

Ammianus Marcellinus and His Descriptions of the Foreign Tribes in His History

Bedia Demirış

Ammianus Marcellinus (AD 330-395) was the last of the great Roman historians and as Mellor claims, was the last outstanding pagan writer of classical antiquity (Mellor 1998: 7). As we learn from the closing paragraph of his historical work, Ammianus was a native Greek (Amm. 31.16.9). By traditional account, he was born in Antioch near the Syrian coast, towards the end of the reign of Constantinus I¹. He describes Antioch as “the crown of the East” (Amm. 22.9.14: *Antiochiam orientis apicem*). In fact, this city was one of the four major cities of the Roman empire and was important both as cultural and as an administrative centre. Ammianus has mentioned the city in his work repeatedly (Amm. 14.7-9; 22.9-12; 29.1-2). The city was ruled by a Greek-speaking elite of landowners, while the poor farmers were speaking Syriac; the richer families were obliged to accept the financial burdens of membership of the city council. Ammianus’ prosperous Greek family must have belonged to this curial class (Grant 1995: 23). On this matter, we have no details, although we know a good deal about the life of Ammianus, which he has frequently mentioned in his own history. But it can be taken that, Ammianus was a member of the upper middle class and had comparatively little of financial worries (Thompson 1969: 2). As a Syrian Greek Ammianus served in the emperor Julian’s army. Because of his good birth, he was no ordinary soldier; when he was made one of the *protectores domestici*², he was in his twenties.

After he had served long years in the empire army and traveled some years, Ammianus settled in Rome about AD 378, and began to write his historical work in Latin. Although he has described himself as a Greek (Amm. 31.16.9) and frequently used Greek words in his work with a comment like “as we call it...” (for example Amm. 20.3.11), why he prefered to write

¹ For the conflicts about his birthplace, see to Rohrbacher 2002: 15-16.

² A select corps of the imperial bodyguard; with other words, a body of troops with the rank of officers.

in Latin? There is no certain answer to this question, but several considerations can be suggested. First of all, Ammianus' decision to write in Latin rather than in Greek can be explained with his Antiochene heritage, as Rohrbacher suggested: in Antioch, which was used by Constantius II as his base during the wars against the Persian empire throughout the 340s, and was filled with Latin speaking soldiers and bureaucrats, Latin would have been a familiar language, during Ammianus' youth (Rohrbacher 2002: 14). Secondly, Ammianus wrote for a Roman public, and his intensely Roman patriotism, which is seen especially in the military narrations of his work giving his opinions on the successes and failures of Roman armies, would have had an important part in his decision to write in Latin (Laistner 1963: 145). For him, the city of Rome is "eterna" and "venerable"; she is the "home of empire and all the virtues" (Amm. 16.10.14: *urbis aeternae*; 14.6.5: *urbis venerabilis*; 16.10.13: *Romam ... imperii virtutumque omnium larem*).

Ammianus has reported the content of his history in the last sentences of his work: he had set forth those events from the principate of the emperor Nerva to the death of Valens (Amm. 31.16.9). His history *Res Gestae* completely covered a period of nearly three centuries in thirty-one books. But the first thirteen books have not survived. The extant books 14 to 31, of which text rests on sixteen manuscripts, two of the ninth and fourteen of the fifteenth century³, describe the events of twenty five years, from AD 353 to 378. His work was a continuation of Tacitus' *Historiae*⁴ and has reported the events of Roman empire from the accession of Nerva in AD 96 to the disaster of Hadrianople and the death of the eastern emperor Valens at the battle against the Visigoths in AD 378.

Ammianus wrote not only political and diplomatic history. Besides his interest in administration and bureaucracy, as an easterner, he had also sympathy for peoples throughout the empire (Mellor 1998: 513). He has mentioned the countries of peoples and the customs, religion, history of the tribes to whom the Romans have had political relations. For this purpose he has used digressions, which were used by all ancient historians. In using digressions, he explicitly intended to provide background to his narrative (Browning 1983: 64). Ammianus' digressions have variety of subject: he has provided a wide scope of geographical, ethnographical, scientific, philosophical and religious information. He was an observant traveller both in regard to natural phenomena and in regard to people (Usher 1997: 254). The historian

³ For the text tradition of Ammianus Marcellinus' work, see to Reynolds 1983.

⁴ Tacitus has reported in this work the events of the Roman empire from 69 to 96 AD.

attended to detail. His *Res Gestae* is distinguished by its profusion of detail. On account of this, Rohrbacher suggested that, Ammianus was the autor of the most colorful, readable, and elegant history of the fourth century (Rohrbacher 2002: 41). Even though in many cases he has used his first-hand knowledge, Ammianus' digressions are generally based upon written sources. In his work, we find mainly six digressions of which subject is foreign tribes and ethnographical informations: Amm. 14.4; 15.9-12; 22.8; 23.6; 27.4; 31.2.

The first digression (Amm. 14.4) is on the lands and ethnography of the Saracens, a tribe from Arabia Felix⁵. Ammianus had written about this tribe in one of the lost books. Yet he would briefly add a few more particulars about them, while narrating their inroads (Amm. 14.4.2). In this passage he writes about their manners and customs. Besides these we find his description of the Saracens. According to Ammianus, the Saracens look like "rapacious kites" (Amm. 14.4.1: *similes milvorum rapacium*), since in a brief of time they laid waste whatever they could find. In his opinion, the Saracens are a dangerous tribe (Amm. 14.4.7: *hactenus de natione perniciosa*): they must be desired neighter as friends nor as enemies (Amm. 14.4.1: *Saraceni tamen nec amici nobis umquam nec hostes optandi*).

The second digression is a long one (Amm. 15.9-12), in which Ammianus mentions the origin of the Gauls. He narrates from where the name of the Celts and the Galatians comes (Amm. 15.9), and describes the various parts of Gaul: he gives a geographical description of the Gallic Alps and the various passes through them (Amm. 15.10), followed by a brief description of the various parts of Gaul and of the course of the Rhone (Amm. 15.11). This digression connects the appointment of Julian as commander of Gaul and his campaigns which Ammianus narrates in the following book (Sundwall 1996: 623). His information about the earliest origin of the Gauls comes from Timagenes of Alexandria (Amm. 15.9.2), who was brought to Rome as a prisoner of war by Pompeius and wrote a history of Gauls. Throughout Gaul, as Ammianus said, men gradually grew civilized and the study of the liberal arts flourished. At that moment, the historian mentions the learned men of the Gauls: the Bards, who were poets; the Euhages, who were diviners and natural philosophers; the Druids, who studied both natural and moral philosophy. At the end of this part, Ammianus narrates the manners, features and customs of the Gauls: all the Gauls were of tall stature, fair and ruddy.

⁵ Arabia, the large country of Asia, forming a peninsula between the Arabian and Persian gulfs, is divided by the ancients into three different parts, Petraea (from its principal city Petra), Deserta and Felix.

Because of the fierceness of their eyes, they were terrible, and fond of quarrelling and of overbearing insolence (Amm. 15.12.1: *celsioris statuae et candidi paene Galli sunt omnes et rutili, luminumque torvitate terribiles, avidi iurgiorum, et sublatius insolentes*). Their voices were formidable and threatening and there were no difference between their good-natured and angry (Amm. 15.12.2: *metuendae voces complurium et minaces, placatorum iuxta et irascientium*). Ammianus describes the Gauls as a race greedy for wine (Amm. 15.12.4: *viniavidum genus*). According to him, a group of foreigners would be unable to cope with one of the Gauls in a fight, if he called in his wife. Because the Gallic women were like a catapult, who would kick and punch, and were much stronger than Gallic men. As being understood from this example, Ammianus' references to the characters of the Gauls have sometimes relied upon personal observations (Rohrbacher 2002: 27).

In the third digression (Amm. 22.8), we find a description of Thrace, of the Pontic sea, and of the regions and peoples of Pontus. In this passage, which was mostly full of topographical narrations, Ammianus gives the name of all tribes who inhabited in Pontus. But there were several obscure peoples whose names and customs were unknown, as he says to us (Amm. 22.8.38). Ammianus gives some account of the remote parts of Thrace and of the topography of the Pontic sea, partly from his own observation and partly from his readings. He says that his account is clear and accurate. But scholars suggested that Ammianus' account is confused and in places inaccurate (Rolfe 1986a: 212 n.3). He lists the tribes of Pontus (Amm. 22.8.21): the Dahae, Chalybes, Byzares, Sapires, Tibareni, Mossynoeci, Macrones and Philyres. The Dahae were the most violent warriors (Amm. 22.8.21: *acerrimi omnium bellatores*) and the Chalybes have first mined and worked iron. Ammianus mentions the people who lived near the Palus Maeotis⁶. In Cherronesus⁷, near the left side of the Palus Maeotis, lived Greek colonies, who were quiet and peaceful. But at no great distance from these colonies, there were the Tauri, who were terrible for their ruthless cruelty (Amm. 22.8.33: *immani diritate terribiles*). Here, Ammianus mentions that, those peoples have offered human victims to the gods, and especially, strangers to Diana, whom they called Orsiloche (Amm. 22.8.33). In 22.8.25, Ammianus gives an example on the integral relationship between peoples and their environmental conditions: the Achaei, the natives of Achaia, who were being carried out by contrary winds to Pontus, meeting enemies every where and

⁶ The modern Sea of Azov.

⁷ Modern Krim, Crimea.

unabling to find a place for a home, settled on the tops of mountains covered with perpetual snow. Because of the rigorous climate, they became robbers to continue this dangerous life and became later savage.

The fourth digression (Amm. 23.6) is about Persia and devoted largely to the geography and the topography of the Persian kingdom. As Ammianus himself tells us, the Persian digression is based on written sources (Amm. 23.6.1: *descriptionibus gentium curiose digestis*). But it is also impossible to show which sources he used (Drijvers 1999: 202). This digression, which is the longest one in his work, suits Julian's invasion of Assyria, which he narrates in his next book (Book 24) (Sundwall 1996: 624). In 23.6.14 Ammianus gives a list of the greater eighteen provinces in all Persia: Assyria, Susiana, Media, Persis, Parthia, Carmania maior, Hyrcania, Margiana, the Bactriani, the Sogdiani, the Sacae, Scythia at the foot of Imaus (the Himalayas), and beyond the same mountain, Serica, Aria, the Paropanisadae, Drangiana, Arachosia, and Gedrosia. Later, he narrates the cities, natural resources, climates and geographical conditions and tribes of these Provinces one by one. The nation of Media was warlike (*pugnatrix*) and was to be feared (*formidanda*) next to the Parthians (Amm. 23.6.28). The inhabitants of Parthia were savage (*feri*) and warlike (*pugnaces*) and they were taking such pleasure in war and conflict that one who died in battle was regarded as happy beyond all others and those who had departed from life by a natural death, they were attacking with cries of protest as unworthy cowards (Amm. 23.6.44). The inhabitants of Bactria, a province in the eastern part of Persia, were a nation which was warlike (*bellatrix*) and very powerful (*potentissima*) (Amm. 23.6.55). The Sacae, living east and north-east of Bactria were a tribe of savages (Amm. 23.6.60: *natio fera*). Ammianus mentions various Scythian tribes some of whose, because of the extreme roughness of their land, were inaccessible (Amm. 23.6.62: *inaccessi*). Among these nations, there were some mild (*mitis*) and kindly (*pius*) tribes such as the Iaxartae and the Galactophagi. The historian gives a verse from Homer who mentions Galactophagi as righteous (*dikaiotaton*) men (Amm. 23.6.62 confl. Hom. *Iliad.* xiii.6). In this long passage, Ammianus mentions also the Seres, a people of eastern Asia. They were unacquainted with arms and warfare. They were living a peaceful life and were gentle (*sedati*) and quiet (*placidi*) (Amm. 23.6.67). They were having no troubles with their neighbours. Their climate was agreeable and healthful, the sky was clear, the winds were gentle and very pleasant. While he gives climate after the characteristics of the tribe, Ammianus seems to emphasize the effect of climate on the characteristic of a tribe. In 23.6.75-84 he gives bodily characteristics and customs in general of the tribes who was living in the Persian province. According to his

description, the Persians were crazed with sex, boastful (*superbi*) and threatening (*minaces*), cruel (*crudeles*), talking loudly and because of their sloppy and effeminate behaviours, often seemed as lacking in discipline. On the other hand, they were not eating luxuriously. They were moderate (*restricti*) and cautious (*cauti*), most gallant warriors (*acerrimi bellatores*), rather crafty (*artifices*) than courageous (*fortes*). Because of their military training and discipline, their constant practice of manoeuvres and arms drill, they were formidable even to large armies (Amm. 23.6.83: *metuendi*).

In the fifth digression (Amm. 27.4), we find a description of the six provinces of Thrace and their peoples. One of these tribes is the Scordisci. They were formerly cruel (*saevi*) and savage (*truces*) (Amm. 27.4.4), and accustomed to offer up their prisoners as victims to Bellona⁸ and Mars and to drink human blood. In this section, he also mentions Odrysae, a people of Thrace who were living on both sides of the river Artiscus, a tributary of the Hebrus. They were noted for their savage cruelty beyond all others (Amm. 27.4.9: *praeter alios ut immaniter efferati memorantur Odrysae*). They were so habituated to kill other people that when there were no enemies, they plunged the sword into the bodies of their own countrymen. After these descriptions, Ammianus narrates how these six provinces which the barbarians inhabited, were won for the Roman republic.

In the last digression which we deal with (Amm. 31.2), Ammianus narrates the customs of the Huns, the Halani, and other nations of Asiatic Scythia. His information on Hunnic culture and customs is not from first hand. He says that there were little information about the people of the Huns in ancient records (Amm. 31.2.1). He has taken passages from ancient ethnographers and composed them so as to make the Huns seem as uncivilized (Rohrbacher 2002: 226). The Huns were not using fire or savory food, as Ammianus mentioned, but were eating the roots of wild plants and the half-raw flesh of any kind of animal which they warm under their saddles. Because of their fear of roofs and cities, they have never got off their horses, eating, drinking and sleeping on horseback. They were more like beasts than men. They also completely lacked morality and religion. Like unreasoning beasts (Amm. 31.2.11: *inconsultorum animalium ritu*), they were ignorant of the difference between right and wrong. They were the most terrible of all warriors (Amm. 31.2.9: *omnium acerrimi bellatores*) In this sixth digression, Ammianus also mentions from Halani who were once known as the Massagetae, and compares them with the Hunni: in all respects they were like the Huns, but

⁸ The Roman goddess of war.

in their manner of life and their habits, the Halani were less savage (Amm. 31.2.21). Ammianus, who has drawn some of his descriptions of Hunnic society word for word from Pompeius Trogus and Livius, has selected the details to emphasize the extreme primitivism of the Huns (Rohrbacher 2002: 226).

Apart from these six ethnographical digressions, Ammianus makes descriptions for the foreign tribes, when he was commenting on the successes and failures of Roman arms in the military portions of his work. In these descriptions Ammianus generally uses particular adjectives. For example, in 16.12.47 the Alamanni, a tribe of the Germans, are savage (*feri*) and uncontrollable (*turbidi*); in 19.2.3 the Segestani, an Oriental nation, are bravest warriors (*acerrimi bellatores*); in 22.7.8 the Goths are deceitful (*fallaces*) and treacherous (*perfidi*); in 27.5.6 the Greuthungi, a tribe of the Ostrogoths, are warlike (*bellicosi*); in 27.8.5 the Attacotti, a people of Britain, are a warlike race of men (*natio bellicosa*); in 29.5.23 the Dardani, the people of Dardania in Illyricum, are murderous enemies (*internecivi hostes*); in 29.6.1 the Quadi, a German nation, are warlike and powerful (*bellatrix et potens*); in 30.4.8 the Spartani and the Cretae are hounds (*canes*); in 31.9.5 the Taifali, a Gothic people, living near the river Danube, are a shameful folk (*gens turpis*); in 31.16.3 the Goths are a warlike and brave people (*bellicosi et fortes*), when they mix with Huns and Alans.

In his narration, Ammianus uses frequently the term *barbari* for the Germanic tribes, the Huns, the Halans and the other savage tribes. The term *barbari* was originally a Greek term. For the Greeks, the barbarians were all those who did not speak Greek. After the Persian Wars (544-445 BC.) the term which was used especially of the Medes and Persians, also gained the connotation of "brutal, uncultivated". The Romans applied the word to foreigners in general and to Persians in particular. After the Augustan age, they used this word for any hostile people, especially the German tribes. In late antiquity the term included all those who were not citizens of the Roman state. In his use of this term for the foreign tribes, Ammianus has followed Greek-Roman tradition, only with one change: He has not used the term *barbari* for the Persians (Ensslin 1963: 33). He makes impartial references to the Persians and he is free from angry feelings against them (Laistner 1963: 145-146). Why he avoids calling the Persians "barbarians", although he served on the emperor Julian's final campaign against the Persians? According to Usher, Ammianus implies their equality to Rome (Usher 1995: 74). Because the vast Persian empire was the only rival to Rome in size, power, and administrative complexity (Rohrbacher 2002: 207). Mellor says that Ammianus

depicted the Persians with respect, since the historian was an easterner himself (Mellor 1999: 124).

Finally, Ammianus uses ethnographical digressions in his work, in order to warn the Romans about military skills of their enemies and rivals, and about the danger which comes from them. For this purpose he mentions their physical features, characters, habits, customs and military skills. He comments not only on the negative qualities of foreign tribes, but on their positive aspects also. Following the traditional classical ethnographers and historians, he makes some positive comments about other nations, in order to criticise his own society. In his description of the military skills of foreign tribes, he frequently uses the same adjectives and noun phrases such as terrible (*terribilis*), violent warriors (*acerrimi bellatores*), warlike (*pugnatrix* or *pugnax*), savage (*trux* or *ferus*), powerful (*potens* or *potentissimus*). Although he uses these adjectives also for the Persians, and his description of the Persians suits to the term *barbari* of Greek-Roman tradition, why he leaves them out of this term? Apart from his eastern identity, its more plausible explanation is that in his opinion, because of its greatness and importance in the ancient world after the Roman Empire, the ancient Persian civilisation, and the Persian kingdom has been set apart from other tribes in late antiquity.

Ammianus Marcellinus ve Tarih Eserindeki Yabancı Kavimlerle İlgili Betimleri

Ammianus Marcellinus (İ.S. 330-395) antik çağın pagan tarih yazarlarının sonuncusudur. Aslen Grek olmakla birlikte, Suriye'de Antiochia kentinde doğmuştur. Varlıklı bir ailenin çocuğu olduğu sanılan Ammianus, İmparator Julianus'un ordusunda başladığı hizmetini uzun yıllar sürdürdüktен sonra, İ.S. 378'de Roma'ya yerleşmiş ve tarih eserini Latince olarak yazmaya başlamıştı. Anadili Grekçe olduğu halde, neden eserini Latince olarak yazdığını sorusuna kesin bir yanıt bulunamasa da, bu konuda bazı görüşler ileri sürülebilmektedir: İlkın Latince, tarihçinin doğduğu kent olan Antiochia'da bilinen ve konuşulan bir dildi; ikinci olarak Ammianus Roma halkı için yazıyordu ve eserinin, Roma ordularının başarılarını ve başarısızlıklarını anlattığı bölümlerde ayırdına varılan Roma'ya karşı duyduğu vatanseverlik, eserini Latince olarak yazmasının sebebi olarak gösterilir. Ammianus tarih eseri *Res Gestae*'de yaklaşık üç yüzyıllık bir zaman diliminin olaylarını - İmparator Nerva'nın İ.S. 96'da tahta çıkışından, İmparator Valens'in İ.S. 378'de Vizigotlara karşı yaptığı savaşta ölümüne kadar - otuz bir kitapta anlatmıştır. Eserin ilk on üç kitabı kaybolmuş olup günümüzde İ.S. 353'den 378'e kadar olanların anlatıldığı 14-31. kitaplar ulaşmıştır.

Ammianus sadece politik ve diplomatik bir tarih yazmamıştır. Eserinde Roma ile politik ve askeri ilişkiler içinde olan yabancı halkların ülkelerinden, yaşam koşullarından, tarihlerinden, gelenek ve göreneklerinden de söz etmiştir. Bu amaçla, eserin esas konusuyla doğrudan bağlantılı olmayan, konuya yandan sokulan konu dışı anlatımlara (*digressio*) yer vermiştir. Onun eserinde, yabancı halklarla ilgili etnografik bilgilerin verildiği başlıca altı adet konu dışı anlatım (*digressio*) bulunmaktadır: 14.4'te Saraceni kavmi anlatılmaktadır; 15.9-12'de Gallia halklarından söz edilir; 22.8'de Pontus halkları anlatılmaktadır; 23.6 Pers krallığına ve Persia'da yaşayan halklara ayrılmıştır; 27.4'te Thracia'nın altı eyaleti ve her birinde yaşayan halklar anlatılmıştır; 31.2'de ise Asia Scythia'sı halklarından Hunlar ve Alanlar ele alınmaktadır.

Konu dışı anlatımlardan başka, Ammianus Roma ordularının başarılarını ya da başarısızlıklarını anlattığı bölümlerde de yabancı halklarla ilgili nitelemlerde ve betimlemelerde bulunmuştur. Örnek vermek gerekirse, 16.12.47'de Alamanni kavmi, 19.2.3'de Segestani kavmi, 22.7.8'de Gothlar, 27.5.6'da

Greuthungi kavmi, 27.8.5'te Attacotti kavmi, 29.5.23'te Dardanialilar, 29.6.1'de Quadi kavmi, 30.4.8'de Spartalilar ve Giritliler, 31.9.5'te bir Goth kavmi olan Taifali ve 31.16.3'te Gothlarla ilgili nitelemeler bulunmaktadır. Bütün bu nitelemelerden ve betimlemelerden başka, Ammianus'un, German kavimleri, Hunlar, Alanlar ve diğer zalm kavimler için *barbari* kelimesini çok sık kullanırken, aynı terimi Persler için hiç kullanmadığı görülmektedir. Bunun neden olduğu konusunda bilim adamları tarafından bazı görüşler ileri sürülmüştür. Bir görüşe göre, Ammianus Pers krallığını büyülük, güç ve idari açıdan Roma'nın rakibi olarak gördüğünden, barbar kelimesini onlar için kullanmamıştır. Bir başka görüşe göre ise, Ammianus'un kendisi de doğulu olduğu için, Perslerle ilgili betimlemelerinde onlara saygılı davranmaktadır.

Sonuç olarak, Ammianus'un gerek konu dışı anlatımları sırasında, gerekse Romalıların yabancı halklarla yaptıkları savaşlardaki başarı ve başarısızlıklarını anlatırken, bu halkların askeri güç ve yeteneklerini belirtmek için şu sıfat ya da sıfat tamlamalarını sıklıkla kullandığı görülmektedir: Korkunç (*terribilis*), çok çetin savaşçılar (*acerrimi bellatores*), kavga düşkünlü (*pugnatrix* ya da *pugnax*), yabanıl, acımasız (*trux* ya da *ferus*), güçlü ya da çok güçlü (*potens* ya da *potentissimus*). Bu sıfatları Persler için de kullanmakla birlikte, ve Perslerle ilgili betimlemeleri Grek-Roma geleneğinin *barbari* tanımına uymakla birlikte, Persler için *barbari* kelimesini niçin kullanmadığı sorusuna yanıt olarak, Ammianus'un doğulu kimliğinden başka, eski Pers uygarlığının ve Pers krallığının, antik dünyada Roma İmparatorluğundan sonra gelen büyülüğu ve önemi sebebiyle, tarihçinin kendisi tarafından geç antik dönemin diğer halklarından ayrı tutulmuş olduğunu söylemek daha kabul edilebilir bir açıklama olacaktır.

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