of the tradition of Hellenism in the Late Roman Empire. In the epilogue, the final impression he wanted to leave of his work, he specifically tells us he wrote of the events from the principate of Nerva (96 AD) to the death of Valens (378 AD) ‘as a former soldier and a Greek’ (*ut miles et Graecus* 31.16.9).

In the past, this was sometimes taken as an apology for poor Latin, but studies over the last thirty or more years have shown that his style is close to that of the roughly contemporary entries in the Theodosian Code, so that his Latin can hardly be seen as that of a ‘foreigner’ (Thompson 1947; Seyfarth 1978; Mathews 1989; Barnes 1998; Kelly 1999).¹ During the fourth century educated people were still trained in both Greek and Latin. In addition many may have spoken a local language (e.g. Syriac for a Syrian like Ammianus) or Coptic. His stylistic parallels to, and borrowings from, Latin authors show his desire to be seen as a worthy stylist (Hertz 1874; Owens 1958).

So too is the case with his ‘Hellenism/Greekness’. Indeed he seems rather to be proud of his education, rather in the manner of the now old-fashioned phrase ‘an officer and a gentleman’. So if stating that he was writing as a Greek is not referring to poor Latin, it is our task here to see what he meant by it, and in particular why that is the final impression he wants to leave with his

readers. Moreover, it is hard to see how he could have been anything less than proud to have been an active soldier in defence of the empire, and so the same would hold for the second part of the phrase as they are closely linked. He wants to leave us with a positive image of an author who is proud to be both a man of affairs, involved in the major military events of his time, and a Greek, in culture and thought. We will explore what that means for his work, noting in conclusion that, while he must have had a good reason to write in Latin, this does not for him at all negate his Hellenism.

The five areas in which I argue his Hellenism is chiefly displayed are : his interpretation of the historiographical tradition; his display of interest in philosophy/science/technology; his use of, and actual quotes from Greek authors; Graecisms in the text, and finally his admiration for the Hellenism of Julian.

Historia

The historiographical tradition in Greek was around eight hundred years old by the time Ammianus was writing. It began in the fifth century BC with Herodotus, while drawing on the longer tradition of the Ionian logographers, for whom *historia* (enquiry) encompassed enquiry into the world, past and present. Ostensibly by beginning his history from the accession of Nerva (96 AD), and by writing a connected history of the Roman world, with emphasis on emperors and military matters, Ammianus is aligning himself methodologically with Tacitus whose (now incomplete) *Historiae* ended with Domitian. It is also possible there is also a hint of continuity with Tacitus' near contemporary, the biographer Suetonius, who also finished his *Lives of the Caesars* with Domitian, the emperor prior to Nerva. In fact we do not now have the first thirteen books of Ammianus which went from Nerva's reign to part way through the reign of Constantius II. Whether coincidentally or not, we now possess from book 14, at which point Ammianus as a soldier enters the narrative personally (14.9.1). As far as Roman forerunners are concerned, Ammianus must have read widely in Sallust, Tacitus and possibly Livy. Sallust was highly regarded as a stylist and his works were school texts. As an educated man from a good background Ammianus knew this, and saw Tacitus too as a stylistic and historical model.

This is not the whole story however. From the second century onwards, full-scale narrative history was not, as far as we know, written in Latin, and its

place was taken over by the genres of biography and shorter epitomes. Neither of these developments was to Ammianus' liking. We know from a letter of Libanius addressed to a Marcellinus (almost certainly our historian) in Rome, that the addressee was giving recitals of his work at Rome in sections.² In the preface to one of the sections into which Ammianus' work was divided, he expressly rejects brevity for its own sake: in other words the basic concept of the epitome, 'For brevity is praiseworthy only when it breaks off ill-timed discursiveness, and in no way detracts from understanding the course of events' (15.1.1).

In another such sectional preface later in the work (26.1.1), no doubt delivered after another tranche of the work had been read out at Rome, he also rejects minor personal details of the kind in which biographers delight. He refers to 'unreasonable critics', who complain when details such as what an emperor said at table, are omitted. These and the other kinds of information he mentions are just what biography was often about, as any perusal of Suetonius will immediately show.

It is to be inferred that his audiences were used to epitome and biography, thus incurring Ammianus' scorn particularly in regard to the latter. Thus they needed to be won over to the full scale analytical empire-wide narrative Ammianus was offering. One of his complaints about life in Rome in his day was that some of the nobles hated learning 'like poison', and read only Juvenal, a sometimes risqué satirist, and Marius Maximus, a biographer whose now lost works continued biographies in the style of Suetonius. 'Some of them [Roman aristocrats] hating learning like poison read only Juvenal and Marius Maximus with more attentive care, in their profound idleness handling no volumes other than these, for a reason which my humble mind cannot judge' (28.4.14). Even allowing for some exaggeration, it is not hard to see where Ammianus' sympathies lay and why he may have found full scale narrative history not as popular as he hoped. So where did he get the idea to write such a work?

Hellenism

The Greek tradition of history writing, exemplified by the still highly influential Herodotus and Thucydides, was a continuous living tradition in the second and third centuries AD and lasted via Procopius and Agathias until the end of the sixth century. The dearth of 'proper' Roman histories in Latin as

well as his natural inclinations as a Greek may have inclined him towards using Greek sources for his (now lost) account of the second and third centuries. The Greek classical-style histories of Cassius Dio, Herodian and Dexippus (the last of whom is now fragmentary) were all available and widely read, as far as we can tell from citations. Ammianus' history has more affinity with them than with Roman historiography after Tacitus (though in fact in some features, such as the use of personalised obituaries, his work is more Suetonian than Tacitean). Like the three Greek historians just mentioned he wrote, in part at least, contemporary history; for all three took events to their own day from where their predecessor finished off. To take but one example, there are close parallels between Herodian and Ammianus, including points on which these two and no others agree. The use of Dexippus is a little harder to demonstrate as the latter is now fragmentary and these parts of Ammianus are lost except for cross-references, but nonetheless there are some similarities.³

Far more indicative however of Greek influence than the actual content is the conception of the work, in particular the use of geographical and other digressions after the manner of the Ionians and Herodotus. As Syme (1958: 18) aptly remarked, it is precisely where he turns aside from his theme that a historian inserts his own interests and 'reveals his predilections'. Those portions of the work confirm his autonomy, reveal his predilections and permit an approach to his character and opinions.

Philosophy, science and technology

Following on from this, it is in the digressions to his work that Ammianus especially shows his Greek heritage. For reasons of space I will single out philosophy and science/technology, as these were notably Greek endeavours, though Ammianus' work also abounds in geography (including the *periplous* or circumnavigating genre) and ethnography, likewise largely Greek-inspired. Though Roman historians such as Sallust and Tacitus included geography and ethnography, they were following Greek models, and not to the extent that we find in Ammianus. He delights to display his erudition on the natural world and natural phenomena. To allow, as it is argued, that some or much may have come from handbooks is not to downplay its significance in his work (Adams et al. 2003; Adams 2008). He shows the true original spirit of *historia* – the notion of enquiry. A few examples follow.

At 19.4.1-7 he discourses on the causes and varieties of plagues (hearers or readers would immediately think back to Thucydides here). Indeed even in the sixth century AD, Procopius' discussion of the plague is still modelled on Thucydides. Other topics of relevance to Hellenism are eclipses of the sun and moon (20.3.2-12); rainbows (20.11.26-30); divination (21.1.7-14); comets (25.2.5-6). The number and variety of such digressions point to a Greek education and Greek interests.

Use of Greek language and literature

To pass to the third major indication of Hellenism in the work, Ammianus actually breaks the usual historical convention of paraphrasing documents and assimilating information in order to quote Greek verbatim (11p.67). He proposes that in the context of a state visit to Rome by Constantius II (16.10.17) an account of the obelisk set up at Rome by Constantius was in order, but then defers it to the next notice of the city prefect (17.4.1ff).

Again, the polymath Ammianus cannot resist showing off his erudition in this chapter about the obelisk. He describes obelisks generally and explains the principles of hieroglyphics. The Greek tradition of interest in Egypt goes back to Herodotus, who devoted all of his second book to the Egyptian civilisation which so fascinated first the Greeks and then the Romans. In sections 17-23 of Ammianus 17.4 we have the entire Greek text of the obelisk inscription. 'Now the text of the obelisk ... I add below, following the work of Hermapion in its Greek translation (*'litteris graecis'*) (17.4.17). How carefully he must have observed this while living in Rome!

This is the only extended passage of Greek, but he is not backward in demonstrating his Greek background and allegiance. He shows his pride in Greek language and thought at other points by introducing individual Greek words in to his text. For instance at 26.1.1, in arguing that history should deal with highlights and not unimportant and trifling details, he compares those who wish for the latter to those who want to count the tiny indivisible particles which fly through space and to which 'we' (note the identification!) give the name of 'atoms'. The word is written in Greek! There is no doubt as to his primary allegiance here. A discussion on eclipses at 20.3.2-12, quoting Ptolemy, is interspersed with terms written in Greek, giving the Latin translation. He cites them '*Graeco sermone*', that is 'in the Greek language',

and again uses 'we'. Ammianus needs to use a Greek word to describe comets or falling stars using the Homeric word for a shooting star (25.2.5). Again here he identifies as a Greek, saying 'we' call them thus (*'nos appellamus'*). Nor can he discuss earthquakes, another scientific phenomenon, without recourse to Greek. Aristotle, Anaxagoras and Anaximander are all cited (17.7.11-12). The word 'we' is again invoked in quoting in Greek letters a Greek term. Two Greek epithets for Neptune are also cited (though this time not in Greek characters): *Ennosigaios* and *Sisichthon*, that is, 'Earthshaker' and 'Earthquaker'.

Where the Greeks also led the way was in developing the art of oratory in the sphere of public life, which of course the Romans enthusiastically adopted. It is Plato even rather than Cicero whom Ammianus chooses to cite on this point, quoting directly in Greek his definition of the art of politics as seen by 'the greatness of Plato' (*'amplitudo Platonis'*) (30.4.3). Further on in the same passage, Epicurus too is quoted in Greek as calling forensic oratory an 'evil art'. Finally on this point we may note 26.1.7-14, where in explaining the phenomenon of the leap year, Ammianus does so with reference to the Greek word Zodiac, indicating the signs of the heavens. Astronomy is yet another area where the Greeks hold pride of place. All these instances are sufficient to show his pride and identity in Greek learning and culture.

While no claim is here being made that he had read first hand all or even most of the authors whom he cites, he at least knew of a wide range of Greek literature: Hesiod, Homer (frequently), Timagenes, Democritus, Hermapion, Aristotle, Anaxagoras, Anaximander, Ptolemy, Menander, Heraclitus, Eratosthenes, Hecataeus, Theopompus, Plotinus, Herodotus, Plato, Thucydides, Meton, Euctemon, Hipparchus, Archimedes, Theognis, Demosthenes, Ctisias, Gorgias, and Isocrates are all cited. So too are vaguer groups such as *mathematici*, *philosophi et illustres medici*, *physici* and others who are likely from their subject matter to have been primarily Greek.

In keeping with his contemporaries, Ammianus reserves his greatest admiration and number of citations for Homer on the Greek side. Homer was fundamental to the education system and was learned by heart to a greater or less extent. Notably at the Emperor Julian's ceremonial receipt of the role of Caesar to his cousin Constantius II's role as Augustus, Ammianus makes him cite Homer (presumably implying that many readers would understand the allusion). It is a dramatic scene, one of the visual impressions Ammianus loved

to create. After a moving address from Constantius (15.8.5ff), the soldiers showed their approval by creating a celebratory noise with their shields, to the great joy of almost all present (15.8.16). Julian, clad in imperial purple and having a look both awe inspiring and full of charm, quietly whispered in Greek a verse from the Iliad (5.83) as he was taken up to sit in the chariot with the emperor, 'by purple death I am overcome and by *moira*' (overarching fate). This is clearly intended as a tribute of note both to Julian and also to Homer.

Graecisms

The fourth area of display of Hellenism is the use of Graecisms, or Greek constructions and grammar, in the text. Though Ammianus was clearly well read and well educated in Latin, as characterised any educated person of his era where both languages were prized, at times his language does show evidence of Graecisms – features of Greek grammar or syntax. Ancient Greek makes far more use than does Latin of connecting words (particles), which reflect the looser Greek sentence structure. This is an area of highly specialised scholarly debate, and deeper work on bilingualism in the Ancient world using modern linguistic studies is becoming ever more sophisticated (Adams, Janse & Swain 2003; Adams 2008). For this reason a brief mention only will be made here. The scrupulous Timothy Barnes (1998) weighing up German scholarship, has concluded that evidence 'continues to mount that Ammianus thought in Greek'. Individual examples are pinpointed as they occur in the Dutch series of commentaries on specific books by P. de Jonge (1935) and subsequent colleagues.⁴

The conclusion for our purposes is that while Ammianus was of course influenced by his primary tongue and the speech/writing habits instilled in youth, his Latin is adequate and appropriate for his task. This has quite a bearing on our conclusion, namely that he is writing in Latin to reach an audience in and beyond Rome, so that while of interest to philologists, the Graecisms do not materially affect our argument.

Emperor Julian

Finally, Ammianus' admiration for the Emperor Julian (his near contemporary) shows few bounds. The introduction to his career (16.1.2-5) prepares the reader for the whole style of narration of Julian's reign. Ammianus claims that he will even approach *panegyric*! This is soon followed (16.5.1-15) by a passage which tells of the merits of Julian's life. The claim

is later borne out by the structure and content of Julian's obituary (25.4.1), which follows the rhetoricians' ideas of the four principal virtues, moderation, wisdom, justice, and courage. Of course Julian is nowadays mostly remembered for his rejection of Christianity in which he had been unwillingly brought up. Later he became an advocate and practitioner of traditional sacrificial religion (maybe even to excess!). Yet again Ammianus illustrates from another Greek quote from a second century Greek poet who satirised the excessive sacrifices of Marcus Aurelius and hence of Julian (15.4.17). By forbidding Christian teachers to teach on the grounds that they were using classical texts in which they did not believe, Julian showed his devotion to the Greek tradition in the extreme. Ammianus seems to disapprove, apparently condemning the law as inclement (25.4.20), but given that he was by then writing in the time of the staunchly Theodosius, not all are prepared to see Ammianus' remarks as those of a moderate, but rather perhaps of one who cannot afford to offend the reigning sensibilities (Rike 1987; Judge 2010). Either way, the emphasis given to Julian's Hellenism clearly reflects Ammianus' own inclinations.

The Latin link

In conclusion, if Hellenism is so strongly present in Ammianus' work, why then did he choose to write in Latin, in a genre that had been largely unused and unappreciated for so long? The answer must lie in his intended audience, of whom he is very conscious throughout the work. While Greek was of course the *koine* (common language or *lingua franca*) of the Eastern Mediterranean part of the Roman Empire, and the language of medicine et cetera, Latin was used in three areas in the East: law, bureaucracy and the army. It was generally the language of the Imperial court. We know that Ammianus lived for a time in Rome, probably in the late 380's and early 390's. It is inferred too that he publicly read his work there. However he does envisage '*peregrini*' (foreigners) reading his work (14.6.1) and says it is for them he describes the shortcoming of the present day Romans compared with those of the glorious past. This is clear from 14.6.3: 'When Rome first began to rise to world-wide splendour, Virtue and Fortune, usually at odds with one another, formed an agreement: for if either had failed her Rome would not have come to her complete height.' Further on, we have more clues (14.6.5):

‘thus the venerable city has entrusted the management of her patrimony to the Caesars as to her children’.

Ammianus’ *Rea Gestae (History)* is focussed on the emperors and their court together with wars. Other matters are included but largely by way of digression. We may infer that he wanted attention from the emperor or his attendants and/or the bureaucracy. It seems that failed to happen⁵ and might have been risky too at the time of Theodosius (26.1.2). We can see a parallel case in the poet, Claudian, a Greek speaker from Alexandria who came to Rome seeking and gaining patronage for writing imperial panegyrics.

Ammianus displays his moral purpose by comments in several extended passages on vices and virtues (14.6 and 28. 4 on the Romans; 30.4 on lawyers of all kinds). He makes great use of *exempla*, or examples from the past, to show in each case how people ought to behave. This is linked with a concern for injustice and how this can arise from defects in a ruler.

The benefit of using Latin in his compositions was that they were to be understood and read (or heard) by the Romans and also by those in the bureaucracy or imperial employment. In common with many Greek and Roman historians Ammianus’ work had a strong moral streak. History was seen as instructive, from its earliest beginnings. To provide but a few examples, Polybius has a moralising account of the ways men act contrary to their principles and what makes them do it (*Polyb.*9.23). Sallust’s moralising tone is well-known and pronounced (*Bellum Catilinae* 6-13). Interestingly the *Historia Augusta*, probably composed in Rome in the late fourth century as most scholars now agree, betrays an interest similar to Ammianus’ in the effects of character on rule. Thus though there was ample precedent for Greek and Roman historians to include such moral advice, for it to be heeded where Ammianus may have hoped it was expedient (if nothing more) to use Latin as his medium.

So then we see a blend of Greek and Roman ideas in Ammianus’ outlook, but the impression left (as he intended) by his final description of himself (‘*ut ... graecus*’, 31.16.9) emphasizes the Hellenic cultural background which is so necessary for us to understand in estimating his work.

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Notes

¹ There was extensive scholarship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries especially in German. In many of these the Greekness of Ammianus was discussed. This article offers a synthesis which draws on these. English scholarship on Ammianus was largely set in train by E.A. Thompson (1947).

² Libanius, a rhetorician, a fellow Antiochene, and near contemporary of Ammianus mentions an 'Ammianus' in his surviving corpus a couple of times. The reference in Ep. 1053 (ed. Foerster) is to an author giving recitations in Rome, and of his work 'cut up into many pieces' i.e. recited aloud in stages.

³ In fact looking for the use of Dexippus and Herodian in the extant and fragmentary parts of Ammianus occupied much early scholarship. These efforts were first collected by Gimazane (1889). Recent scholarship on the *Historia Augusta* has amplified this but not changed the main conclusions.

⁴ De Jonge's *Sprachlicher und historischer Kommentar zu Ammianus Marcellinus* was originally part of a German dissertation on Ammianus book xiv. 1-7, published in Groningen 1935, but gradually it became an ongoing series in English with other colleagues.

⁵ That is certainly the impression left by remarks like that at 14.6.13-15 and 19.