

Digressions in Classical Historiography

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Volume 150

Digressions in Classical Historiography



Edited by
Mario Baumann and Vasileios Liotsakis

DE GRUYTER

Free access to the e-book version of this publication was made possible by the 13 institutions that supported the open access transformation Purchase to Open Pilot in collaboration with Jisc.

ISBN 978-3-11-132075-5
e-ISBN (PDF) 978-3-11-132090-8
e-ISBN (EPUB) 978-3-11-132115-8
ISSN 1868-4785
DOI <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111320908>



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Library of Congress Control Number: 2024930735

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

© 2024 with the author(s), editing © 2024 Mario Baumann and Vasileios Liotsakis, published by Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston.
This book is published with open access at www.degruyter.com.
Editorial Office: Alessia Ferreccio and Katerina Zianna
Logo: Christopher Schneider, Laufen
Printing and binding: CPI books GmbH, Leck

www.degruyter.com

Contents

Preface — V

Mario Baumann and Vasileios Liotsakis

Introduction — 1

Ioannis M. Konstantakos

Digressive Anecdotes, Narrative Excursus and Historical Thought in Herodotus — 11

Vassiliki Pothou

“I Have Written about It and Have Made This Digression from My Account ...”: Thucydides’ Digressions and Their Relation to the Main Work — 43

Antonio Ignacio Molina Marín

Emulating Herodotus: Digressions in the First Generation of Alexander Historians — 73

Nikos Miltsios

Polybius’ *Histories*: No Room for Digressions? — 93

Mario Baumann

Why Charondas Taught the Thurians How to Read and Write, or: Digression and Narration in Diodorus’ *Bibliothēke* — 111

Christina S. Kraus

Going in Circles: Digressive Behavior in Caesar, *BC* 2.23–44 — 131

Edwin Shaw

Expansion, Heterogeneity and Method in Sallust’s Digressions — 151

Kyle Khellaf

Inglorious History and the Tacitean Digression — 183

Vasileios Liotsakis

Digressions as Meta-Literary Markers and Narrative Milestones in Arrian’s *Anabasis of Alexander* — 223

VIII — Contents

Mads Ortving Lindholmer

Digressions and the Fall of the Republic in Cassius Dio — 241

Chrysanthos S. Chrysanthou

Digressions in Herodian's *History of the Empire* — 273

Michael Hanaghan

Ammianus' Digressions and their Narrative Impact — 309

List of Contributors — 329

Index Locorum — 333

Index Nominum et Rerum — 353

Michael Hanaghan

Ammianus' Digressions and their Narrative Impact

Abstract: Ammianus' *Res Gestae* contains some thirty-two digressions. These vary considerably in length and content. This chapter examines the narrative impact of four of these digressions, namely Julian's Thracian campaign (22.8.1–48), the Persian pearls (23.6.85–88), the tragedian Phrynichus (28.1.2–5), and the bissextile day (26.1.7–14). These digressions suggest alternate histories, foreshadow plot developments, engage in metaliterary reflections on the narrative, and develop coded polemics, all the while providing powerful symbols for understanding the motivations and challenges of the leaders of the Roman empire in the fourth century. Each digression is directly connected to the main text, situated within a network of digressions, as they reflect the history and historical vantage point of Ammianus' age, and provide ample scope for metaphorical, allusive, narratological, and political implications.

Keywords: Ammianus Marcellinus, Late Antiquity, Historiography, Emperor Julian, Persia

1 Introduction

Ammianus' *Res Gestae* abounds with digressions, some thirty-two in total, ranging from the very small, an exceedingly brief digression on atoms, to the vast description of the Persian empire or the city of Rome.¹ The language that Ammianus uses to introduce his digressions and then return to the main narrative provides an indication of the aims of each digression, how Ammianus understood the relationship between his digressions and the narrative, and the principles that shaped their composition. These introductory remarks vary considerably, but key *topoi* recur. Ammianus often cites the timeliness (*tempestivum*, *tempus adest*) of embarking on a specific digression or the suitability (*convenit*)

¹ Amm. Marc. 26.1.2; 23.6.1–84; 14.6.3–25. The exact number depends on the definition of what constitutes a digression, for discussion of which see below.

of doing so.² Typically the digressions' function is labelled as either explanatory or descriptive.³ Their length is short, as Ammianus hastens to return to the main narrative, unless the importance of the subject matter demands a longer treatment. This importance is rarely intrinsic to the subject matter at hand, but relative to the main narrative. Digressions may begin at the main narrative, but by the time they end, Ammianus may have found himself some way removed (*evectus longius*) requiring him to retrace his steps to pick up where he left off.⁴ Rather than separate, wholly contained entities, Ammianus' digressions may be better understood as asides, akin to dramatic soliloquies, in which Ammianus provides information to the reader to help them understand the primary narrative, directly, by for example, detailing the geography of Gaul or Persia, or indirectly, by suggesting narrative lines that the text will follow.⁵ The same scene may have both effects; Ammianus' description of Gaul both informs the reader as to what Gaul was like during the period of Ammianus' narrative and indicates through its sustained focus on Gaul that this part of the Roman empire will be important for the narrative that follows (and indeed much of the action of book sixteen takes place in Gaul).⁶

This chapter examines the impact that Ammianus' asides have on his main narrative, focusing on four case studies: Julian's Thracian campaign (22.8.1–48), the Persian pearls (23.6.85–88), the tragedian Phrynichus (28.1.2–5), and the bissextile day (26.1.7–14) to reflect the breadth and depth of Ammianus' use of digressions to inform his narrative. These digressions suggest alternate histories, foreshadow plot developments, engage in metaliterary reflections on the narrative, and develop coded polemics, all the while providing powerful symbols for understanding the motivations and challenges of the leaders of the Roman empire in the fourth century. Each digression is directly connected to the main text, situated within a network of digressions, as they reflect the history and historical vantage point of Ammianus' age, and provide ample scope for metaphorical, allusive, narratological, and political implications.

² Amm. Marc. 14.8.1: *opportunum*; 15.9.2: *tempestivum*; 17.4.2: *tempestivum*; 17.7.9: *adesse tempus existimo*; 21.10.3: *conveniet*; 22.8.1: *adpositum est, ut existimo, tempus*; 22.14.7: *conveniet*; 27.4.1: *convenit*.

³ 14.4.3: *expediam*; 14.6.3: *perstringam*; 15.9.2: *ostendere*; 19.4.2: *explicabo*; 20.11.26: *expositio* [...] *ostendet*; 21.10.3: *ostendi*; 22.8.1: *monstrare*; 22.14.7: *expediri*; 23.4.1: *monstrare*; 23.6.1: *monstrare*.

⁴ Amm. Marc. 22.16.24. Emmett 1983, 44 shows that Ammianus' conception of length cannot be equated with his conception of completeness, and so his reference to his lengthy departure in this excursion does not contradict his use of *strictim* i.e. 'summarily' to introduce the digression.

⁵ Amm. Marc. 15.9.2–12.6.

⁶ Sundwall 1996, 626.

Traditional approaches to these scenes underscored their supposed lack of importance, factual inaccuracies, and failure to have much bearing on Ammianus' main narrative history.⁷ In 1970 Alexander Demandt recognised the narrative impact of the eclipse digression in book 23, noting the prophetic relevancy of the eclipse occurring immediately prior Julian's rise to the position of sole Augustus, despite the fact that no visible eclipse actually occurred at this point in history.⁸ His study prompted renewed interest in Ammianus' digressions,⁹ including in Sabbah's 1978 monograph *L' Methode d' Ammien* and Barnes' 1998 monograph *Ammianus and the Representation of Historical Reality*.¹⁰ Barnes identified thirty-two 'formal digressions' using the litmus test that such digressions must have either introductory or transitional remarks.¹¹ Oddly, Barnes' references to Ammianus' text routinely excludes these framing remarks from the text of the digression proper (which is all the more curious, given Barnes' definition effectively prioritises Ammianus' framing of the digressions). For Barnes, their presence in Ammianus' text was unprecedented for a Roman historian, no other author writing in Latin came close to the "number, scale or variety of those [digressions] offered by Ammianus, nor [to] displaying his range of erudition" through his digressions.

Barnes' focus however remained Ammianus' representation of history rather than his narrative. Thus, for Barnes the eclipse digression was mere 'imaginative fiction'; Ammianus had been led astray from the historian's true purpose by an unforgiveable literary dalliance.¹² Such an approach devalues Ammianus' narrative (rather than the history it purports) and inevitably ends up judging Ammianus' work by modern historiographical standards.

Perhaps if the eclipse scene was the only digression to impact the narrative, or reveal Ammianus' literary proclivities, Barnes' diminishing of their narrative

7 E.g. Rolfe 1936, vii. For a discussion of the traditional approach to Ammianus' digressions see Den Hengst 2010, 236.

8 Demandt 1970, 492 ff. For the absence of a visible eclipse at this point in history see Hanaghan 2018, 127–130. Cf. a similar chronological distortion for narrative purposes in Ammianus' account of the great tsunami at Amm. Marc. 26.10.15–19 for which see Kelly 2012, 142.

9 Emmett 1972. See also Emmett 1981, 15–33 and Emmett 1983, 42–53.

10 Sabbah 1978, 595–596 includes Ammianus' digressions in a long list of textual features which suggest meaning and [...] retrouvent une utilité et même une nécessité fonctionnelle : celle de documents très élaborés, d'autant plus efficaces qu'ils sont plus stylisés. "find a usefulness and even a functional necessity: that of very elaborate documents, all the more effective as they are more stylized." Barnes 1998, 32–42 listed formal excursus as a key component of Ammianus' 'narrative blocks'.

11 Barnes 1998, 222–224.

12 Barnes 1998, 106, for which see Den Boeft *et al.* 1987, 22–51, and Hanaghan 2018, 127–130.

contribution might have gained more traction. Instead, literary approaches to Ammianus' digressions have come to dominate scholarly debate. Vergin's monograph length study of Ammianus' geographical digressions, for example, emphatically linked the literary and narrative importance of the digressions to Ammianus' conception of historiography.¹³ For Vergin this demanded a reconsideration of the limitations of the language of digression, which implicitly — to some extent at least — works against the consideration of digressions as bound to the main narrative in contextually meaningful ways.¹⁴

Not all of Vergin's interpretations however met with scholarly acceptance of the supposed narrative significance of some of Ammianus' digressions. For example, Vergin argued that Ammianus' depiction of the Rhine's violence reflects the nature of the barbarians who live by its shore.¹⁵ Given that the link between topography and ethnography is well established in historiography, such a claim was likely to convince the interpretative community of its merits. Vergin, however, also argued that the description of the Rhine flowing into Lake Constance was a metaphor for the barbarian threat to the Roman empire, embodied by the static lake. Den Hengst, in his review of Vergin's monograph, considered both interpretations, accepting the former, and rejecting the latter.¹⁶ For Den Hengst, the latter claim was 'completely arbitrary'.¹⁷ In critiquing Vergin's interpretations of the symbolic and narrative importance of the Rhine and Lake Constance, Den Hengst implied a standard by which interpretations of narrative importance of Ammianus' digressions might be judged, namely they needed to make meaningful connections between the digression in question and generic precedents or uncover and interpret significant intratextual or intertextual allusions. This standard is reflected in Den Hengst's analysis of Ammianus' 'scientific' digressions which allowed for their ability to embellish and structure the narrative and in the work of other scholars;¹⁸ Kelly's influential *Ammianus: the Allusive Historian* for example convincingly showed Sallustian allusions energised Ammianus' moral critics in his second Rome digression, and so clearly established the literary significance of the moralising function of the digression.¹⁹ Similarly, Ross' *Ammianus' Julian. Narrative and genre in the Res Gestae* explored the complexities of Ammianus' narrative techniques and

¹³ Vergin 2013, 12–18.

¹⁴ Vergin 2013, 18.

¹⁵ Vergin 2013, 75–76.

¹⁶ Den Hengst 2013.

¹⁷ Den Hengst 2013.

¹⁸ Den Hengst 2010, 236 ff.

¹⁹ Kelly 2008, 206–208.

their relation to the historiographical tradition, including in his digressions.²⁰ In addition to these monograph length literary studies, various article length studies have examined the narrative impact of individual digressions and demonstrated the limits of historicising Ammianus' claims.²¹

Not all scholars are as accepting as Vergin or even Den Hengst of the narrative potential of Ammianus' digressions. Feraco, in both his detailed, monograph length study of Ammianus' Persian digression and his monography survey of several of Ammianus' geographic and ethnographic digressions accepted that since digressions are well established in the historiographical tradition, they deserved to be read within a wider context, even if their connection to the main narrative remained relatively weak.²² This approach has garnered some support,²³ but in recognising the narrative capacity of Ammianus' digressions, Feraco lit upon the major hermeneutic challenge of interpreting Ammianus' digressions. Each reader can (and must) determine for themselves to what extent a digression responds to the main narrative. Any determination about the narrative resonance of any of Ammianus' digressions is necessarily an act of interpretation, an attempt to make meaning from the text which is not explicit. The reward for navigating these interpretative dangers is a far richer understanding of the text, certainly a far richer understanding of Ammianus' digressions, and his skill as an author.

2 Julian's imaginary Thracian campaign

In book twenty-two, shortly after Julian becomes sole emperor, Ammianus provides a description of the coast of Thrace, the Hellespont, and the Black Sea. Drijvers analysed this digression in detail, showing that Ammianus' geographical claims are routinely wrong and demonstrating that Ammianus' sources almost certainly included Dionysius' poem.²⁴ At the end of his analysis, Drijvers called for primary consideration of the digression as "a piece of literature."²⁵ This section takes up Drijver's call, extending his analysis of the point of the

²⁰ Ross 2016, 184–195.

²¹ E.g. Sundwall 1996, 619–641; Drijvers 1998, 268–278; Kelly 2012, 141 ff.; Burgersdijk 2016, 111–132; Hanaghan 2017, 445–457.

²² Feraco 2004; 2011.

²³ Merrils 2013, 624.

²⁴ Drijvers 1998, 268–278.

²⁵ Drijvers 1998, 278.

digression beyond Ammianus “[intention] to honour Julian and to demonstrate that his influence went beyond the frontiers of the Empire.”²⁶

Ammianus introduces the digression by claiming his description is derived from reading and autopsy (Amm. Marc. 22.8.1):

Adpositum est, ut existimo, tempus ad has partes nos occasione magni principis devolutos super Thraciarum extimis situque Pontici sinus visa vel lecta quaedam perspicua fide monstrare.

The time is at hand, I think, now that the occasion of a great prince has taken us there, for me to give a clear and honest account about the remote places of Thrace and the expanse of the Pontic Sea, partly from what I have seen and partly from what I have read.

These claims are historiographical tropes;²⁷ the former gestures at Ammianus’ use of sources in the account, but the latter is also worthy of real consideration. For Drijvers Ammianus’ claim to autopsy is “merely an agreeable fiction”, the logic being that if Ammianus had actually seen the area himself, then his description would not have included factual errors.²⁸ The difference between autoptic and panoptic claims is here important; Ammianus may well have glimpsed the region in his travels, at the very least Mount Athos in Macedonia.²⁹ Accurate knowledge of an entire region is hardly evidence for an absence of personal knowledge of parts of the area. The claim to autopsy is a clear reminder to the reader that Ammianus had travelled widely.³⁰

The description of the journey from the Aegean to the Pontus Euxinus is littered with literary references, especially to epic.³¹ The island of Tenedos is mentioned, where the Greeks hid while waiting for their men secreted in the wooden horse to unlock the gates of Troy,³² alongside Lemnos and Thasos, despite being dwarfed by their size.³³ Explicit references follow to (Amm. Marc. 22.8.3): “*Ilium*

²⁶ Drijvers 1998, 271.

²⁷ See Marincola 1997, 63 ff.

²⁸ Drijvers 1998, 275. For analysis of Ammianus’ claims to autopsy see especially Kelly 2008, 87–103. See also Kulikowski 2008, 57–60.

²⁹ Sundwall 1996, 623–624 argues that Ammianus’ autoptic claims relied in part on his extensive travel during his service as *protector domesticus* in the Roman army, noting that Ammianus “journeyed from Babylonia to Mauretania, Gaul to Kurdistan, and spent time in Egypt, the Black Sea region, Thrace, Cologne, Ctesiphon, Antioch, Laconia, Rome, and perhaps Constantinople.”

³⁰ Kelly 2008, 36.

³¹ Amm. Marc. 22.8.2 ff.

³² Virg. *Aen.* 2.21. Tenedos is approx. 38 km² while Lemnos is 476 km² and Thasos 380 km². For analysis of the references to Troy at Amm. Marc. 22.8.2 ff., see Feraco 2011, 170–171.

³³ Amm. Marc. 22.8.2.

heroicis casibus claram” “Ilium, famous for heroic disasters” and the city of Aenos “*qua diris auspiciis coepta moxque relicta ad Ausoniam veterem ductu numinum properavit Aeneas.*” “a city which Aeneas began under unfavourable auspices, but presently abandoned it and hastened on to ancient Ausonia under the guidance of the gods.” Ammianus progresses to where the Aegean narrows (Amm. Marc. 22.8.4) “*per Achillis Aiacisque sepulchra*” “alongside the tombs of Achilles and Ajax.” In addition to these references to epic, explicit allusions to the events of history and myth abound, including various Persian defeats.³⁴ This extended and detailed allusive tapestry of events, which draws so widely on events recalled by history and literature, amounts to an overt display of erudition. The catalogue of places and references make an accumulative impression on the reader, as to exactly how much Ammianus has in fact read, but the same could be said of almost any long, literary catalogue.³⁵

Consideration of an earlier scene in the main narrative provides a compelling reason for Ammianus' inclusion of this digression.³⁶ Prior to the inclusion of the digression, Ammianus notes that Julian repaired all the fortresses in Thrace and reinforced the troops along the Danubian frontier.³⁷ Some advisers made a suggestion (Amm. Marc. 22.7.8):

Quae cum ita divideret nihil segnius agi permittens, suadentibus proximis, ut adgrederetur propinquos Gothos saepe fallaces et perfidos, hostes quaerere se meliores aiebat: illis enim sufficere mercatores Galatas, per quos ubique sine condicionis discrimine venundantur.

When he [Julian] was arranging these affairs in this way, allowing no laziness in getting it done, his close advisers urged him to attack the neighbouring Goths, who were often deceitful and treacherous; but he said that he was looking for better enemies; that for the Goths the Galatian traders were enough, by whom they were offered for sale everywhere without distinction of rank.³⁸

This detail casts the Euxine Sea digression and its literary references in a different light. Ammianus effectively advertises this region as a compelling counter scenario for where Julian could have invaded instead of Persia. His various claims to factual knowledge about the geography of the area together press the

³⁴ Amm. Marc. 22.8.4 ff.

³⁵ On the role of Ammianus' digressions in displaying his *paideia* see Sánchez Vendramini 2016, 36–37.

³⁶ Den Boeft *et al.* 2009, 77 note the similarity of Ammianus' inclusion of interesting details in both excursus but otherwise do not link their interpretation of the two excursus.

³⁷ Amm. Marc. 22.7.1–7.

³⁸ For the network of slave trading that Julian refers to with this remark see Paoletta 2020, 47.

claim that Julian would have known the topography in some detail prior to this campaign — unlike in Persia, where the alien topography and conditions repeatedly provide stumbling blocks.³⁹ The litany of epic and historiographical references present Thrace, the Hellespont, and the Black Sea, as the site of epic narratives and pivotal historical victories, the kind of place suited to the ‘great emperor’ that Ammianus sees in Julian, his epic hero.⁴⁰ Shortly after the aside, Julian travels to Antioch, winters there, and then prepares to invade Persia.⁴¹ The suggestion of his advisers, and the prospect of conquest around the Euxine Sea dissipates as one of many alternative paths that history failed to take.

This interpretation, that the Thracian digression in book twenty-two dangles the prospect that Julian might have invaded there instead of Persia, is confirmed by the position of the second Thrace digression in book twenty-seven.⁴² In that book the digression appears immediately prior to Valens’ successful campaign against the Goths on the other side of the Danube, the very enemies in the same region that Julian’s advisers suggested to him in book twenty-two.⁴³ If only Julian had listened to his advisers, then Valens’ successes against the Goths could have been his, instead of his disastrous Persian campaign.

Clearly this digression has a major narrative implication in its creation of a counter-scenario — what could have been — if only Julian had listened to the sound advice of his confidants. The detailed catalogue of literary and historical events promoted Thrace and the Euxine Sea as a region that is conducive to the making of history and its celebration in literature. The contrast with Persia is acute. In the Persian digression Ammianus provides an account of how the Persian empire began, and then expanded, before suffering numerous defeats when it overextended.⁴⁴ Persia’s contests with Rome receives a brief mention, without specific details, that acknowledges that Rome and Persia were often equally matched, with each side enjoying moments of ascendancy over the other.⁴⁵ This equilibrium is more cautionary than might at first appear given that Ammianus’ claim is underpinned by the fact that no Roman army ever conquered Persia, and even those that won considerable gains, such as Septimius

³⁹ E.g. Amm. Marc. 24.1.11; 24.2.5; 24.8.7.

⁴⁰ For Ammianus’ reference to his Julianic books as akin to panegyric Amm. Marc. 16.1.1. For his conception of Julian as a ‘great emperor’ see e.g. Amm. Marc. 22.8.1: *magnus princeps*.

⁴¹ Amm. Marc. 22.9.2; 22.12.

⁴² Amm. Marc. 27.4.2–14.

⁴³ Amm. Marc. 27.5.1–10.

⁴⁴ Amm. Marc. 23.6.7–8.

⁴⁵ Amm. Marc. 23.6.9.

Severus or Galerius, ultimately failed to hold them, as the geopolitical situation returned to its equilibrium.

3 Persian pearls and Julian's quest for wealth (Amm. Marc. 23.6.85–88)

The longest digression in the extant books of Ammianus' *Res Gestae* occurs in book twenty-three where Ammianus describes Persia over the course of some three thousand, six hundred and eighty-four words. The length of this digression is certainly warranted; Persia has already featured substantially in the narrative, and continues to do in the remaining Julianic books and those that follow. At the end of the Persian digression, Ammianus describes the Persians' appearance, including their use of jewellery (Amm. Marc. 23.6.84): *armillis uti monilibusque aureis et gemmis, praecipue margaritis quibus abundant, adsuefacti post Lydiam victam et Croesum*. "To the use of golden armlets and neck-chains, gems, and especially pearls, of which they possess a great number, they first became accustomed after Lydia was defeated and Croesus." The Persian use of jewellery is symbolic of their wealth, especially their pearls, which Ammianus notes are in abundance.

Ammianus explicitly links this practice to their military conquests in Lydia against king Croesus. The link between pearls and conquest first appears in a brief anecdote in book twenty-two (Amm. Marc. 22.4.8):

notum est enim sub Maximiano Caesare vallo regis Persarum direpto gregarium quendam sacculum Parthicum, in quo erant margaritae, repertum proiectis imperitia gemmis abisse pellis nitore solo contentum.

For it is known that under Galerius, when a fortification of the Persian king was sacked, a common soldier found a Parthian purse with pearls in it, in ignorance of the valuable gems threw them away, and went off happy with just the shine of the leather.

The anecdote appears in Ammianus' account of the actions Julian took to reform the military, correcting their weak and greedy inclinations.⁴⁶ The actions of Galerius' soldier reflect his ignorance of wealth and subsequent lack of greed, a mere sixty years or so prior to Julian's reign. In both instances the Persian pearls are indicative of their wealth.

⁴⁶ Rohrbacher 2006, 122 speculates that this anecdote may have had an oral source.

At the end of the Persian digression, a second, much shorter, digression on pearls immediately follows (Amm. Marc. 23.6.85):

Restat ut super ortu lapidis huius pauca succinctius explicentur. apud Indos et Persas margaritae reperiuntur in testis marinis robustis et candidis permixtione roris anni tempore praestituto conceptae.

It remains for a few points to be explained about the origin of this gem. Among the Indians and the Persians pearls are found in strong, white sea-shells, which are conceived at a definite time of the year by being covered with ocean spray.

Ammianus specifically notes the pearls' abundance, and their great value, at least relative to the pearls found off the coast of Britain. At this point in the narrative Persian pearls stand metonymically (and synecdochally) for Persian wealth. An account of how pearls are formed follows, including how they are gathered (Amm. Marc. 23.6.87): *capturas autem difficiles et periculosas et amplitudines pretiorum illa efficit ratio*. "Their taking is difficult and dangerous, and their price is high." Given the close link in Ammianus' text between Persian wealth and its pearls, the description of how pearls are captured (*capturas*) reflects on how Persia (and all its wealth) may be taken.⁴⁷ Like the pearls, Persia is hidden away, in dangerous parts, that are too difficult to access, but the risks of going after Persia, like the risks run by a pearl fisherman, must be weighed against the vast reward, the ample wealth that such a conquest would entail, including from its many pearls.

At no point in the narrative does Ammianus outline Julian's purpose for invading Persia, but he does come close a couple of times. In Julian's necrologue Ammianus blames Constantine for inflaming the Persian situation, which is a clever albeit probably ineffective way of redirecting the blame placed on Julian.⁴⁸ A small anecdote in book twenty-three indicates that Julian was cognisant of Persia's wealth. His horse, Babylonius, is shot by a missile (Amm. Marc. 23.3.6):

[...] dum dolorum inpatiens volvitur, auro lapillisque ornamenta distincta conspersit. quo ostento laetior exclamavit plaudentibus proximis Babylona humi procidisse ornamentis omnibus spoliata.

⁴⁷ Devilliers 2002, 61 "les difficultés de leur [i.e. les perles] capture [...] préfigureraient les dangers de la campagne entreprise par Julien." "The difficulty of their capture [that is, the pearls] prefigures the dangers of the campaign embarked upon by Julian."

⁴⁸ Amm. Marc. 25.4.23.

While it rolled around in intolerable plain, it dispersed its ornaments, decorated with god and gems. At which sign Julian shouted aloud quite happily to bystanders' applause that Babylon had fallen to the ground stripped of all its ornaments.⁴⁹

The participle *spoliatam* suggest the *spolia* of a successful military campaign, which in turn implies that Julian anticipated that a successful invasion of Persia would bring great wealth to the Roman Empire, including presumably an abundance of pearls.

Ammianus' description of pearls both within and outside the pearl digression is a powerful narrative symbol, embodying the lure of wealth that is often a motivator for conquest. The failure of Julian to resist this temptation forms a direct contrast to the actions of Maximian's soldier, whose ignorance regarding the value of pearls, standing symbolically for the wealth of Persia, leads him to be happy with the more austere comfort of the Persian's leather purse. Like the Thracian digression, Ammianus' pearls provide a gripping, hypothetical counter-scenario, one in which Julian's invasion of Persia is not motivated by his desire for riches, a desire that ultimately leads him to make rash and ill-conceived decisions dooming the plight of his army and culminating in his death.

The significance of pearls in Ammianus' account likely ran deeper. Unfortunately, Ammianus' account of the beginning of Constantine's war against Persia is not extant, but an intriguing comment in his necrologue for Julian provides a fleeting indication as to how the war began (Amm. Marc. 25.4.23):

Et quoniam eum obtrectatores novos bellorum tumultus ad perniciem rei communis insimulant concitasse, sciant docente veritate perspicue, non Iulianum sed Constantinum ardore Parthicos succendisse, cum Metrodori mendacis avidius adquiescit, ut dudum rettulimus plene.

And since his [Julian's] critics allege that he stirred the panic of wars afresh to the endangerment of society, let them know clearly with the truth instructing them, that it was not Julian but Constantine who started the Persian fires, when he most greedily accepted the lies of Metrodorus, which we have previously relayed in full.

Pearls are not mentioned, but in a tenth century chronicle ascribed to Symeon, repeated verbatim in the eleventh century history of Cedrenus, Metrodorus' role is sketched out in some detail.⁵⁰ As Warmington relates, the famous philosopher Metrodorus journeyed to India, and during his travels he acquired 'precious stones and many pearls' (Sym. *Chron.* 88.4.4: λίθους τιμίους καὶ μαργαρίτας

⁴⁹ For the symbolism of the horse in the fourth century and its relation to victory (or defeat), see Moreau 2016, 335–360. For Jovian's reign and its representation see Drijvers 2018, 234–256.

⁵⁰ Wahlgren 2006, 107.

πολλοῦς) from the king of India as a gift for Constantine but, on his return to the Roman Empire, alleged that the precious cargo had been stolen by the Persians.⁵¹ Constantine, incensed at the news, wrote to the Persian king Sapor demanding that he release the gems, but Sapor demurred. This story places pearls at the very beginning of the Romano-Persian war of the early to mid-fourth century.

It is extremely improbable that Symeon had direct access to Ammianus' history (including the lost books) and so was simply paraphrasing Ammianus' remarks in the lost book that details the beginning of the Persian war. Ammianus' use of *avidius* to qualify Constantine's acceptance of Metrodorus' claims is however broadly consistent with the lure of wealth being Constantine's primary motivator in his account of how the war with Persia started, and given the emblematic role that pearls play in Ammianus' history, it would hardly be surprising if Ammianus' account aligned more or less with Symeon's. Indirect access through intermediary sources is more probable. As Treadgold shows, Ammianus' lost books were summarised in Greek by Eustathius of Epiphania at the beginning of the sixth century, which was used by John Malalas in the mid to late sixth century, and again by John of Antioch in the seventh century;⁵² however, this specific story of Metrodorus and the Persian pearls is not found in any extant source between Ammianus and Symeon. Since the episode is not found in Zonaras, it remains most likely, as Treadgold argues, that Symeon and Cedrenus drew this story from an earlier user of Ammianus' history, the compiler of the *Excerpta Salmasiana II* that Constantine gifted some pearls to the barbarians in the Danube.⁵³ It also remains possible of course, as Warmington speculates, that Eunapius' history included the episode, but its absence in Zosimus' account is a major (albeit not insurmountable) impediment to that argument, given Zosimus' generally critical attitude towards Constantine, one would expect that Zosimus would have included a story that reflected poorly on Constantine, even if the specifics of his redaction remain largely beyond scholarly appreciation since Eunapius' history survives only as fragments.⁵⁴ In any case, the possible presence (or absence) of the anecdote in Eunapius' history has no direct bearing on whether Symeon's story could well be a fair reflection of Ammianus' account of the role pearls played in the beginning of the Persian war. A further brief anecdote

51 Cf. Ced. 1.295.A. Warmington 1981, 464–465.

52 Treadgold 2019, 530–533.

53 Roberto 2005, 440 lists this fragment as being by John of Antioch, while Mariev 2008, 592 claims that it is spurious. For a detailed discussion of the methodological issues see Van Nuffelen 2012, 438–440.

54 Warmington 1981, 467–468.

in John Malalas' *Chronicon* for the year 329 provides a tantalising detail that offers some circumstantial support for the possibility that Ammianus linked the instigation of the Persian war to Constantine's desire for pearls and precious gems. In that entry John Malalas describes how Constantine attended a race with a diadem fashioned with pearls and precious stones, something which no Roman emperor before him had ever worn (*Chron.* 13.9).⁵⁵ Given that John Malalas had access to Ammianus' account, this story offers some support for the possibility that Ammianus alleged Constantine's desire for pearls and precious stones led him to trust in Metrodorus' lies and so start the war with Persia.

4 The bissextile day: Sacerdotal corruption (Amm. Marc. 26.1.7–14)

Towards the beginning of book twenty-six Ammianus explains Valentinian I's actions after hearing that the army had selected him to be the next emperor following the death of Jovian.⁵⁶ Arriving after receiving the army's summons, Valentinian refused to appear as it was a leap day, as such a day was considered inauspicious. An account of what a leap day is follows in what is one of Ammianus' more scientifically accurate digressions. Ammianus segues from the scientific discussion of the leap day to a brief history of pre-Augustan Rome (Amm. Marc. 26.1.12–13):

haec nondum extentis fusius regnis diu ignoravere Romani, perque saecula multa obscuris difficultatibus implicati, tunc magis errorum profunda caligine fluctuabant cum in sacerdotes potestatem transtulissent interkalandi, qui licenter gratificantes publicanorum vel litigantium commodis ad arbitrium suum subtrahebant tempora vel augebant. hocque ex coepto emerterunt alia plurima, quae fallebant, quorum meminisse nunc supervacuum puto. quibus abolitis Octavianus Augustus Graecos secutus hanc inconstantiam correctam turbatione composuit, spatiis duodecim mensium et sex horarum magna deliberatione collectis [...].

The Romans were long ignorant of all this, since their realm was not yet widely extended, and for many centuries they were involved in obscure difficulties; and they wandered in still deeper darkness of error when they gave over the power of intercalation to the priests, who lawlessly served the advantage of tax-collectors or of parties in litigation by arbitrarily subtracting or adding days. From this beginning many other errors arose, which I think

⁵⁵ Cf. *Epitome de Caesaribus* 41.14 which mentions the diadem but does not provide the details of its decoration.

⁵⁶ Amm. Marc. 26.1.7.

it superfluous to mention here. These were done away with by Octavian Augustus who, following the Greeks, corrected the confusion and brought order into this inconsistency by adopting after great deliberation the arrangement of twelve months and six hours.

Commentators have identified Ammianus' likely sources, including works by Plutarch that are no longer extant.⁵⁷ Of the works that are extant (and which are themselves also probably derived from Plutarch) several features in Ammianus' account stand out. While Augustus did make a minor change to the calendar, most credit the major reforms to the Roman calendar to Julius Caesar, not Augustus. This is unlikely to be a case of mistaken identity, or conflation, especially given Ammianus' apparent reticence to name Julius Caesar in the other extant works of his history.⁵⁸ More likely, the shift in credit from Caesar to Augustus enables Ammianus to draw a clear chronological line between the great confusion and corruption of Republican Rome, and the clarity and order of Augustus' principate and the imperial age that followed.⁵⁹

Scholars have long noted the complexities of some of Ammianus' implied criticisms. Barnes coined the term 'progressive insinuation' for how Ammianus asserts one point of view, and then provides the reader with evidence that undermines that initial assertion.⁶⁰ For example, Barnes cites Ammianus' portrayal of the actions of the bishop of Bezabde, who comes across as having collaborated with the Persians, despite Ammianus' ostensible denial of that rumour, while Kulikowski showed how book 31 counters the views of two influential contemporary Eastern sophists, Libanius and Themistius.⁶¹ Importantly, for our purposes, Den Hengst recognised how Ammianus' Egyptian digression "was diametrically opposed to the Christian representation of Egypt" and thus showed how what might appear as a relatively simple and innocuous factual description was in fact bound up in the religious and political zeitgeist of Ammianus' age.⁶² Uncovering these 'implied', 'coded' or 'hidden' polemics requires the reader of be aware of how the politics of Ammianus' age resonate throughout his work,

⁵⁷ Amm. Marc. 26.1.8–11. Den Boeft *et al.* 2008, 33–34 lists Ammianus' likely sources.

⁵⁸ Amm. Marc. 15.11.1 names Julius Caesar (using the epithet *dictator*) as one his sources for the digression on Gaul, for discussion of which see Sundwall 1996, 626.

⁵⁹ This is in keeping with his view of Roman history at Amm. Marc. 14.6.4, for this connection see Den Boeft *et al.* 2008, 32.

⁶⁰ Barnes 1998, 87–88. See Sabbah 1978, 414.

⁶¹ Kulikowski 2012, 91–93.

⁶² Den Hengst 2010, 258. Barnes 1993, 166, notes Ammianus' critical attitude towards Christianity "[...] a deep and insidious bias can be detected in Ammianus when he writes about Christianity. Ammianus does indeed make favourable remarks [...] but in virtually every case the favourable comment has the literary function of emphasising a criticism in the immediate context."

even as he remained (largely) very careful to avoid the kind of direct criticism that might alienate his readers or unleash contemporary political consequences.

With Ammianus' use of hidden polemics in mind, it is worth considering how Ammianus' criticism of sacerdotal corruption resonates in the broader context of his history, especially given Ammianus uses the word *sacerdos* (and for that matter *antistes*) to refer to both Christian and non-Christian priests.⁶³ This allows for the implication that Ammianus' criticism of Republican *sacerdotes* engaging in corrupt calendar fixing (*interkalendi*) reflects on the increasing role of ecclesiastical figures manipulating the Roman calendar when Ammianus was composing his history, in particular by increasing the number of religious holidays to mark saints' lives.⁶⁴ The phrase *ad arbitrium suum* speaks directly to the priests' overreach, especially given Ammianus only uses this phrase elsewhere for ill-conceived imperial decisions.⁶⁵ If the lesson of Republican Rome is remembered, involving priests in the formation of the calendar will lead to the chaos, confusion and discord of Republican Rome.

This interpretation cannot be proven, but it does provide a more compelling reason for Ammianus' inclusion of this digression. Ammianus' portrayal of Valens (and Valentinian I) includes a plethora of scenes that speak to his superstitions and stupidity, culminating in Ammianus' description of his death following a prophecy that he at first ignores and then ultimately becomes increasingly concerned with, as his death unfolds as predicted.⁶⁶ Valens decides not to appear on the leap day (Amm. Marc. 26.1.7):

Qui cum venisset accitus, inplendique negotii praesagiis, ut opinari dabatur, vel somniorum adsiduitate, nec videri die secundo nec prodire in medium voluit, bissextum vitans Februarii mensis tunc illuescens, quod aliquotiens rei Romanae fuisse dignorat infaustum.

After he had arrived, once summoned, owing to predictions of the business that needed to be completed, as was widely understood, or by frequent dreams, he did not want to be seen on the next day or come out into the open, avoiding the bissextile day of the month of February which appeared then, because he had discovered that it sometimes had been unlucky for the Roman state.

⁶³ E.g. Liberius whom Amm. Marc. 15.7.6–9 refers to as both *sacerdos* and *antistes*. Cf. Amm. Marc. 29.5.15 *Christiani ritus antistites*.

⁶⁴ Cf. Amm. Marc. 28.4.24 where he criticises Roman nobles who refuse to go out in public until they have consulted an astrological calendar. At Amm. Marc. 28.6.27 Ammianus specifically links the celebration of a Christian festal day to the failure of guards to perform their duties as they spent the entire evening in Church.

⁶⁵ Amm. Marc. 16.10.14.

⁶⁶ Amm. Marc. 31.14.8–9, discussed in detail by Hanaghan 2019, 242 ff.

Ammianus could have presented Valens' actions in a much more sympathetic light. Fixing the source of his concern would have made them more convincing, instead Valens' decision to remain out of sight is based on unspecified *praesagia* which might indicate genuine future knowledge, but here suggests a more general anxiety, as Valens is overwhelmed by the task at hand. Ammianus' use of the phrase *die secundo* (rather than an alternative, such as *die proximo*) may be read as simply indicating the next day, but the adjective *secundus*, especially when applied to conditions, may also mean 'favourable.'⁶⁷ That second meaning is consistent with the view that the first day of an emperor's reign was auspicious. Ammianus further weakens the legitimacy of Valens' decision to avoid an appearance, including the temporal adverb *aliquotiens* to diminish his belief that the bissextile day was unlucky.

5 Phrynichus' tragedy, a metaliterary reflection (Amm. Marc. 28.1.2–5)

At the beginning of book twenty-eight, Ammianus offers a metaliterary reflection on the challenge confronting him in the final books of the *Res Gestae*; the tale is necessarily bloody (*textu cruento*), as the Romans are repeatedly beaten, culminating in their decisive loss to the Goths at the battle of Adrianople.⁶⁸ The best that Ammianus can do is to be brief (*carptim, succincte*) selecting only those events that are worthy of recollection.⁶⁹ The reflection segues into a digression about the tragedian Phrynichus whose play about the fall of Miletus upset his audience (Amm. Marc. 28.1.4):

[...] *paulisperque iucunde auditus, cum cothurnatus stilus procederet lacrimosus, indignatione damnatus est populi arbitrati non consolandi gratia sed probrose monendi, quae pertulerat amabilis civitas, nullis auctorum adminiculis fulta, hos quoque dolores scaenicis adnumerasse fabulis insolenter.*

At first he was heard with pleasure, but as the sad story went on in too tragic a style, the people became angry and punished him, thinking that consolation was not his object but blame and reproach, when he had the bad taste to include among stage-plays a portrayal even of those sufferings which a well-beloved city had undergone, without receiving any support from its founders.

⁶⁷ LSJ. s.v. B. 3.

⁶⁸ Amm. Marc. 28.1.2.

⁶⁹ Amm. Marc. 28.1.2.

Badian impugned Ammianus' description of Phrynichus as "a rhetorical excursus that, within his narrative, seems to have little point," but others have been more attentive to the implied comparison between Ammianus and Phrynichus, which they have interpreted in a variety of ways, either as justifying Ammianus' fear lest he end up like Phrynichus, or proof of his courage in carrying on anyway.⁷⁰ The metaliterary force of this digression and its framing has eluded comment.

The framing acts as a defence for Ammianus' condensing of decades of history into the final four books (*carptim, succincte*) as he covers the last thirteen years or so (from ca 365–378) in four books (29–31) compared to the eight years of Julian's rise and reign covered in ten books (16–25).⁷¹ It also protects Ammianus from charges of omission, with the pre-emptive defence that what was omitted was not worth remembering. More importantly, the digression bears on Ammianus' purpose (at least, implied purpose) in writing the final books (which may well have been an extension, if the original history ended at book 25), not to express disapproval (*monendi probrose*) but offer some sense of consolation (*consolandi*).⁷² This points directly at Ammianus' nostalgic tone over these final books, as he mourns for the Rome that was, invariably remembering, like Tacitus, an ambiguously defined better time.⁷³ Lastly, Ammianus' criticism of Phrynichus is bound up with his conception of genre. Phrynichus' mistake was partly down to his decision to include such a tragic play among the presumably more frivolous plays of the theatre. Here Ammianus points tellingly at the triumphant arc of historiography, which in the Classical tradition, invariably recorded how the past led to the triumphant present. In these remarks Ammianus offers a compelling reason for his generic loneliness.⁷⁴ At the end of his history the Roman Empire has suffered one of its most horrific defeats in battle, including the death of thousands of irreplaceable veteran soldiers. One need not look forward to the fifth century to see that Ammianus was going to struggle to write a triumphant, secular (that is non ecclesiastical) history of his times.

⁷⁰ Badian 1996, 55. Fornara 1992, 424 considers the scene a mere topos. Matthews 1989, 209 denied any implied analogy between Ammianus and Phrynichus, interpreting the excursus "as a general illustration of the courage of a writer who dared to tell the truth." More positive interpretations may be found in Den Boeft 2007, 304–305, C. Kelly 2007, 286, and Den Boeft *et al.* 2011, 4–10.

⁷¹ Hanaghan 2019, 240–245.

⁷² For the structural break between books 25 and 26 see Sabbah 1978, viii–ix; Barnes 1981, 39–42; and more recently Kulikowski 2012, 88.

⁷³ Momigliano 2012, 421.

⁷⁴ Momigliano 1974, 1393–1407.

6 Conclusion

In his highly influential study of Late Antique literary aesthetics, Michael Roberts espoused the “detail of the compositional unit,” sometimes at the expense of the whole, as a defining feature of Late Antique literary aesthetics.⁷⁵ In an article length study involving Ammianus, Roberts noted the late Roman historian’s capacity to produce “a series of brilliantly eye-catching but discrete visual impressions, which in part by their very brilliance deter the reader from trying to piece together the individual scenes into a coherently ordered whole.”⁷⁶ Roberts firmly had Ammianus’ description of Constantius II’s *adventus* in mind, but the capacity for intricate details to mask the broader relevancy of a description is present to various extents in each of Ammianus’ digressions, all of which can be read and interpreted as isolated units, unconnected to the text that proceeds or that which follows. Indeed, in at least one translator’s case, Ammianus’ digressions were even redacted, presumably lest their glittering details distract the reader from the main narrative.⁷⁷ This approach fundamentally ignores Ammianus’ presentation of the digressions, which are never framed as mere distractions, but timely, important additions to the main narrative, directly connected in a series of complex ways, some explicit, others implicit. Reading Ammianus’ digressions as bound up with his narrative thus provides a far richer reading experience, a great appreciation of Ammianus’ purpose in including the digressions, and a crucial insight into his conception of the aims of historiography, to educate and engage the reader, rather than simply fill them with a linear narrative history of what happened.

This chapter has demonstrated how the narrative impact of four of Ammianus’ digressions may be assessed, ranging from one of his smaller digressions, his description of Persian pearls, to one of the longer digressions, his description of Thrace and the Euxine Sea. In all cases what may appear as minor scenes of limited, even esoteric detail offer tantalising depth to Ammianus’ narrative, from providing a compelling counter scenario where Julian invades Thrace instead of Persia and reaps the benefits of a successful campaign rather than suffer disastrous defeat, to enriching Ammianus’ characterisation of Valens, as a superstitious, hesitant ruler, ill-equipped for the business at hand.

75 Roberts 1989, 84.

76 Roberts 1988, 183.

77 Wallace-Hadrill and Hamilton 1986, for discussion of which see Den Hengst 2010, 237.

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