

ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE ROMAN DIGRESSIONS OF AMMIANUS MARCELLINUS*

Abstract: This article examines the content of Ammianus Marcellinus' Roman digressions, the form and intent of which have been a consistent subject of debate for scholars, from the perspective of ethnographic writing. It highlights Ammianus' comparison of the Romans of his day with those of the idealised past, as well as his unusual portrayal of the inhabitants of Rome as similar to the barbarian peoples described elsewhere in the *Res Gestae*. These aspects of Ammianus' portrayal of the Romans, it is argued, exemplify the changing nature of Roman identity in Late Antiquity and suggest that at least part of the reason Ammianus wrote the digressions was to articulate an idealised conception of Romanness.

Keywords: Ammianus Marcellinus, ethnography, digressions, Roman identity

Scholars have long puzzled over the purpose of the two Roman digressions found in Ammianus Marcellinus' *Res Gestae* (14.6.1–26; 28.4.8–31). Was Ammianus, wounded by his treatment in Rome,¹ offering earnest criticisms of the Romans, or was he alluding to staples of earlier satirical writing for his own playful purposes? Perhaps both? Most critics of the Roman digressions have tended to view them as satirical, with many favouring the position that Ammianus relied on Juvenal as a source for much of the digressions' subject matter.² But, while Ammianus likely drew on Juvenalian

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¹ Ammianus mentions in his first Roman digression that scholars, writers, and other adherents of the liberal arts were expelled from Rome in AD 383/4 because of a food shortage (Amm. Marc. 14.6.19). Many scholars have recognised this as a small, but important, autobiographical snippet, and several have maintained that Ammianus wrote the Roman digressions primarily out of pique at his banishment from Rome. For this interpretation see Rohrbacher (2007) 469; id. (2002) 28; Frakes (2000); Barnes (1990) 69; Matthews (1989) 13; Thompson (1947) 14; Seeck (1894) 1846. For those sceptical that Ammianus was among those expelled from the city in 383/4, see Brodka (2009) 18; Kelly (2008) 132–41; Sabbah (2003) 53; id. (1978) 125–6; Momigliano (1974) 1396 = (1980) I.146.

² Alonso (2016) examines Ammianus' frequent inversions of literary genres like tragedy and satire; Ross (2015) and Sogno (2012) both explore Ammianus' relationship with other works of satire in Late Antiquity in addition to those of Juvenal; Goncalves (2013) suggests through an analysis of Roman gaming terminology that Ammianus crafted the language of the Roman digressions in a deliberately satirical way; den Hengst (2007) is sceptical of Ammianus' ties to Juvenal, and suggests that contemporary satire might instead have been his source of inspiration; Rohrbacher (2007) 469 argues that Ammianus emulated

satire to some degree, widespread acceptance of the Juvenalian-parallel argument has been stymied because of the lack of direct correspondences in vocabulary between the two authors,³ as well as because of Ammianus' apparent criticism of Juvenal in the second digression.⁴ Although there has been much debate over which authors Ammianus emulates and alludes to throughout the *Res Gestae*, Ammianus scholars are in general agreement that he was extremely well read, and that many of the literary flourishes and digressions in the *Res Gestae* were likely intended to show off his knowledge of the Greco-Roman corpus. In that vein, this paper will examine the Roman digressions from the perspective of the Greco-Roman ethnographic tradition, another genre to which Ammianus was no stranger and from which he drew

Juvenalian satire, but mingled it with several other literary genres; Sabbah (2003) observes that Juvenal seems to have been appreciated and emulated by several late-antique authors in addition to Ammianus; Rees (1999) lists possible parallel passages found in Juvenal and Ammianus' Roman digressions (see next n.); Matthews (1989) believes the digressions are satirical and pointed out their similarities to earlier satire and comedy; Saleme (1987) contends that Ammianus' use of satire was not emulative, but rather a distinct evolution of the genre for his own time; Kohns (1975) examines the similarities of satire and circumstance in Ammianus and the early Imperial period (i.e., the works of Juvenal); Syme (1968) 84 observed that the search for Juvenalian elements in Ammianus 'does not prove very remunerative'; Pack (1953) argues that the Roman digressions are satirical mirrors of the city-praise orations of Libanius.

³ Rees (1999) compiles a lengthy table comparing similar passages of Juvenal and Ammianus, claiming that the accumulation of these parallels 'indicates a thorough and conscious employment of the *Satires* in the composition of Ammianus' Roman digressions' (150). Although Rees' list is quite thorough, there is little depth to the similarities he points out, with very few correspondences in vocabulary between Juvenal and Ammianus. This lack of correspondence is troubling given Ammianus' tendency elsewhere in the *Res Gestae* to quote other authors more or less verbatim without attribution: his description of Gaul, for example, corresponds quite closely, both in its structure and vocabulary, with that found in the first chapter of Caesar's *Gallic War* (Amm. Marc. 15.11.1; cf. Caes. *BG* 1.1.1; see also below, nn. 29, 32). As such, I share den Hengst's (2007) and Sogno's (2012) scepticism of this aspect of the Juvenalian-parallel argument, and see Ammianus emulating historians like Caesar, Livy, and Tacitus much more than satirists like Juvenal.

⁴ Ammianus laments that literate Romans will read nothing except Juvenal and Marius Maximus, when they should be studying and emulating the great figures of the past (*Iuvenalem et Marium Maximum curatiore studio legunt, nulla uolumina praeter haec profundo otio contrectantes ... cum multa et uaria pro amplitudine gloriarum et generum lectitare deberent*, 28.4.14–15). Several scholars have offered explanations of this passage: Ross (2015) 362–3 asserts that Ammianus' remark on Juvenal here is not an insult at all, but actually a signal to Ammianus' readers that the Roman digressions are meant to be read as satires; Sogno (2012) 377 argues that Ammianus' criticism is not meant to condemn the Romans' love for Juvenal, but is instead supposed to express Ammianus' disappointment that the Romans *only* read Juvenal and Marius Maximus; Rees (1999) 152–3 claims that Ammianus' remark is meant as a criticism of the Romans' hostility towards Greeks and foreigners.

liberally, yet one that has remained largely unexamined with regard to the Roman digressions.⁵

While the content and purpose of Ammianus' ethnographic digressions have also been subject to considerable discussion,⁶ the ethnographies are relevant to the study of the Roman digressions because they describe several traits and habits that are shared by the Romans and distant foreigners like the Gauls and Persians. These traits reveal another reason for Ammianus' writing of the Roman digressions not as easily seen through the satire reading, for when the ethnographic elements of the digressions are considered alongside Ammianus' many comparisons between the Romans of his time with those from earlier Roman history, we see that Ammianus' depiction of the Romans appears very similar to that of a foreign, non-Roman people. This 'othering' of the Romans by Ammianus, a Syrian Greek from their own empire—and a former functionary of the imperial government, no less—provides insight into the scrambled state of Roman identity in the fourth century AD, and into Ammianus' desire, despite his pride in his Greek identity,⁷ to make sense of his own Romanness. Contemporaries of Ammianus like Libanius and Eunapius, both ethnically and culturally Greek, elected to view themselves through a Hellenistic lens, a perspective similar to that of most of the inhabitants of the eastern empire.⁸ Yet, in stark contrast with many of his fellow Greeks, Ammianus' conception of Romanness as borne out in the digressions skews decidedly towards republican Rome. The Roman digressions thus provide us with an enlightening view of how Ammianus perceived his own identity as a Roman citizen in the fourth century vis-à-vis the inhabitants of Rome itself, both past and present.

Although rarely stated explicitly by ancient authors, ethnography is, at its core, a comparative genre, one in which an author effectively examines the

⁵ Rohrbacher (2007) discusses a few ethnographical elements that appear in the Roman digressions (469–70), but does so in the course of his novel argument that Ammianus not only emulated satire, but also ethnography, comedy, and a host of other literary genres.

⁶ On examinations of ethnography and geography generally in Ammianus, see Feraco (2011); Barnes (1998); Sundwall (1996); Lee (1993) 102–4; Signes (1990); Matthews (1989) 304–82; Richter (1989); Wiedemann (1986); Emmett (1983); Cicochka (1975); Mommsen (1881). For Ammianus on the Huns, see Burgersdijk (2016); King (1987). For the Gauls, Isaac (2011); Woolf (2011) 105–11; Sontheimer (1926). On the Persians, Sommer (2017); Feraco (2004); Drijvers (1999).

⁷ Sánchez Vendramini (2016) 37; Barnes (1998) 65–6.

⁸ For Libanius, see Cribiore (2007) 15–18; Wiemer (1995) 181–3. For Eunapius, see Blockley (1981) 17–18; Cracco-Ruggini (1972) 207–16. For the shift among eastern Greeks towards more localised, Hellenic forms of identity, see Tannous (2018); Andrade (2013) 314–48. Among these transformations of identity, Christianity also seems to have exerted significant influence on peoples' sense of Romanness (Hen (2018)).

strange or exotic customs of foreigners in light of his own ‘home’ culture.⁹ Generally, the implicit comparisons of ethnography are far from positive, and, particularly in the Greek tradition, they seem intended to promote the superiority of an author’s native values and customs. Conversely, ethnographic writers sometimes speak admiringly of the savagery, martial prowess, and pristine virtues of foreigners,¹⁰ and occasionally even attribute the decline or loss of those qualities to contact with Greco-Roman culture.¹¹ Absent from these discussions of decline, however, are considerations of how Greco-Roman culture, most often implicitly superior by the standards of ethnographic writing, can corrupt and debase foreigners without also negatively affecting the Greeks and Romans themselves. This issue is sidestepped perhaps most noticeably by Julius Caesar: in his *Gallic War*, Caesar implies that the pristine ferocity of many Gallic tribes had been syphoned away by their exposure to imported wine and other Roman luxuries (Caes. *BG* 1.1.3; 2.15.3–5; 4.2.6; 6.24.5–6), yet he never reflects on why those luxuries did not weaken his own troops or deprive them of their much-lauded *virtus*.¹² The closest thing to an acknowledgement of this paradox in Greco-Roman historiography before Ammianus comes from Tacitus, who is popularly believed to have used the ethnographic medium to criticise the Romans of his day through his depictions of the Germans and Britons,¹³ although even he does not explore the issue in explicit detail.

Ammianus’ Roman digressions, however, are poised to address this allegedly corrupting influence of Greco-Roman culture on the Romans themselves. First, the digressions adopt several aspects of ethnographic writing. Ammianus observes the Romans not as a Roman himself, but as an outsider, and he catalogues Roman habits and customs from the same distant perspective as the other foreign peoples he describes in the *Res Gestae*’s ethnographic digressions. But Ammianus also takes an approach with the Roman digressions not usually seen in ethnographies. Both digressions, the first in Book 14 and the

⁹ Discussed specifically in regard to Caesar by Johnston (2018) and Woolf (2011) 43–58. For this distinction in Greco-Roman ethnography more broadly, see Isaac (2004); J. M. Hall (2002); Hartog (1988); E. Hall (1989); Dauge (1981); Balsdon (1979).

¹⁰ Similar to earlier ethnographic writers like Herodotus, Diodorus, and Strabo, Ammianus himself acknowledges the Gauls’ impressive size and strength (14.12.1; cf. Str. 4.4.2–3, 5; D.S. 5.28.1–4), the significant religious and philosophical legacy of the Egyptians (22.16.20; cf. Hdt. 2.35–58; Str. 17.1.46; D.S. 1.94–98.4), and the courage of easterners like the Parthians and Alans (23.6.44; 31.2.21–2; cf. Hdt. 1.136; Str. 15.3.18).

¹¹ On the deterioration topos, see Creer (2019) 249–51; Allen-Hornblower (2014) 686–7; Woolf (2011) 54; id. (1998) 177; Wells (1999) 100–1; Romm (1992) 47.

¹² Observed in Creer (2019) 260; Gruen (2011) 148–58; Riggsby (2006) 83–96.

¹³ A popular opinion, echoed in the last several decades by Damtoft Poulsen (2018) 3–8, 216–17; Gruen (2011) 159–78; Woolf (2011) 90–2; Rives (1999) 200–1; O’Gorman (1993); Thomas (1982) 125–6.

second in Book 28, describe the practices of the Romans in Ammianus' time in comparison with those of their ancestors in earlier periods of Roman history while also incorporating unflattering *topoi* commonly attributed in ethnographic writing to barbarian peoples—especially those who dwell on the outskirts of the inhabited world and are therefore supposed to be the most unlike its civilised inhabitants. As such, Ammianus effectively adopts the culture and customs of past Romans as the 'home' or comparative culture of the Roman digressions and seems to group the Romans of his own time with the other barbarian peoples that he treats throughout his work. This approach differs from the conventions of earlier Greco-Roman ethnography, for no other surviving author, Greek or Roman, discusses his home culture in the style of an ethnographic digression. But it also departs, as far as we can tell,¹⁴ from the conventions of fourth-century historiography, whose authors did emphasise the sternness and discipline of ancient Romans,¹⁵ but also relied on traditional ethnographic *topoi* to maintain relatively nebulous distinctions between contemporary Romans and barbarians.¹⁶

In Book 14, Ammianus begins the first of the Roman digressions with a metaphor primed to set the tone for both. Here he likens the Romans' earlier conquest of Italy and the greater Mediterranean world to the growth of a child into an adult, but opines that, by his own time, Rome is 'now declining into old age' (*iamque uergens in senium*) and that the city and its inhabitants have effectively entrusted their empire to the emperors, like a retiring parent to his grown child (14.6.5).¹⁷ This passage marks the beginning of a series of chapters

¹⁴ Ammianus' *Res Gestae* is far and away the most complete of the fourth-century historians, the majority of whose works survive only as epitomes or in scattered fragments.

¹⁵ Eutropius, for example, lauds the 'severe' morality of the ancient Romans (10.10), while his portrayals of barbarians are reliant on the ancient Roman *topoi* of discipline and severity (59 = *Exc. de Leg. Gent.* 7; 60.1 = John of Antioch, F 187 = *Exc. de Ins.* 79).

¹⁶ The thoughts of several of Ammianus' contemporaries on the treatment and nature of the barbarian peoples outside the Roman empire can be found in Ratti (2007) 182–4. In terms of Ammianus' fellow fourth-century historians, Aurelius Victor occasionally comments on the great size of northern Europeans (*Caes.* 42.6–7), and says that Silvanus the Frank had become 'cultivated and patient' thanks to Roman training and discipline (42.11). Eunapius, other than Ammianus the most prolific commenter on barbarian traits, emphasises the wildness and indiscipline of the Scythians (5.27 = *Exc. de Sent.* 20; 37 = *Exc. de Leg. Gent.* 5; 59 = *Exc. de Leg. Gent.* 7) and of Arbogast the Frank (58.1 = *Suda* s.v. Ἀβρογάστρης (A 81 Adler); 60.1 = John of Antioch, F 187 = *Exc. de Ins.* 79), marvels at Subarmachius the Colchian's superhuman capacity for alcohol (67.8 = *Suda*, s.v. Σουβαρμάχιος (Σ 793 Adler)), and seems to make a habit of mentioning if an individual is of barbarian or half-barbarian heritage (Stilicho, while Romanised, was Scythian, 60.1 = John of Antioch, F 187 = *Exc. de Ins.* 79; half-barbarian, 48.1 = *Exc. de Sent.* 52).

¹⁷ The wording and sense of this passage closely matches that of a fragment of Seneca the Elder (*FRHist* 74 F 2), which takes a similar view of Rome's decline into the early Imperial period.

in which Ammianus compares the old, enfeebled Rome of his time with what he sees as a younger, stronger one, its use of *uergens* likely a rather deliberate encapsulation of Ammianus' unfavourable view of the eternal city and its inhabitants.¹⁸ This usage aligns well with the fact that, as many proponents of the Juvenalian argument have already noticed,¹⁹ the bulk of Ammianus' comparisons in both digressions between the Romans of the past and present centre around moral decline, with a particular emphasis on the positive qualities of the Romans of the Republic.²⁰ Like so many other authors of the Latin tradition,²¹ Ammianus is keen to point out in both Roman digressions instances in which the Romans of his time have departed from the stern, patriotic (and often idealised) thrift of the Republic, frequently with the implication that contemporary Romans fall so far short of the great deeds of their ancestors that they are effectively a different (and foreign) people.

To this end, Ammianus claims that the Roman elite care only about money, contrasting the thrift of their Republican ancestors—which was sometimes so extreme that even famous senators had been supported by public funds²²—with their overweening greed in the fourth century AD (14.6.10–11; 28.4.26). Ammianus supports this stance with a quotation from Cicero decrying preoccupation with wills and contracts (28.4.26 = Cic. *Amic.* 21.79), and he also criticises the Roman elite's obsession with erecting gilded statues of themselves, noting that Cato the Elder (who unsurprisingly condemned both gold and statues (Plin. *HN* 33.3, 24)) and even Hesiod (*Op.* 288–92) scorned such tawdry displays of wealth (Amm. Marc. 14.6.7–8). This interest in money, Ammianus claims, stems from a similar passion for unceasing entertainment and pleasure among both the rich and poor at Rome (14.6.25–6; 28.4.29, 32–4). To add to these outrages, he also says that patricians and plebeians alike fixate on chariot racing (14.6.25–6; 28.4.11, 29–30), that the nobility has driven off philosophers, librarians, and men of learning in favour

¹⁸ *Vergo* is also used to denote this sense of elderly decline—for people, periods of time, and social conditions—by Pliny (*HN* 21.36; 32.116), Cicero (*Att.* 16.6.2; *Phil.* 11.11), Tacitus (*Ann.* 1.3; 2.43; 4.41), Seneca (*Ben.* 4.27.4; *Dial.* 7.15.4; 9.1.4), and Suetonius (*Oth.* 7.1).

¹⁹ Ross (2015) 358–60 notes the 'moral distinction made between the degenerate present and the exemplary past' (359); Sogno (2012) 373–7 explores how this element of Ammianus' digressions fits with the rest of the satirical tradition; Rees (1999) 142–50 frames his comparison between Juvenal and Ammianus around aspects of Roman degeneracy common in Roman satire.

²⁰ Ross (2015) 360.

²¹ For succinct surveys of this well-documented tendency, see Malik (2019); Liebeschuetz (2003); Lintott (1972).

²² 14.6.11, where Ammianus mentions specifically the burial of Valerius Publicola (cf. Liv. 2.16.7), M. Atilius Regulus' family's reception of aid from the city coffers (cf. Val. Max. 4.4.6), and the supply of a dowry for Cn. Cornelius Scipio's daughter from public funds (cf. Val. Max. 14.4.10) as examples of noble poverty among Romans of the past.

of singers, actors, and musicians (14.6.15, 18–9), and that Roman men openly chase after prostitutes—by contrast, an indignant Ammianus claims that these Romans' ancestors would have been fined by the censors for so much as kissing their wives in public (28.4.9). In all, Ammianus portrays people at every level of Roman society as so debased that he predicts even the legendary Cretan king Epimenides, notable in Attic myth for his expiation of the Athenians after the murder of Cylon,²³ could not purify them of their many wrongs (28.4.5).

These examples of the vices decried by Ammianus and their virtuous foils highlight his method throughout the Roman digressions, in which a litany of negative traits and habits among contemporary Romans is contrasted with many positive ones from throughout antiquity. What is most striking about the positive examples above is their variety: Ammianus' ancient sources, cited and uncited, are drawn from within an eight-hundred-year span of Greek and Latin literature, and, although Ammianus seems to favour authors like Livy and Cicero, the wide range of sources he uses to construct his image of the Rome of the past renders it increasingly more artificial as the digressions wear on. Based on his rather loose criteria for selecting quotations and anecdotes, then, it seems that Ammianus' chief concern here was not with crafting a consistent and chronologically focused depiction of ancient Rome, but rather with picking out the most appealing exempla of Roman virtue from the entire breadth of Greco-Roman antiquity—an approach that accords well with Ammianus' penchant elsewhere in his work for including a copious number of learned references to the past.²⁴

Another target of Ammianus' scorn that incorporates his love for archaic allusions is the state of the Romans' martial culture. The veterans of the Roman digressions are irretrievably vile creatures who, Ammianus says, exaggerate their accomplishments, zealously pursue gambling, have an unhealthy preoccupation with astrology, and use charioteers to extort money and bully creditors (28.4.20–5). The patricians, who would have been these veterans' commanders in earlier times, fare no better under Ammianus' observer's eye, and are mocked for their concern with their many slaves and the dainties of luxurious living, in an extended passage which bears quoting in full (14.6.17):

utque proeliorum periti rectores primo cateruas densas opponunt et fortes, deinde leues armaturas, post iaculatores ultimasque subsidiales acies (si fores adegerit) iuuaturas, ita praepositis urbanae familiae suspense digerentibus atque sollicite, quos insignes faciunt uirgae

²³ See [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 1; Plut. *Sol.* 12.

²⁴ A quality met with equal parts admiration and scorn: see Kelly (2008) 29–30; Barnes (1998) 75; id. (1990); Fornara (1992); de Jonge (1972) 47; Mommsen (1881) 633–5 = (1909) 421–4.

dexteris aptatae, uelut tessera data castrensi, iuxta uehiculi frontem omne textrinum incedit: huic atratum coquinae iungitur ministerium, dein totum promisce seruitium, cum otiosis plebeis de uicinitate coniunctis; postrema multitudo spadonum a senibus in pueros desinens, obluridi distortaque lineamentorum compage deformes.

And just as experienced commanders of battles place at the front dense and brave companies, then light-armed troops, after them the javelin-throwers, and last of all the reserve forces who will (if chance should urge it) aid the battle lines, thus the chamberlains of a city household, who are distinguished by rods grasped in their right hands, carefully and attentively draw up the array, as if the signal had been given in camp, and close to the front of the carriage the whole weaver's shop marches; these close ranks with the black-clad service of the kitchen, then the rest of the slaves without distinction, joined by the idle plebeians of the neighbourhood; next, a great number of eunuchs, beginning with the old men and ending with the boys, pale and disfigured by the distorted form of their features.

Similar to the varied comparisons discussed above, this image presents a perfect juxtaposition between the debased Rome of the fourth century and the austere glory of Republican Rome. In keeping with his tendency to reach beyond the Late Republic for examples of old Roman greatness, Ammianus here depicts mockingly an ancient manipular legion: weavers stand in the front rank, filling in for the sturdy *principes*. These are followed by *hastati*-like kitchen slaves, then still more slaves and no-account plebeians serve as stand-ins for the javelin-throwing *uelites*. Finally, a group of eunuchs, the objects of discussion on several other occasions in Ammianus' work,²⁵ embody the pinnacle of Roman corruption by substituting for the elite *triarii*, the wealthiest and most

²⁵ One of Ammianus' more curious authorial quirks is his preoccupation with eunuchs, who make many generally unflattering appearances throughout his work (14.11.3; 15.2.10; 18.4.2–4; 20.2.4; 21.15.4; 23.6.18, 30.1–5). Tougher examines the activities of eunuchs in the *Res Gestae* specifically and Late Antiquity more broadly in several works: Tougher (1999) speculates that Ammianus' frequent negative highlighting of eunuchs is a device by which he can explain the decline of Rome and also criticise the court of Constantius II; id. (2008) explores the role of eunuchs in the late-antique imperial court, as well as possible reasons why the emperors of the later Roman empire, contrary to earlier custom, began to employ eunuchs; id. (2020) summarises much of the earlier work on late-antique eunuchs and the court of Constantius II and provides a more focused bibliography. Hanaghan (2018) suggests that Ammianus used eunuchs as a metaliterary device to contrast Constantius and Julian; Kuefler (2001) explores the positive and negative portrayals of eunuchs as the results of a conflict between Roman and Christian perceptions of manhood in Late Antiquity; and Sidéris (2000) argues against the general trend of earlier scholarship to take Ammianus' criticisms of individual eunuchs as representative of his view of eunuchs more generally.

experienced soldiers of the old Roman military.²⁶ That Ammianus has replaced these troops with luxury-producing slaves and low-lives is a stinging rebuke of how the Romans' interests have shifted from the parade ground to the dining hall.

While these comparisons of past and present Rome are universal in their condemnation of contemporary Romans, Ammianus was not content to restrict criticism of them to the Roman digressions alone. Scattered throughout the digressions and elsewhere in the *Res Gestae* are also several venerable topoi attributed in ethnographic writing, and in Ammianus' own work, to barbarian peoples. In particular, Ammianus' ethnographic digressions on the Gauls and Persians contain noticeable parallels with the Roman digressions, all of which seem intended to portray the Romans in an unflattering light. This quality stands in marked contrast with other examples of ethnographic writing, which are generally complimentary of at least a few of their subjects' traits.²⁷ The first notable similarity between the Romans and Gauls appears in the opening lines of Ammianus' first Roman digression, where Ammianus discusses Orfitus' prefectureship at Rome. Here Ammianus says that several serious riots broke out during this time over a shortage of wine in the city, and that the Romans were frequently stirred to violence because they were 'eager for gluttonous use of wine' (*vini ... cuius avidis usibus uulgius intentum*, 14.6.1). Any reader familiar with Greco-Roman ethnography would recognise that a penchant for undisciplined drinking, while often applied to foreigners generally,²⁸ is a consistent characteristic of the Gauls. This topos had been around since at least the time of Caesar's *Gallic War*, perhaps even earlier,²⁹ and Ammianus adheres to this tradition in his own description of the Gauls as 'a race greedy for wine ... with wits dulled by continual drunkenness' (*vini avidum*

²⁶ Ammianus here seems to have confused the order of the ancient manipular legion, which typically placed the *velites* in the van; this is similar to his misunderstanding of other ancient customs, such as decimation (24.3.2). On the military units and formations of the early Roman Republic, Zhmodikov (2000) discusses several pertinent issues and provides bibliography, while Lendon (2005) 424 collects references for the bilious debates of the early twentieth-century German scholars responsible for our current conception of the manipular legion.

²⁷ See above, n. 10.

²⁸ Tacitus claims that all-day drinking is not uncommon among the Germans (*Germ.* 22), and the Persians are portrayed as heavy drinkers by Herodotus (1.133.3–4), Xenophon (*Cyr.* 8.8.20), Strabo (15.3.20–2), Plutarch (*Artax.* 6.1), Athenaeus (1.28d; 4.145c), and Aelian (*VH* 12.1).

²⁹ It is well attested, albeit implicitly, in Caesar (*BG* 1.1.3; 2.15.4; 4.2.6; 6.24.5), from whom Ammianus probably drew some of his own examples, as well as in Diodorus (5.26) and likely Posidonius, whom Caesar might have used as a source. On the Gauls' excessive drinking, see Woolf (2011) 54; id. (1998) 177; Wells (1999) 100–1; Romm (1992) 47. On Posidonius and Caesar's possible use of his material, see Tierney (1960) and Nash (1976).

genus ... obtunsis ebrietate continua sensibus, 15.12.4).³⁰ But, since Ammianus is aware of Caesar's imputation that the Gauls, who once were fierce warriors before being introduced to the luxuries of civilisation, had been corrupted and weakened by wine and other goods introduced to them by the Romans,³¹ Ammianus' accusation that the Romans were excessively fond of wine is intended to carry with it all the implications of weakness and corruption found in the Gallic ethnographies of the preceding five centuries.

In order to strengthen this negative link between contemporary Romans and the Gauls, Ammianus' ethnography of the Gauls features more unfavourable comparisons between them and the Romans. Like several other ethnographic digressions in the *Res Gestae*, the Gallic ethnography does not shrink from listing the Gauls' admirable traits, such as their great size, ferocity in battle, toughness from labour and exposure to the cold, and their willingness and fitness for military service at nearly any age (15.12.1–3).³² Ammianus directly contrasts this last trait with the Italians' tendency to cut off their own thumbs in order to avoid military service (15.12.3), a custom attested in several Imperial and late-antique sources, beginning with Suetonius' biography of Augustus.³³ Ammianus' depiction of the Romans is thus doubly insulting, for not only are they similar to the Gauls in their undisciplined love of alcohol, but they are martially weak, while the Gauls have remained fierce warriors. Instead, the Romans bear most resemblance to the weakest barbarians in earlier accounts of the Gauls, such as the Aquitani, who, Ammianus himself says, had been 'weakened to effeminacy' by imported wine and a lack of military exercise and who had been among the first of the Gallic tribes to fall under Roman control (15.11.5).³⁴ In both the first Roman digression and the

³⁰ This passage is considered a fragment of Cato the Elder (*FRHist* 5 F 151), whom Ammianus cites, which means the use of this topos among the Romans could have occurred as early as the second century BC.

³¹ *cuius avidis usibus uulgus intentum*, Amm. Marc. 14.6.1.

³² These traits are also clearly discernible in descriptions of the Germans and Gauls from Caesar (*BG* 2.15.5; 4.1.9–10), Diodorus (5.28–30), and Tacitus (*Germ.* 4).

³³ Suet. *Aug.* 24.1. Here Suetonius relates that Augustus, hoping to revitalise military discipline among the Roman elite, punished a Roman equestrian who had cut off the thumbs of his sons so that they might avoid military service. Justinian's *Digest* attributes to Trajan a law that imposed exile on the man who mutilates his son to help him evade service (*Dig.* 49.16.4.12). In Ammianus' period, Constantine had decreed that Roman recruits who had amputated their fingers in order to avoid service should not be 'protected from such service' (*Cod. Theod.* 7.13.4), and that Gallic recruits guilty of the same offence should be burned to death (7.13.5). See also Wardle (2014) 188–9; Wesch-Klein (1998) 161–3; Wierschowski (1995) 210, 222–3.

³⁴ In addition to this remark about the Aquitani, Ammianus also goes on to say that the Belgae had in ancient times avoided such a fate by being far removed from civilisation (15.11.4)—both characterisations strongly mirroring those of Caesar in Book 1 of the *Gallic*

Gallic ethnography that follows it one Book later, then, Ammianus seeks to show his reader that the Romans have been corrupted by the luxuries of civilisation just as much as the Gauls have—perhaps more so, given that Ammianus also shows in several passages in both the Roman and Gallic digressions that the Romans lack the martial prowess that he claims was still intact among the Gauls.

To round out his portrayal of the Romans as a corrupted people weighed down by vice and excess, Ammianus also includes several comparisons and parallels between them and the Persians, who usually were the preeminent examples of the luxury and softness associated with inhabitants of the East in Greco-Roman ethnography.³⁵ In this vein, Ammianus' characterisation of the Persians as having a predilection for luxurious clothing (23.6.84) and keeping multiple wives and concubines (23.6.76) was consistent with ancient convention. Ammianus' attribution of similar traits to the Romans—and their explicit links with corrupt eastern culture—is, however, a novelty in ancient historical writing, and worthy of our attention.

Ammianus' criticism of the Roman nobility's love of fine clothing comes early on in his first Roman digression, where he says the wealthy wave their garments about 'in order that the over-long fringes and the tunics embroidered with multi-coloured threads in multiform figures of animals may be conspicuous' (14.6.9–10; cf. 28.4.8). This parallels rather neatly with his description of the Persians' own sartorial preferences, for Ammianus says they cover their bodies from head to toe 'with clothes gleaming in many shimmering colours', along with 'golden armllets and neckchains, gems, and especially pearls' (23.6.84). Also similarly to the Persians, Ammianus criticises the Romans for shamelessly chasing after beautiful women and prostitutes: first, by contrast with the old counter-example, mentioned above, of a senator fined by the censor for kissing his wife in public, and then by the parallel of the Persian ethnography's mention of the Persians' large harems and unquenchable lust (23.6.76). Finally, he links these Romans' behaviour more explicitly with that of effete easterners (28.4.9):

War. These depictions of the Gauls are also noticeably at odds with Ammianus' characterisation of all Gauls as strong and warlike in 15.12, a discrepancy probably best explained by Ammianus' tendency in several of his ethnographic digressions to paraphrase much earlier writers without making it explicitly clear that he is describing the past (McInerney and Roller (2016) ad *BNJ* 88 F 2; Isaac (2011) 240–1; Woolf (2011) 109; Barnes (1998) 97–9).

³⁵ For more extended discussions of common topoi in ethnographic writing about the Persians, see Gruen (2011) 9–75 and Romm (1992) 82–120. For their deployment in various periods of antiquity, see Llewellyn-Jones (2017); Miller (2017); and Sommer (2017), who treats specifically Ammianus' Persian ethnography.

si apparuisse subito ignotam compererint meretricem, aut oppidanae quondam prostibulum plebis, uel meritorii corporis ueterem lupam, certatim concurrunt, palpantesque aduenam, deformitate magna blanditiarum ita extollunt, ut Samiramim Parthi uel Cleopatras Aegyptus aut Artemisiam Cares uel Zenobiam Palmyreni.

If they have found that an unknown harlot has suddenly appeared, either some common whore for the people of our city, or an old prostitute of hired body, they all rush in rivalry for her, and, caressing her at her coming, they extol her with such a disgraceful abundance of flatteries just as the Parthians do Semiramis, or the Egyptians their Cleopatras, the Carians Artemisia, or the Palmyrenes Zenobia.

All the women mentioned here were famous eastern monarchs,³⁶ and they and their people often have strong associations in Greco-Roman historiography with the generalised eastern proclivity for effeminacy and luxury. This passage thus serves as a standout example of Ammianus' linkage of the Romans with conspicuously un-Roman qualities, which are capped by his association of the Romans' fawning over prostitutes with the eastern tradition of rule by women, which itself was strongly at odds with the long-entrenched patriarchy of traditional Rome.

While these similarities might seem like fairly simple coincidences, the fact that Ammianus is even willing to break occasionally with some of the established topoi of Greco-Roman ethnography to accord with his polemic against the Romans strengthens the argument that he made these Roman-barbarian parallels deliberately. For example, the first major Persian ethnography in the Greco-Roman tradition is found in Herodotus, where the Persians are portrayed as a noble warrior people with scruples against deception (Hdt. 1.138.1) and dealing too harshly with servants (1.137.1). Herodotus' Persians are also 'very partial to wine' (1.133.3), regularly serve large feasts (1.133.2), and customarily deliberate over all matters while drunk before making their final decisions in the light of sobriety (1.133.3–4). Ammianus' Persians, however, avoid splendid banquets and excessive drinking, and only eat when

³⁶ Semiramis, whose exploits were described by Ctesias via Diodorus (2.1–22), was a mythologised version of the ninth-century BC Assyrian queen Shammuramat, who unsurprisingly, given her early date, had no known interactions with the Parthians. Cleopatra VII of Egypt was famously used as a symbol of eastern corruption by Octavian during his struggle with Antony for control of Rome (Dio 50.5). Artemisia was the name of two Carian queens, the first who fought memorably under Xerxes at the Battle of Salamis (Hdt. 7.99) and the second who built the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus for her husband/brother Mausolus (Str. 14.2.16). Zenobia was queen of the third-century AD Palmyrene Empire, founded by her husband, Odaenathus, until her defeat and subsequent exile by the emperor Aurelian (SHA *Aurel.* 15–17, 27, 30).

hungry instead of at set meal times (23.6.76–7). They are also extremely cruel to servants (23.6.80). While some allowance can certainly be made for the many centuries between Herodotus and Ammianus, there is still a notable tendency in ethnographic writing, demonstrated frequently by Ammianus, to maintain the outdated portrayals of foreigners used by earlier authors.³⁷ In light of this tendency and Ammianus' departure from it in the Persian ethnography, Ammianus uses his contrasting portrayal of the Persians to sharpen his critiques of the Romans. Ammianus' Romans possess all the negative traits of the Persians found in Herodotus and in the *Res Gestae*,³⁸ and his Persians differ from those of Herodotus wherever there might be an opportunity for humiliating contrast without completely spoiling their stereotypical penchant for luxury and excess. To choose perhaps the most noticeable example, Ammianus is the only extant writer in antiquity who does not portray the Persians as heavy drinkers.³⁹ Ammianus' long list of negative qualities found among the Romans and the several unflattering comparisons, both explicit and implicit, that he makes between the Romans and the barbarians of the North and East thus seem targeted to depict the Romans not just as barbarians, but as among the most contemptible of their kind. Moreover, these efforts might also offer an answer of sorts to the question, unaddressed by Caesar, of how the Romans managed to corrupt and weaken the Gauls and other barbarians without suffering similar ills—namely, that they did not. Instead, Ammianus implies through the comparisons of the Roman digressions that the educated elite of the empire—those who had read more than just Juvenal and Marius Maximus—had remembered the positive elements of Romanness found among the Romans of the past, and that this group had maintained and revered ancient Roman exempla even as the people of Rome itself fell into degeneracy.

Another popular explanation for the decline topos of the Roman digressions, however, is that much of their content is based on Ammianus' own personal experiences in the city, and that his anti-Roman polemic was motivated by the historian's involuntary expulsion from the city in AD 383/4.⁴⁰ It is

³⁷ For this tendency in the Persian ethnography, see Sommer (2017) 350–4. Perhaps the most conspicuous example in the *Res Gestae* is Ammianus' detailed account of the druids (15.9.4–8), which is thought to have originated with Pytheas and Timaeus, then was expanded by Posidonius and Timagenes, and was then repeated with little variation by later authors up to Ammianus, whose description of the druids matches those of Diodorus (5.31.2–5) and Strabo (4.4.4) quite closely (McInerney and Roller (2016) ad *BNJ* 88 FF 2, 15; Isaac (2011) 240–1; Webster (1999)).

³⁸ Luxurious clothing: 14.6.9; 28.4.8, 19; cf. 23.6.84; affection for prostitutes: 28.4.9; cf. 23.6.76; harsh treatment of slaves: 28.4.16; cf. 23.6.80; love of banqueting: 14.6.14; 28.4.13; cf. Hdt. 133.1–2; fondness for alcohol: 14.6.1; cf. Hdt. 133.3–4; rank-based greetings: 28.4.10; cf. Hdt. 1.134.1.

³⁹ Kelly (2008) 37; Teitler (1999) 220.

⁴⁰ See above, n. 1.

fairly tempting to allow Ammianus' description of the Romans of the fourth century some degree of special consideration, given his personal experience with the city and the well-attested corruption of the imperial bureaucracy and military.⁴¹ Yet we should still exercise caution in taking Ammianus' description of Roman behaviour as actual evidence of moral decline. First, condemnation of moral decline and luxury was popular among fourth-century authors, both Christian and pagan,⁴² so Ammianus was far from the only writer to touch on these topics: it was his method, which incorporated classical satire, ethnography, and several other genres, that made him unique. But the Roman digressions' echoes of Juvenalian satire and use of hoary ethnographic *topoi* to describe barbarian peoples also remind us that Ammianus' reliance on such typical sources of criticism for Roman behaviour, even by an historian who frequently stresses his accuracy and authority,⁴³ means that such behaviour is likely either fictitious or at least grossly exaggerated. Finally, every Roman historian since Cato the Elder had bemoaned the increase of luxury and decline of virtue in his own time,⁴⁴ and the yearning for the good old days displayed so frequently in Ammianus' Roman digressions had by his time become a tiresomely well-worn *topos* of Roman historical writing.

Yet if we account for these typical, and problematic, features of Roman historiography, Ammianus' reliance on older Greco-Roman literature for many of his complaints against the corrupt Romans of his time, as well as for his nebulously idealised Rome of the past, do suggest some points of significant importance to our reading of the Roman digressions. Most obviously, the patchwork nature of Ammianus' anecdotes and examples, drawn from the many phases of Rome's history from the time of Cato the Elder to that of Tacitus and Pliny, should imply that much of this material is artificial and not representative of historical reality. On the one hand, Ammianus' negative portrayal of his Roman contemporaries was likely derived from satire, ethnography, and several other literary genres with which Ammianus was familiar. Yet, on the other hand, his 'good' Rome of the past is also a synthetic amalgam of quotations and anecdotes from sometimes much older literature, its pieces stitched together to form something that, while not entirely accurate, was at least appealing and familiar to Ammianus' sense of Romanness. And, really, what better way for Ammianus to ridicule the Romans of his day than

⁴¹ Perhaps still best surveyed by MacMullen (1988) 148–97.

⁴² As displayed by Watson (2019).

⁴³ On these claims generally in Greek and Roman historiography, see Marincola (1997) 3–12, 63–86, 95–117. Ammianus himself makes frequent efforts to reinforce his authority as an historian and to reassure readers of his accuracy, most often through claims of autopsy (14.4.6; 15.9.6; 22.8.1, 15.1; 23.6.1; 27.4.2) or by correcting earlier historians (22.8.25; 23.6.1, 20–1; 27.4.2).

⁴⁴ Rohrbacher (2007) 470; see above, n. 19.

to hold them up alongside an impossible-to-emulate construct that represented the best of Rome's thousand-year history? Ethnographic writing was often used in antiquity, especially by Roman authors, to project artificial images of foreign peoples. Ammianus' Roman digressions are novel not only because of their treatment of the Romans as the foreign subjects of an ethnography, but also because both Ammianus' fourth-century Rome *and* the idealised Rome of the past were artificial projections. This means that Ammianus' criticism of the Romans' behaviour and habits is but a symptom of a real crisis of identity that lies beneath his complaints: unable to recognise a discernibly 'Roman' tenor among the Romans of his day, Ammianus, an antiquarian at heart,⁴⁵ instead turned to the pages of Rome's far-flung past to determine what it was to be properly Roman. In this way, then, Ammianus' Roman digressions are almost like double ethnographies, in which both past and present Romans are described in exaggerated ways in order to articulate an artificial and decidedly fourth-century conception of Romanness.

Ammianus' use of ethnographic elements in the Roman digressions thus represents a fascinating departure from the norm established by earlier Greco-Roman ethnographers, and, especially in light of Ammianus' negative personal encounters with Rome's inhabitants, they might also signal the growing rift between the largely eastern administrative core of the Roman empire, of which Ammianus was a part, and the city itself during Ammianus' lifetime. This rift is characterised not only by Ammianus' unflattering comparison of the Romans of his day with a centuries-spanning agglomeration of their idealised ancestors, but also by his incorporation of *topoi* typically used to represent barbarian behaviour, especially that of the Gauls and Persians, into his descriptions of the Romans. While there are also several topical parallels between the grievances aired by Ammianus in his Roman digressions and Juvenal's satires, these elements of ethnographic writing that Ammianus seems to have incorporated into the digressions suggest that Ammianus had more than just playful satire in mind when he wrote them. As such, the use of ethnographic *topoi* in Ammianus' Roman digressions provides a fascinating perspective on how conceptions of Romanness were changing among the inhabitants of the empire in the fourth century AD, and on how Ammianus configured his own sense of Roman identity.

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⁴⁵ Ammianus references a staggering number of earlier historical figures, events, and sites throughout his work. This tendency, and its implications for the nature of Ammianus' work and his reliability as an historian, is explored thoroughly by Kelly (2008).

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