



The Later Roman Empire (A.D. 354-378)

Ammianus Marcellinus , *Walter Hamilton (Translator)* , *Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (Annotations)*

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He was not a professional man of letters but an army officer of Greek origin born at Antioch and contemporary with the events described in what remains of his work. He set himself the task of continuing the histories of Tacitus from A.D. 96 down to his own day. The first thirteen of his thirty-one books are lost; the remainder describe a period of only twenty-five years (A.D. 354-378) and the reigns of the emperors Constantine, Julian, Jovian, Valentinian and Valens, for which he is a prime authority. He was a pagan and an admirer of the apostate Julian, to whose career about half the surviving books are devoted. Nevertheless, his treatment of Christianity is free from prejudice and his impartiality and good judgement have been generally acknowledged.

The Later Roman Empire (A.D. 354-378) Details

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Doug says

One of my favorite authors. If only they hadn't lost his earlier volume, we would know so much more than we do about the fourth century. As it is, and even weighing into consideration his prejudice (possible) rooted in his time as a staffer for the General Ursicinus, this historian gives you the turmoil after Constantine is incredibly vivid detail.

J.G. McMillan says

As a fan of ancient history, I really enjoyed this book. Even though it reads like an excerpt from a larger history (which it is), as long as you have a good understanding of the geography it flows very nicely. He does go on several asides, though I think these add to the character of the work. Particularly interesting were his descriptions of astronomical phenomenon (comets, meteors, the sun and stars, the round earth) which give a clear picture of what an educated Roman understood, clearing aside the mystic explanations for more rational ones.

The best part of the story is certainly his narration of the life of Julian the Apostate, a good candidate for a movie if there ever was one. Ammianus certainly takes sides in his recollection of history, and Julian plays the role of a sympathetic Hamlet, appeasing the Christians on one hand and secretly worshiping the old gods on the other, all the while expressing wisdom and bravery on the road to inevitable tragedy.

If you've enjoyed Herodotus, Thucydides, and Polybius, you'll like this. Definitely not as dense as Livy, thankfully.

Simon says

Decided to reread this classic of late Roman historiography after reading Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, because I remember being most interested in Ammianus' treatment of Julian the Apostate, for whom Tartt's character of the quasi-pagan classics professor Julian Morrow is surely named. This edition omits many of the wild digressions (what are rainbows?!) that gave Ammianus his bizarre charm, but this is still a fascinating book, recording the history of the later Roman Empire from the heirs of Constantine to the sack of Rome. Ammianus clearly worshiped Julian, but he's nevertheless fair, able to speak about Julian's flaws as much as his strengths. Some of the best parts are the gossipy sections about the Roman elite, where Ammianus details the scandalous behaviours of the ruling class of a doomed empire. Honestly, more fun than it sounds!

Stephen Simpson says

It's hard not to like a book that Gibbon cited as a major source, but the Penguin version is unfortunately

abridged and leaves out some quality passages.

Marcellinus presents history in a way that is familiar and palatable to modern readers, without a lot of the overt propaganda, nonsense, and fabulism that infects early "historical" accounts. Unfortunately, after having studied this period a lot, there wasn't much new here. Marcellinus' accounts add in some detail and flavor, but it wasn't a life-changing book by any stretch.

Julian Abagond says

The closest thing to a time machine to the late 300s, not just to its events but even its mindset. What stands out most in his account are the Goths (who are strangely like Anglo-Americans in the 1800s, with covered wagons and everything), that horrible battle against them at Adrianople and his picture of Julian, the last man to rule the Roman Empire who believed in the old gods. Much of what seems "Christian" in Augustine's world view really was not: it was just the received wisdom of the age. As it turns out, Ammianus believed many of the same things yet was not Christian.

More:

<https://abagond.wordpress.com/2006/03...>

Eduardo says

I enjoyed this book. Ammianus Marcellinus was as he describes himself 'a former soldier and a Greek.

His history covers the final decades and decline of Roman empire (354 to 378 A.D.).

Almost all accounts he describes as eyewitness are about military campaigns, battles, sieges, betrayals, political intrigues, murders in the reigns of the emperors Constantius, Julian, Jovian, Valentinian and Valens.

The accounts shows the extreme violence and bloodthirsty behavior of the Romans from that time.

In the beginning i liked the stories about battles but from a certain point as subject is always about military i found the narrative repetitive and boring.

I liked his brief narrative about the visit of the emperor Constantius to Rome and how he was stunned when he saw the Trajan forum:

" ... But when he came to the Forum of Trajan, a creation which in my view has no like under the cope of heaven and which even the gods themselves must agree to admire, he stood transfixed with astonishment, surveying the gigantic fabric around him, its grandeur defies description and can never again approached by mortal men..."

He describes that there were 700,000 volumes in the famous Alexandria library.

Finally I laughed loudly reading the description of 5 kinds of lawyers according to the famous orator Cicero that Ammianus quoted in his book.

This Penguin edition is abridged.

Alex Athanassakos says

This is a great book that begins about 20 years after the death of Constantine the Great in 337 AD and describes the tribulations of his children. Now Ammianus is not Tacitus or Livy in terms of writing style, but he had an advantage over many of these ancient historians; namely, he lived and participated (i.e., was an eye witness) to most of the events he describes.

The only unfortunate part about this book is that the editor deemed necessary to omit a large number of sections from the original manuscript. Although these sections may appear, at a superficial glance, trivial from a historical perspective (like Ammianus' opinions of what causes earthquakes), to me these kind of passages have greater value than descriptions of battles. One can find description of battles or other main events in any contemporary summary of history. But it is only by reading these ancient texts that we find out how people thought, how they spoke, their habits and culture. And sometimes, it is the off the cuff remark that reveals some surprising facts. For example, in describing Julian's campaign against the Persians he mentions of a town that was deserted "by its Jewish inhabitants because of its low walls." This town was close to today's Basrah in southern Iraq, close to the beginning (or end) of the Persian Gulf. To me this was unexpected as I never thought that Jewish people lived in their own towns so far away from Jerusalem.

Ophelia Vert says

Some absolutely hilarious entries, particularly Book 28, Chapter 4 on the vices of Roman Society. A wonderful chronicle of the later Roman Empire, with scathing reviews of all Emperors and generals throughout.

Eadweard says

What's left of his writings cover the reigns of Emperors Constantius II, Julian, Jovian, Valentinian (plus Gratian) and Valens. I specially enjoyed his account of Julian's short reign, the war against Shapur II and the Battle of Adrianople.

My only issue is with the translator, some of his choices were off-putting, using sayings/terms in french, using 'scotfree', etc. And he also omitted parts of the work, why?

Jordan says

In general I enjoyed this book. It is a primary source dealing with my favorite time period, Late Antiquity

and the early middle ages. However, the choices that Editor/Translator Walter Hamilton made in assembling this volume were extremely aggravating and frustrating. This volume is an abridgment of what remains of Ammannius's full work. Let that sink in for a minute. This is an abridgment of a work which is already incomplete. To make this worse, Hamilton chose to effectively omit virtually ALL of the material dealing with the non-Roman groups. So that by the time you get to the battle of Adrianople, the bulk of the material fleshing out the background of the Goths and Huns, the construction of the Limes on the Rhine and Danube, the incursions by the Franks and Saxons into Gaul and Britain, have all effectively been skipped and replaced with 1-2 sentence long summaries. Considering what this volume cost, and considering it bears the lofty name of Penguin Classics, I find it inexcusable for such a substantial portion of material to be missing.

Penguin similarly did this with their edition of the Prose Edda, leaving out a full 1/3rd of it.

Ammannius's prose and eye for details are well worth the read, but if you're looking for a comprehensive and "complete" publication of his Works, it's best to get the Public Domain one that is freely available online rather than spend the money on this abridgment.

Chantaal says

Surprisingly readable and not as dry as many other ancient sources I've read lately.

Anthony says

I decided to read Ammianus because I understood he was a self-conscious successor to Tacitus, whose work is probably my favorite of the contemporaneous Roman histories. Then I realized that his history would probably seem very familiar to me, having already read Gibbon's 'Decline and Fall' and Heather's 'Fall of the Roman Empire', for which Ammianus serves as a primary source. The beginning of Ammianus's work, covering the reign of Constantine, is lost, but the surviving portions focus on the emperor Julian and his failed invasion of Mesopotamia and conclude with Valens's disastrous defeat at Adrianople in 378, so there are important historical turning points in the chronology.

Given this background, Ammianus does not disappoint. Like Tacitus, his style is much closer to modern history than ancient biography (eg, Plutarch, which I found to be frustrating). As such, the chronology is much easier to follow, although there is still little analysis. The focal point of his history is the brief--and seemingly unsuccessful, or at least inconsequential in broader scheme of things--reign of the pagan emperor Julian. This choice is not entirely clear to me as a contemporary reader, but it fits Ammianus's personal experience and available resources, so his account is filled with detail. The book is most engaging in its lengthy, visceral descriptions of the campaigns in Mesopotamia, although the modern reader will blanch at the exaggerations and imagined speeches (although these are apparently indigenous to the genre). The accounts of the various lesser political intrigues at the periphery of the empire are confusing at times--it's hard to keep track of the characters and their relative positions--but they provide interesting documentation of politics in the late empire. Ammianus uses them pedagogically, hitting his main themes of traditional virtue and modern decay that will be familiar to any reader.

Given the limitations of his times, Ammianus does a good job of being objective and descriptive. His history is essential reading for anyone interested in ancient history from the source. The period may not be as

familiar or glamorous to the novice reader, but it's an important one, and Ammianus's historical mode is accessible and readable.

Jason Goetz says

Fascinating history, just about the last significant output in the genre from the ancient world. One can see much of the early medieval world here, several centuries before its onslaught.

The dynamic of burgeoning bureaucracy, unaccountability, and unrestrained corruption resonates to a resident of 21st Century California. And the fact that everything appears to be done for profit or loss also bears relevance to the modern world. While the tales of cruelty are borderline barbaric, one must give some leeway to a culture whose mores allowed for such a thing and to a literary-historic discourse which frequently appears to exaggerate such abuses and which dates back at least to Tacitus and Suetonius.

Additionally, the strategic brilliance of Julian the Apostate carries weight for all whose ambition cannot be subdued. Julian harks back to an earlier period, both in his religious outlook and in his moderation and (mostly) humble attitude.

Lee Edwardsen says

This volume contains a substantial narrative of political and military events, highlighting major episodes such as the conversion of Constantine, the creation in the East of the pious Christian state, and the resurgence of Roman ambition under the emperor Justinian. In a group of thematic chapters, the book considers the nature of the late Roman state, the emergence and character of the western barbarian kingdoms, the epochal religious changes of late antiquity, and major aspects of economy and society. The final chapters address the decline of the empire by examining the period between the outbreak of the Great Plague of 542 and the eclipse of Roman power in the Near East in the seventh century, resulting from a final great war with the Persian Empire and the emerging power of Islam among the Arabs.

Anthony Dalton says

Loved this. It only encompasses 24 years of the mid to late fourth century, but this bloke was there and witnessed it first hand. It is so eloquently worded, presenting a raw and graphic representation of events. As good as Plutarch is, Ammianus makes him look ordinary.
