

Ammianus Marcellinus' Historical Conception

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Abstract: Christianity crashed with Ammianus Marcellinus' traditional Roman values during the crisis of the 4th century, while the empire slowly strolled to its end. This paper explores the latent factors that had shaped the paganistic historian's conception, his ideal as well as his position in the throes of the change. This paper aims at rediscovering the long-neglected historian who stood for such a critical era, which is beneficial to scholars to understand this topic deeper. By employing 11 articles searched from Google Scholar, this research finally drew the conclusion that the historian had been way beyond his era by his truthful narration and pragmatic approach.

1. Introduction

It is believed that Ammianus Marcellinus wrote Roman history between 380 and 383 ADS after much hardship traveling by land and taking his way to the ancient battlefield at Thrace before finally, in 383 ADS, making his way to the city of Rome [1]. Noted as a peregrinus, he was thus propelled to seek refuge from the nobility [2]. At the same time, upon the harsh attack of Christian historiography and the great pressure in the late Roman empire, moral distress has pervaded Latin historiography, frequently shown as dissatisfaction with imperial politics and a flashback to the glory of the past. As an avid part of it, Ammianus attached great importance to the morality carried out by specific historical incidents. He emphasized the moral role played by the political figures under the gods of fate while seeking to identify himself with the society of his time.

Therefore, this paper aims to discuss how Ammianus Marcellinus expressed, through the gigantic pounds of Christian historiography and the turbulence of the late empire, his ideal for the revival of paganism and resurrection of classical Rome. This research also ventures to signify the importance of the long-underestimated classical historiographer; it would reveal his position in the blending of Hellenic and Rome culture, which later served as the everlasting classical tradition that was rooted deep down into the European civilization.

During the past thirty years, researchers have attached importance to classical Rome historiographies again. Books and symposiums containing diverse niches such as ethnology, geography, and natural sciences had emphasized Ammianus' study of the domestic and international environment, the characteristics of historical works, and the objectivity of historiography. In the meantime, Ammianus has gained popularity in the far East: after the consecutive publishment of commentary articles, the current collection composed by Ye Min in the last century was regarded as the most conclusive monograph published in Chinese. The monograph discusses in detail the historical status, tradition, structural features, historical concept, and historical value of Ammianus.

This paper takes Ammianus Marcellinus, Roman antiquity, historical conception, Paganism, and Christianity as the keywords, and has been selected on Google Scholar for articles from the year 2000.

2. Ammianus Marcellinus' life, ideals, and restrictions

This paper will mainly focus on three parts: "Ammianus Marcellinus' identity, writing features, and historical background that influenced his writing", "Ammianus' participation in the imperial system through compiling the history", and "Ammianus' ideal passed on through his historiography". Papers about Ammianus Marcellinus can be seen in Table.1.

Table.1. Analysis of 11 papers of Ammianus Marcellinus

No. of papers	Ammianus Marcellinus' Historical Conception	References
7	Ammianus Marcellinus' identity, writing features, and historical background that influenced his writing	[3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [8], [9]
3	Ammianus' participation in the imperial system through compiling the history	[10], [11], [12]
3	Ammianus' ideal passed on through his historiography	[10], [12], [13]

2.1 Ammianus Marcellinus' identity, writing features, and historical background that influenced his writing

The three most salient facts about Ammianus are his Hellenistic identity, his social class as a military nobility, and his pagan identity [3].

First, although he was a native Hellenic and had a great sense of identity with his own culture, his homeland was not Rome but Antioch. This is highly relevant to the injustice he later suffered in the city when he wrote his Roman history: he traveled a long way to a once-glorious town, only to find the nobility already immersed in pleasure and unconcerned with the political affairs, as he himself was even cast out during the famine in the city of Rome (384 A.D.). It was not only because the social trend of the time had already sped away to hedonism, but also because he was non-native and did not have a solid social status over there [4].

Moreover, he joined the army as soon as he reached adulthood, holding the position of Protector Domesticus, and had since fought with the army for decades [5]. His familial background made him acquire spoken and written Latin only used in the army and at court and gave him access to first-hand accounts at a relatively young age. His position as a senior general in the army also allowed him to understand and reflect on the full picture of the battles [6].

In addition, a rather important point lies in his pagan identity. Since the third century A.D., at the moment when classical doctrine and Greek tradition were in ruins, it was through his praises of the ideal monarch Julian and his criticism of the status quo that Ammianus revived the classical tradition to a certain extent by embodying a conscience of moral distress.

As the most preeminent paganistic historian of the time, Ammianus's life experiences were also influential in his written history: Firstly, his Hellenistic features were presented in Latin texts, though sometimes criticized by later generations because Latin was not his native language, but rather an acquired one especially in armies [7]. In contrast to Tacitus' fluency, Ammianus' use of Latin is distinctly Hellenistic; it does not always conform to the Latin writing tradition and is sometimes commented as obscure. However, this reflects even more of his purpose in writing histories in Latin: not only because he wished to take up the historical tradition of Tacitus in order to break the focus of Roman historians in recent centuries on trivial matters, but also for the practical reason that he had settled in Rome by the time and needed to write in Latin to meet the linguistic needs of his Roman readers [8]. Subsequently, his naturalistic and dramatic writing style is also more profound than that of other Latin historians such as Tacitus. He does not speculate on the psychology of an emperor but reflects historical details with the utmost truthfulness. He is also willing to exaggerate: his diction is realistic and sometimes pompous, closely related to his long years of campaigning and his first-hand experience with the cruelty and uncertainty of war [9]. From the current historical point of view, the truthfulness of Ammianus could have therefore gained more popularity than the inclusion of subjective elements in others' versions.

2.2 Ammianus' participation in the imperial system through compiling the history

The 4th century was an important transition in terms of the historical development of historiography. While the empire was on a continuous loss of a strong military and legal system under continuous battles, classical historians were even forced into a difficult state. The crisis was marked by the removal of the altar of victory and the battle of Frigidus when the conflict between Christianity and classical intellects peaked [10]. Under these circumstances, Julian vigorously promoted Latin culture while the

latter flourished again consequently. Paganistic values had never surrendered to Christianity which, at that time, took hold of most of the power during this era of changes. Ammianus Marcellinus, the classical historian, had therefore fulfilled his ambition to convey his ideal about social politics by compiling Roman history and in this way, actively participating in social politics and promoting classical revival.

At the same time, the history stretching over hundreds of years makes Ammianus inclined to reflect on history with a vision of morality. His courage in judging the role of various figures, and his insight into the influence of various aspects of social life added to his writing with a dialectical dimension. His understanding of fate is somehow pessimistic: he hoped to embody his judgment of historical figures under the guidance of the unknown destiny, and value them when they conform to or fight against the oracles and omens [11]. But this does not hinder the fact that his prediction of the future is optimistic: though experiencing the crises and wars at the end of the Empire and being expelled from the city of Athens, he still looked forward to the revival of Rome. It was by his recasting of Roman glories through moral exhortation, and his calling upon another faithful emperor that he conveyed his political and religious ambitions [12].

2.3 Ammianus' ideal passed on through his historiography

From the 1960s on, historians had stressed the reconciliation between Christianity and Roman classics. The traditional classical literature, arts, public festivals, and rituals were part of the shared cultural heritage that Christianity gradually absorbed from classical culture, and through which Christianity gradually molded itself [10]. Therefore, Christianity could get rid of its position as a complete counteractive power towards classical Roman culture, since the two factors were in fact not polarized but integrated in a dynamic way [13].

One of the most significant tendencies of Roman antiquity implies that Rome and Greek culture are intrinsically homogenized. This is exhibited in all those magnificent constructions pervading Romans' lives inspired directly by Hellenistic worldviews, and also in the paganistic histories by which the Latin historians essentially exhibited a myriad of ideas based on Hellenic philosophy and theology [12].

Ammianus, as the representative paganistic historian of Roman antiquity, preserved the counterattack to the monistic Christian narratives. Despite the strong fatalism, the prevailing psychology of the historians at that time, he pierced deep into omens and oracles as well as details of a specific event that is of significant realistic value, as what a historian drenched in both politics and military could exert. His praise for the heroes and his concern for the personnels preserved inheritances of the classical values, which altogether served as a source of the later Renaissance and Enlightenment.

3. Conclusions

It is generally accepted that one could hardly go beyond the limitations of his historical background. When referring to Ammianus Marcellinus, his emphasis on the role of Destiny in the historical text as a moral admonition was an expression of his faith in the revival of Rome, but he failed to realize that the historical pattern of development was a not cyclic one. After the crisis of the third century and the Goths invasion, the polytheism of the empire had long since fallen into decline with the weakening of the upper classes. Since those upper classes indulging in pleasure were clearly not able to quench the decline, the perdition of polytheism was almost inevitable.

However, it is not supportive to conclude that the historian's interpretation was restricted by his era since he had presented his written text in an especially pragmatic historical conception that could be traced back to Hellenic and Roman traditions; he also carried out his version of interpretation in an elaborated, dialectical narrative based on his clear understanding of the view of religious matters. It was through all these approaches did he successfully participate in national affairs to convey his political ideals; he therefore refreshed and revitalized the classical values by perfecting his narration, despite the overwhelming voice of the society. And it is to be hoped that in this century, multiple perspectives would be employed; these should go beyond historical and textual analysis and should

include more diversified niches such as religion, geography, geopolitics, and so on, as to better analyze his position in the reception of Greco-Roman classical culture.

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