

AMMIANUS MARCELLINUS ON THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE PONTUS EUXINUS¹

“Das eitle Bemühen um Allwissenheit, wie es der Fluch aller encyclopädischen Bildung ist, und vor allem der Fluch jener unseligen, auch auf dem geistigen Gebiet, in der Trümmerwelt einer grössern Vergangenheit kümmerlich hausenden Generationen war, zeigt sich bei Ammian ... auf diesem Gebiet ...”²

This quotation of more than a century ago by Theodor Mommsen expresses a harsh verdict on Ammianus Marcellinus’ acquaintance with the geography of the world as it was known in his days (it is geographical knowledge which is meant by “diesem Gebiet”). In this field Ammianus had a “scheinhaftes Bescheidwissen” and empty words had to conceal his “Unkenntniss”, according to the same Mommsen. Mommsen’s article, written in reaction to V. Gardthausen’s *Die geographischen Quellen Ammians*,³ which expressed a more positive opinion, had a great impact. Soon Mommsen’s unfavourable view of Ammianus’ knowledge of geography was widely accepted⁴ and has for a long time not been seriously disputed.

The *Res Gestae* of the fourth-century historian Ammianus Marcellinus started where Tacitus had left off, that is in the year 96 C.E. with the reign of Nerva, and ended at the year 378. The work originally consisted of 31 books, but the first 13 books have unfortunately been lost. The 18 extant books cover only some twenty-five years of Roman history, namely the years from 353 to 378. Thus Ammianus wrote the history of his own time, of which he himself was not only a part but also an eyewitness, since he was present at several important events of this period. Above all, the reign of Julian (361-3) features conspicuously in the *Res Gestae*. The last pagan emperor of a gradu-

¹ This paper is an elaboration of the material in the commentary by J. den Boeft, J. W. Drijvers, D. den Hengst, H. C. Teitler, *Philological and Historical Commentary on Ammianus Marcellinus XXII* (Groningen 1995) 88ff.

² Th. Mommsen, “Ammians Geographica”, *Hermes* 16 (1881) 602-636, 635; reprinted in Th. Mommsen, *Gesammelte Schriften* 7 (Berlin 1909) 393-425.

³ V. Gardthausen, “Die geographischen Quellen Ammians”, *Jb. f. class. Philol.*, Suppl. 6 (Leipzig 1873).

⁴ E.g. M. Schanz, *Geschichte der römischen Literatur IV*² (Munich 1914) 96, who remarks that in his digressions “der alte Soldat [i.e. Ammianus] mit seiner mühsam erworbenen Gelehrsamkeit glänzen will und daher manchmal aus seinen Quellen Dinge abschreibt, die er selbst nicht versteht”.

ally christianizing empire was profoundly, though not uncritically, admired by Ammianus, who was himself also an adherent of the old cults. Although the *Res Gestae* was intended as a continuation of the historical works of Tacitus, Ammianus did not take this famous historian as his primary literary or historiographical model. The influence of Sallust and others, as well as the Greek tradition of the writing of history, seems to be a greater force in Ammianus' work.⁵

Scholarly opinion about the *Res Gestae* is in general favourable. It is considered a very reliable piece of work from a historical point of view. Edward Gibbon in his famous *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* saluted Ammianus as "an accurate and faithful guide, who has composed the history of his own times without indulging the prejudices and passions which usually affect the mind of a contemporary".⁶ Generally speaking, these words of praise are justified. Ammianus' information on the historical events of his time is trustworthy, although not always unprejudiced.

As a historian, Ammianus worked within the tradition of Greek and Roman historiography, and he followed in the footsteps of such authors as Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, Sallust, Tacitus and others. But the classics of Latin literature—Cicero, Vergil, Ovid, to name just a few—also left their imprint on Ammianus' work. Moreover, ancient historians, especially the Greek ones, did not only give a plain narrative of political, military and

⁵ John Matthews, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus* (London 1989), 32. T. D. Barnes, "Literary Convention, Nostalgia and Reality in Ammianus Marcellinus", in: G. Clarke et al. (ed.), *Reading the Past in Late Antiquity* (Rushcutters Bay 1990) 59-92, 63-65. Whereas C. W. Fornara, "Studies in Ammianus Marcellinus II: Ammianus' Knowledge and Use of Greek and Latin Literature", *Historia* 41 (1992) 420-438 emphasizes Ammianus' 'deep familiarity with the Latin literary tradition', T. D. Barnes, in his recent monograph *Ammianus Marcellinus and the Representation of Historical Reality* (Ithaca and London 1998) 65ff. argues in favour of Ammianus' Greekness. On Ammianus see further: E. A. Thompson, *The Historical Work of Ammianus Marcellinus* (Cambridge 1947; repr. Groningen 1969); R. C. Blockley, *Ammianus Marcellinus. A Study of his Historiography and Political Thought* (Brussels 1975); G. Sabbah, *La méthode d'Ammien Marcellin. Recherches sur la construction du discours historique dans les Res Gestae* (Paris 1978); K. Rosen, *Ammianus Marcellinus* (Erträge der Forschung 183; Darmstadt 1982); R. Seager, *Ammianus Marcellinus. Seven Studies in His Language and Thought* (Columbia 1986); Jan Willem Drijvers & David Hunt (eds.), *The Late Roman World and its Historian: Interpreting Ammianus Marcellinus* (London and New York 1999, forthcoming).

⁶ E. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, The World's Classics, 7 vols. (Oxford 1903-1906), vol. 3, 145 (Ch. 26). The Byzantine historian E. Stein, *Geschichte des spätromischen Reiches*, vol. 1 (Vienna 1928) 331, grossly exaggerates when he considers Ammianus the greatest literary genius that the world produced between Tacitus and Dante. A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602* (Oxford 1964) 116, holds the view that Ammianus was a great historian who composed a full and detailed narrative.

other events, but allowed themselves to include in their historical accounts digressions on a great variety of topics. These kinds of discourses had been a characteristic feature of historiography from the time of Herodotus, Father of History. Ammianus, too, enlivened his *Res Gestae* with a great many excursuses. They were a means to supply information, explanation or dramatic background. But they were also a way for the author to express his knowledge and interests to his readers or listeners, as well as to entertain and instruct those readers and listeners.⁷ Ammianus was evidently very fond of digressions. Not only are there many of them in the *Res Gestae*—more than thirty—but some of them are of a length which is quite unparalleled in ancient writing.⁸ The digressions can be shown to fall into several categories of subject matter: military or technical matters; science and natural phenomena;⁹ antiquities or monuments; religion, obituaries or moral judgments; and miscellaneous explanatory digressions. But the most elaborate digressions are on geography and ethnography. The *Res Gestae* contains excursuses on the Saracens (14.4.1-7), the provinces of the eastern part of the Empire (14.8.1-15), on the Bodensee lake (15.4.1-6), on Gaul (15.9-12), on Amida, i.e. modern Diyar Bakir (18.9), on the Black Sea (22.8), on Egypt (22.15-16), on the Persian provinces (23.6), on Thrace (27.4.1-14) and on the Huns and Alans (31.2.1-25).

Although, with the ever-growing interest in Late Antiquity, there has been a significant growth in Ammianean studies over the past two or three decades, not much work has yet been done on the geographical and ethnographical digressions, or for that matter on the other excursuses.¹⁰ The com-

⁷ See e.g. Sabbah, *La méthode* (n. 5) 525-8.

⁸ He sometimes even has digressions within a digression; Sabbah, *La méthode* (n. 5) 527: “il multiplie les digressions dans la digression”. A nice example of this is the section on the Magi in the digression on the Persian provinces (23.6.32-36).

⁹ See D. den Hengst, “The scientific digressions in Ammianus’ *Res Gestae*”, in J. den Boeft, D. den Hengst, and H. C. Teitler (eds.), *Cognitio Gestorum: The Historiographic Art of Ammianus Marcellinus* (Amsterdam 1992) 39-46.

¹⁰ Besides the works of Gardthausen and Mommsen referred to in notes 2 and 3, I mention here: A. Malotet, *De Ammiani Marcellini digressionibus quae ad externas gentes pertinent* (Paris 1898); H. Cicochka, “Die Konzeption des Exkurses im Geschichtswerk des Ammianus Marcellinus”, *Eos* 63 (1975) 329-340; A.M. Emmett, “The Digressions in the Lost Books of Ammianus Marcellinus”, in B. Croke and A. M. Emmett (ed.), *History and Historians in Late Antiquity* (Sydney 1982) 42-53; A.M. Emmett, “Introductions and Conclusions to Digressions in Ammianus Marcellinus”, *Museum Philologum Londiniense* 5 (1981) 15-33; U. Richter, “Die Funktion der Digressionen im Werk Ammians”, *Würzburger Jahrbücher für die Altertumswissenschaft*, NF 15 (1989) 209-222; M. Caltabiano, “Il carattere delle digressioni nelle *Res Gestae* di Ammiano Marcellino”, in A. Garzya (ed.), *Metodologie della ricerca sulla tarda antichità*, Atti del Primo Convegno dell’Associazione di Studi Tardoantichi (Naples 1989) 289-296. On the digression on Persia (23.6), there is Juan Signes, “El Ex-

parative neglect of these digressions may well be ascribed to Mommsen's unfavourable opinion of Ammianus' knowledge of geography. The main focus of research has been, and still is, on Ammianus' historical account. This lack of interest is particularly striking in the latest English translation of the *Res Gestae* where the digressions are simply left out.¹¹ By way of redressing this curious imbalance, I shall discuss in this paper one of the geographical digressions, namely that on the Black Sea or the Pontus Euxinus, as the ancients called it. For several reasons this is an interesting digression: it is one of the longest in Ammianus' work—only the digression on the Persian provinces (23.6) is longer—and the Black Sea area is a region which was rather well known in ancient times. The main questions I would like to pose and attempt to answer are the following: how did Ammianus gain his knowledge about the Black Sea, how profound was this knowledge and how did he organise his information?

The digression on the Black Sea is part of Book 22 (22.8) and covers well over ten pages in the Teubner edition. In this book Ammianus narrates the emperor's Julian stay at Constantinople and his departure for Antioch to prepare for the Persian campaign of the following year (363). The digression is included at the moment when Ammianus has told everything he wanted to tell about the emperor's stay at Constantinople and before he begins the narrative about Julian's journey to Antioch. In his introduction, Ammianus says that the embassies sent to Julian from the remotest regions of the world, about which he told his readers in the last paragraphs of the preceding chapter, provide a good opportunity to embark upon an excursus on the Pontus Euxinus.¹² From this we may also infer that the digression was intended to honour Julian and to demonstrate that his influence went beyond the frontiers of the Empire. Ammianus does not deal merely with the Pontus Euxinus. He begins his digression with a description of the Aegean Sea and following the coastline of what is now north-western Turkey he arrives by

cursus de los Persas de Amiano Marcelino (XXIII, 6)", *Veleia* 7 (1990) 351-375; for the excursus on the Huns (31.2), see C. King, "The Veracity of Ammianus Marcellinus' Description of the Huns", *AJAH* 12 (1987 [1995]) 77-95. On the digressions of Ammianus in general, see Matthews, *The Roman Empire* (n. 5) 389-392. For a discussion on what constitutes a formal digression/excursus in Ammianus, see Barnes, *Ammianus Marcellinus*, 222-224.

¹¹ Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire (A.D. 354-378)*, Selected and Translated by Walter Hamilton with an Introduction and Notes by Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (Penguin Books 1986).

¹² *Appositum 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.*

way of the Bosphorus at the Black Sea.¹³ The structure of the excursus offers no great difficulties, as the following survey shows:

§§ 1-8	Journey from the Aegean to the Pontus Euxinus (PE)
§§ 9-13	The PE's geography in general
§§ 14-19	The south coast
§§ 20-29	From the river Thermodon to the river Tanais
§§ 30-36	Lake Maeotis (= Sea of Asov) and surroundings
§§ 37-45	The (north-)western coast, in three parts, a) its general shape (§ 37), b) 'beginning' (§§ 38-41), c) end (§§ 43-45)
§§ 46-48	Climate and fishes

It is obvious from this structure that Ammianus' main course is to follow the coastline of the Black Sea in an anti-clockwise direction with the Thracian Bosphorus as starting point.¹⁴ Ammianus here adopts the style of the more recent *periploi*, whereas those of the older type follow a clockwise direction. A *periplus* provided geographical data on sea routes naming towns, rivers, peoples etc. as well as sailing distances between towns, rivers and suitable landing places. *Periploi* had therefore a practical purpose and were mainly used by sailors. Although Ammianus follows the geographical scheme of a *periplus*, his digression is more than just a description of the coastline of the Black Sea. Ammianus provides a great deal of other information on various subjects, as for instance on mythology, on the Amazons (22.8.18-19), on history, and on the various nations which lived near the Black Sea.

In comparison with true *periploi*, Ammianus' description of the Black Sea is disappointing and does not display an elaborate geographical and topographical knowledge of the region. The Black Sea, its coast and the various settlements there were in fact well known since the time of the great Greek colonizations, i.e. the eighth and seventh centuries BCE. Herodotus wrote elaborately about the area, even though it must be admitted that his knowledge about its geography was a mess. But thereafter knowledge increased, as is shown by the *periplus* of Skylax (4th cent. BCE), and the works of other Greeks of the Hellenistic period, such as Demetrios of Kallatis, Ps. Skymnos, Eratosthenes, Apollodorus and Poseidonios. In spite of the fact that their

¹³ Emmett, *Introductions and Conclusions* (n. 10), 28 notes that the introduction at 22.8.1 is misleading. The digression opens with a description of the Aegean Sea, whereas the introduction promises to give information *super Traciarum extimis situque Pontici sinus*.

¹⁴ This is quite nicely mentioned by Ammianus himself in 22.8.10: *omnis autem eius velut insularis circuitus litorea navigatio*.

writings have not, or have sometimes only fragmentarily, been preserved, we can get a sound impression of their knowledge of the Black Sea region from the *Geography* of Strabo.¹⁵ Most of Strabo's information goes back to his Greek predecessors. It appears from Strabo that the available geographical knowledge of the Black Sea region was vast and pretty detailed. We may conclude the same from authors who were active in the first centuries of our era, like Pomponius Mela (*De Chorographia*, Bk. II), Pliny the Elder (*Nat. Hist.*, esp. Bks. IV and VI), the geographer Ptolemy, and the great historian Arrian, who wrote a *Periplus Ponti Euxini*. That in Ammianus' own time and thereafter the Black Sea and the regions bordering on it were well known appears from a sixth-century *periplus* composed by an Anonymus.¹⁶ Ammianus' geographical information is in glaring contrast with the achievements of these authors. His topographical information leaves much to be desired, as for instance in the case of the cities Hermonassa and Phanagoras which he calls islands, or the naming of rivers and towns in the wrong order.¹⁷ From time to time, Ammianus gives the impression of not having any clear idea about the exact location of a town or region, as may be surmised from vague expressions as "not far from there" (*haud procul inde*, 22.8.20), "nearby" (*prope*, 22.8.30) or "a long distance away" (*longo exinde intervallo*, 22.8.41). In contrast with the *periplooi* and with Strabo and Ptolemy, Ammianus hardly ever indicates precise distances in stadia or miles.¹⁸

Apart from these matters of detail, there is a more fundamental problem which indicates that Ammianus only had a faint idea of the shape of the Black Sea. Ammianus likens the spatial form of the Black Sea to a Scythian bow.¹⁹ Now he is fully entitled, and in a sense, even obliged, to do so, since

¹⁵ For Strabo on the Pontus Euxinus, see Bks. VII, XI and XII.

¹⁶ For the text of this *Periplus Ponti Euxini*, see A. Diller, *The Tradition of the Minor Greek Geographers* (Amsterdam 1986).

¹⁷ *insulae sunt Phanagorus et Hermonassa ...* (22.8.30). He mentions for instance *Sangarius et Phyllis et Lycus et Rhebo fluvii* (22.8.14) in the wrong order since this must be Rhebas, Psilis, Sangarius, Lycus. In 22.8.16 he mentions *Heraclea et Sinope et Polemonion et Amisos...et Tios et Amastris*; the correct topographical sequence from west to east is: Heraclea, Tius, Amas-tris, Sinope, Amisus, Polemonion. The selection of rivers and towns is also not always comprehensible. See for more examples and details the commentary on 22.8 in Den Boeft et al., *Commentary on Ammianus Marcellinus XXII* (n. 1).

¹⁸ He only does so twice; in 22.8.10 mentioning the circumference of the Black Sea (*viginti tribus dimensa milibus stadiorum*) and in 22.8.20 giving the distance between the promontory Carambis on the south coast of the Black Sea and the opposite lying Criumetopon, the southern promontory of the Crimea (*Haud procul inde attollitur Carambis placide collis...cuius e regione est Criumetopon...duobus milibus et quingentis stadiis disparatum*).

¹⁹ 22.8.10: *in speciem Scythici arcus nervo coagmentati geographiae totius assensione firmatur*.

all ancient descriptions of the Pontus Euxinus have this comparison.²⁰ Six times in the digression he refers to this bow.²¹ However, from these comparisons of the shape of the Black Sea to the Scythian bow, the reader is led to doubt seriously whether Ammianus had a generally correct picture of the Pontus Euxinus.²² That something is wrong becomes most obvious from the fact that Ammianus situates the Sea of Asov (*Palus Maeotis*) on the eastern side of the Black Sea and not to the north, a mistake which is not made by the geographers or in the *periploi*.²³

Ammianus' geographical ignorance and mistakes seem all the more surprising since he had indicated in the introduction to the digression (22.8.1) that he would give an accurate description of the topography of the Black Sea based on his own observation and on what he had read (*visa vel lecta*). Of course, we should not judge Ammianus according to modern standards. We now possess detailed geographical knowledge which is laid down in accurate maps. Since the ancients' conceptualization of geography was quite different from that of modern men, they did not have, and therefore did not use, maps as we know them today. The ancients made use of what are called 'mental maps', formulated in their minds from written descriptions, oral information or their own experience and observation.²⁴ In their mental conception of geography, there was no need for absolute distances and precise locations; a relative idea of places, rivers, distances etc. apparently sufficed. Seemingly, a basic geographical sense and a usable mental image of a region were what the ancients desired, instead of our modern absolute and accurate geographical descriptions and maps. The ancient geographical conception could do very well with a verbal depiction. It becomes evident that Ammianus composed his digression on the Black Sea mainly on the basis of

²⁰ E.g. Sall. *Hist.* 3.63; Str. 2.5.22 (125C); Plin., *Nat. Hist.* 4.76; Pomp. Mela 1.102; Val. Flacc. 4.728.

²¹ 22.8.10, 13, 20, 37, 42 and 43.

²² This was also already noted by H. Berger, *Die geographischen Fragmente des Eratosthenes* (Leipzig 1880) 334-335: "Übrigens bekundet die...Darstellung Ammians völlige Unklarheit...obschon er bemüht ist, die allgemeine Orientierung nach der Figur des Bogens durchzuführen". See also I. Gualandri, "Fonti geografiche de Ammiano Marcellino XXII 8", *Parola del Passato* 23 (1968) 199-211, 204-208.

²³ 22.8.11. J. Fontaine, *Ammien Marcellin. Histories livres xx-xxii* (Paris 1996 [Budé]) n. 659 ad 22.8.11: "Ammien commet...une grave erreur d'orientation...".

²⁴ See for this especially T. Bekker-Nielsen, "Terra Incognita: the Subjective Geography of the Roman Empire", in: *Studies in Ancient History and Numismatics presented to Rudi Thomsen* (Aarhus 1988) 148-161; K. Brodersen, *Terra Cognita. Studien zur römische Raumerfassung*, Spudasmata 59 (Hildesheim/Zürich/New York 1995), with extensive bibliography. For Ammianus as geographer, see Gavin A. Sundwall, "Ammianus Geographicus", *American Journal of Philology* 117 (1996) 619-643.

writings. His claim to autopsy is merely an agreeable fiction, of a kind far from alien to ancient historical writing.

Although Ammianus had travelled extensively all over the Roman Empire, it seems that with respect to the digression under discussion his own observation was limited to the Aegean Sea, Thrace and the Bosphorus—and that only partly—and that he had gathered most, if not all, of his information on the Black Sea from books.²⁵ As an author living in Late Antiquity, Ammianus could have chosen from many geographical works for the purpose of composing his digression on the Black Sea, since the tradition of geographical descriptions of this region went back for some thousand years. However, he does not seem to have used technical geographical treatises as the main sources for his excursus on the Black Sea littoral.

It is in general very difficult and often even impossible to establish which sources were consulted by Ammianus for the composition of his *Res Gestae*. This applies to the historical narrative as well as to the digressions. The digression on the Black Sea is generally believed to be a compilation of various sources,²⁶ but exactly which sources is hard to tell. Possibly Ammianus had Pliny's *Natural History* and Solinus' *Collectanea rerum memorabilium* on his desk, as well as Sallust's *Historiae*.²⁷ But considering his geographical errors and his wrong impression of the shape of the Pontus Euxinus it is highly unlikely

²⁵ Ammianus had long been a *protector domesticus* (14.9.1), a general staff officer elected to serve the emperor in person. As a military man Ammianus travelled around the Empire. He was in Gaul campaigning with the then Caesar Julian against the invading German tribes, he visited e.g. Thrace, Greece, Egypt, the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire and Persia. Contrary to Sundwall, *Ammianus Geographicus* (n. 24) 626-627, I consider it very unlikely that Ammianus' travel experiences and his own authority played an important role with regard to the contents of the geographical digressions; in fact, his description of the Black Sea littoral shows no sign at all of personal experience.

²⁶ See on Ammianus' sources for his geographical digressions: Gardthausen, "Die geographischen Quellen Ammians" (n. 3); Gualandri, "Fonti geografiche" (n. 22). Fontaine, *Ammien Marcellin* (n. 23) n. 604 ad 22.8.1 argues—like Mommsen, "Ammians Geographica" (n. 2) and Gualandri (211: "...un lavoro di mosaico, ottenuto con elementi di provenienza diversissima...")—that Ammianus had used a variety of sources; hence the many mistakes ("La variété des sources entraîne d'ailleurs des contradictions et des ruptures dans l'ordre géographique de l'exposé"). Chr. Danoff, "Pontos Euxeinos", *RE Suppl.* 9 (1962) 866-1175, 917 thinks that Ammianus made use of a now lost *periplus*.

²⁷ 22.8.44-45 on the mouths on the Danube bears a striking similarity to Solinus 13.1. Sallust had included in the third book of his *Historiae*—a work which is only fragmentarily preserved—a digression on the Pontus Euxinus and Ammianus may have used it, although this cannot be proven. However, throughout the *Res Gestae* there are many indications that Ammianus knew Sallust's work.

that he had consulted any serious geographical works.²⁸ This is in spite of the fact that he mentions three famous Greek geographers in § 10 of his digression: Eratosthenes, Hecataeus and Ptolemy; but these are probably only mentioned to add authority to his argument on the circumference of the Black Sea.²⁹

Which sources, then, did he use? It has become clear that to answer this question we should not look upon the digression as a geographical treatise but primarily as a literary exercise designed to please Ammianus' readers and/or listeners. The latter would not have been much interested in the exact location of towns, rivers, in precise distances etc., but rather in the histories, myths and stories which were considered to have taken place in the Black Sea area and with which they would already have been familiar. Information of this kind is not to be found in geographical treatises.

The literary nature of the digression is indicated by Ammianus' own expression, *ut poetae locuntur* at 22.8.13. There are several poetical works which come into consideration. First of all, there is Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*, perhaps the ultimate source of some of the information.³⁰ There are several places in Ammianus' digression which remind us strongly of Apollonius.³¹ However, the *Argonautica* is not a *periplus*, and Ammianus had evidently used some sort of *periplus* as a model.

There is, however, a work which Ammianus could have known well and used, namely the *Περιήγησις τῆς οἰκουμένης*, a poem written by a certain Dionysius of Alexandria in 124 CE.³² Dionysius' poem was a "Lehrdicht" of 1187 hexametric verses, making a tour of the world and telling readers about its basic geography. It was composed in the Greek of Homer and Hesiod. The hexametric form was undoubtedly chosen to make it easier to memo-

²⁸ I do not agree at all with Sundwall's opinion, "Ammianus Geographicus" (n. 24) 640, that Ammianus was an authority on geography. Careful scrutiny of the Black Sea digression demonstrates beyond any doubt that he was not.

²⁹ Ammianus' reference to these three authorities on geography is rather clumsy, since as far as is known nowhere in their works did Hecataeus and Ptolemy give any information on the circumference of the Pontus Euxinus. Eratosthenes did: 20.000 stadia; Eratosth. fr. III B 39 = H. Berger, *Die geographischen Fragmente* (n. 22) 270.

³⁰ Gualandri, "Fonti geografiche" (n. 22) 209: "...l'utilizzazione, da parte di Ammiano, di una fonte prosastica (parafrasi e commentario) che ad Apollonio ora sembra strettamente legata".

³¹ One of the clearest instances is Ammianus' phrase *Haud procul inde attollitur Carambis, placide collis contra septentrionem Helicen exurgens* in 22.8.20 which is strongly reminiscent of Apoll. Rhod. 2.360-1. For more examples see Gualandri, "Fonti geografiche" (n. 3) 209-11.

³² This was already noticed by Gardthausen (n. 3) 539 and Gualandri, "Fonti geografiche" (n. 22) 200ff.

rise and recite the poem. Dionysius' description of the world was a compilation of geographical knowledge of the time. But the poem does not deal with geography and topography *stricto sensu* and it includes history, mythology and ethnography. Its purpose was to teach geography, which in Antiquity was not considered a subject of education on its own. The only way to learn something about geography was through references in literary works and, once it was published, through this work of Dionysius. It is therefore not surprising that Dionysius' poem became very popular. The text was widely known in the fourth century, Ammianus' own time. It was translated (rather freely) into Latin by Rufius Festus Avienus (*Descriptio Orbis Terrarum*), and we know that the famous fourth-century orator Themistius was acquainted with the work (*Or.* 30.183f.).³³ It is very likely that in Late Antiquity Dionysius' poem was used as a school-text. Ammianus may have memorised it himself when he was a schoolboy at Antioch.³⁴ Roughly speaking, verses 652-821 deal with the Black Sea and its surroundings and thus cover a large part of the regions described by Ammianus. There are some interesting similarities between Ammianus' digression and Dionysius' poem. There are parallels with respect both to form and to contents; Dionysius mentions peoples and rivers which are also referred to by Ammianus. Furthermore, Dionysius also likes to alternate his geographical description with stories from Greek mythology and history.³⁵ Even Ammianus' wrong impression of the shape of the Black Sea with the Sea of Asov east instead of north of the Pontus Euxinus may go back to the not altogether clear comparison of the Pontus with the Scythian bow in Dionysius.³⁶

Dionysius' poem is not a geographical manual, but is in the first place a literary work presenting geographical information.³⁷ The same is true of

³³ The text was also later known and regularly referred to, for instance by Cassiodorus and Stephanos of Byzantion. The latter quotes it regularly in his *Ethnika*, an encyclopaedia of geographical names. The work is also quoted in the well-known Byzantine encyclopaedia entitled *Etymologicum Genuinum*. Its popularity in the Middle Ages is proved by the existence of more than 130 mss. Not only was the poem appreciated for its literary qualities, but Dionysius himself was considered an expert on geography.

³⁴ Although recently other places have been suggested as Ammianus' native city, I still think that Antioch is the most likely option; see John Matthews, "The Origin of Ammianus", *Classical Quarterly* 44 (1994) 252-269.

³⁵ 22.8.31 (on the Agathyrsi) has a clear correspondence with Dion. Per. 318; 22.8.25 (on Troy)—Dion. Per. 682ff.; 22.8.27 (on the Amazons)—Dion. Per. 659ff.; see further Gualandri, "Fonti geografiche" (n. 22) 204 n. 19.

³⁶ Dion Per. 157-63, esp. 161-3. See also Gualandri (n. 22) 204-8.

³⁷ See for this the introduction to Dionysius' work by C. Jacob, *La description de la terre habitée de Denys d'Alexandrie ou la leçon de géographie* (Paris 1990) and the introduction by Kai Brodersen, *Dionysios von Alexandria. Das Lied von der Welt* (Hildesheim/Zürich/New York

Ammianus' digression. Both authors wrote for the same audience, an audience interested not so much in factual geographical information, but in an image of the world or a certain region—as in the case of the Black Sea—presented in a literary form. It might even be that Ammianus' readers and/or listeners knew Dionysius' poem, or its Latin translation, from their own schooldays and that Ammianus' digression appealed intentionally to what they had learned from it.

Ammianus' choice of Dionysius' poem as his main source³⁸ shows that it was not his real intention to offer to his audience a geographical manual or a guide for travellers, like a 'real' *periplus*, but a cultural showpiece in which his readers and listeners would take delight. The general evocation of a geographical image of the Black Sea littoral could therefore suffice and Ammianus did not have to bother greatly about the correctness of his information. He would not be judged on that by his audience. A prerequisite for an entertaining digression seems to have been the inclusion of mythological, historical and ethnographical themes. This was the kind of digression educated inhabitants of the Roman Empire expected in a literary and historical work.³⁹ It would not amaze me, even though I cannot prove it, that the geographical knowledge of the educated Roman did not go beyond the kind of information Dionysius and Ammianus presented.

We should therefore look upon Ammianus' digression on the Black Sea as in the first place a piece of literature and not as a geographical treatise for practical use. This puts his information in another perspective and (partly) explains the author's imprecise knowledge. This approach to the digression is more in keeping with Ammianus' intentions and the expectations of his Roman audience than Mommsen's harsh verdict "das eitle Bemühen um Allwissenheit".⁴⁰

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1994). See also Isabelle On. Tsavari, *Histoire du texte de la description de la terre de Denys de périégète* (Jannina 1990).

³⁸ Of course Ammianus must have used other sources, especially for his information on topography, but it is impossible to determine which sources he consulted for that.

³⁹ It is extremely doubtful, at least in the case of the excursus on the Black Sea littoral, whether Richter, "Die Funktion der Digressionen" (n. 5) 219-221, and Caltabiano, "Il carattere delle digressioni" (n. 5) 292-294 are right in arguing that the informative aspect of the digressions was of great importance for Ammianus. If this was so, Ammianus would surely have presented more correct information.

⁴⁰ I am grateful to Dr David Hunt for the revision of my English. The *Histos* editor was John Moles.