

J. den Boeft, J.W. Drijvers, D. den Hengst, and H.C. Teitler, *Philological and Historical Commentary on Ammianus Marcellinus XXIX*. Brill: Leiden, 2013. Pp. xxii + 302. ISBN 978-90-04-26153-2 (hardback); 978-90-04-26787-9 (e-book). \$162.

The publication of yet another volume in the long-running Dutch commentary on the *Res Gestae* of Ammianus Marcellinus is always a welcome event. The end is now within sight for a series which began with P. de Jonge's commentary upon Book 14, the first surviving book, in 1935. The pace was slower at the start, so that De Jonge had only completed commentaries upon 6 books (14–19) by his final volume in 1982, but the rate of completion has picked up noticeably in recent years with the publication of the commentary on Book 26 in 2007, that on Book 27 in 2009, that on Book 28 in 2011, and now this. Whereas the earlier volumes by De Jonge had provided a relatively sparse commentary, with the emphasis very much on the philological rather than the historical, the commentary became much fuller when three of the current team took over from De Jonge in the commentary upon Book 20 in 1987 (to be joined by J.W. Drijvers in the commentary upon Book 22 in 1995). The commentary is much more detailed than it had been initially, but the great virtue of the series continues to be the careful balance between the philological and the historical.

Book 29 covers events from early 371 until the middle of 375. It opens with a disappointingly brief account of a Roman campaign in Armenia in 371 which resulted in an armistice with the Persians lasting for the rest of the emperor Valens' reign, and ends with a brief account of flooding at Rome under the prefect Claudius during the winter of 374/75. In between, the focus falls very much on the treason trials under Valens at Antioch in Syria during 371–72 and the campaign by Theodosius the Elder against the rebel Firmus in Mauretania during 373–75, with lesser attention paid to the campaign by Valentinian I against the Alamanni in 371 and the invasion of the empire by the Quadi and Sarmatians in 374. Perhaps the prime interest of this book for students of Ammianus is what he says, or omits to say, concerning the behaviour of Theodosius the Elder and his son, the future emperor Theodosius the Great (379–95), during whose reign he published his history.

While this review focusses on the historical rather than the philological commentary, this should not detract from the contribution in the latter sphere, not least because the philological can affect the historical understanding of the text also. For example, the distinction drawn between *puniceus* and *purpureus* (p.210 on 29.5.48) serves as a useful warning of the need for linguistic precision and of the fallibility of several modern translations of Ammianus. However, the majority of readers will probably look first to the historical rather than to the philological commentary, and there, one feels, some weakness is evident, although this should not be overstated.

Several weaknesses in the historical commentary gradually become noticeable as one progresses through this volume. The first is that the bibliographical references can sometimes omit key modern studies of immediate relevance to the topic at hand. Two examples will suffice. For an explanation of the equipment and ritual used to divine the name of the successor to Valens (29.1.29–32), the reader is referred primarily to R. Wünsch, *Antikes Zaubergerät aus Pergamon* (Berlin, 1905), with no

mention of either A. Mastrocinque, ‘The Divinatory Kit from Pergamon and Greek Magic in Late Antiquity’, *JRA* 15 (2002), pp. 173–87, or R. Gordon, ‘Another View of the Pergamon Divination Kit’, *JRA* 15 (2002), pp. 189–98. Again, for the frequency of and sources for ancient floods at Rome (29.6.17–18), the reader is referred to J. Le Gall, *Le Tibre, fleuve de Rome, dans l’antiquité* (Paris, 1953), with no mention of G. S. Aldrete, *Floods of the Tiber in Ancient Rome* (Baltimore, 2007).

The second weakness is the lack of imagination, or simple curiosity, displayed by the commentators as they sometimes fail either to anticipate what one might have considered a fairly obvious question about the text or to mention what one might have considered fairly obvious alternatives to those interpretations which they do mention or canvass for. Too often, the overall approach seems to be rather pedantic or minimalist, if not fearful even. Perhaps they felt restrained by that most fierce-some of tyrants, the word-count, but one hopes that someone will loosen their bonds somewhat in the future.

To give an example, Ammianus is our sole source for the intriguing claim that Valentinian kept two pet bears, called Goldflake and Innocence, in cages near his bedroom, and that he eventually returned Innocence unharmed to the forest (29.3.9). The commentary (pp. 133–34) rightly refers the reader to the standard treatments of the subject of bears in antiquity, but does not comment of the wider phenomenon of imperial pets, that is, what pets other emperors are known to have kept (Tiberius’ snake (Suet. *Tib.* 72.2) and Honorius’ cock (Proc. *Bell.* 3.2.25–26) spring immediately to mind), and what patterns, if any, one can detect in such pet-keeping. The commentary rightly acknowledges that ‘there are other possibilities’ between dismissing Ammianus’ claim as a literary topos and swallowing it whole. However, while rejecting the argument of Weijenborg 1975 (omitted from the final bibliography) that these bears are ciphers for Valentinian’s successive wives, it fails to explore these other possibilities any more fully. Could these bears have been diplomatic gifts from some group of Alamanni, so that the return of Innocence actually represented the formal rejection of the treaty which had seen her bestowed upon the emperor in the first place? And whatever their origin, what was their intended purpose? To be used in bear-baiting? Or were they really ‘dancing bears’, trained to perform various amusing tricks?

In another example, the commentary spends a full page (pp. 180–81) discussing the significance of the claim that a tribune placed a torc upon the head of Firmus (29.5.20) without actually stating the obvious, that he may have done so in order to crown him as a king in succession to his father Nubel (29.5.2: *regulus*) rather than as an Augustus in rivalry with Valentinian. This is all the more puzzling because Orosius and Augustine specifically describe Firmus as *rex* and, despite Ridley’s translation, repeated here (p. 157), the term used by Zosimus (4.16.3: βασιλέα) to describe Firmus is probably best translated as ‘king’ also. Again, in order to resolve an apparent contradiction between the evidence of Zosimus (4.16.4) and Ammianus (29.6.5) as to the identity of the official whom the Quadi blamed for the murder of their king, the commentary simply repeats (p. 231) the assertion of *PLRE I* that Celestius and Marcellianus were possibly the same person, where Celestius may have been the *signum* of Marcellianus, without considering the alternative, more probable

in the light both of the corruption of many of the names within Zosimus' text and of Ammianus 29.6.12, that Zosimus' Celestius (Κελέστιος) is really a corruption of the name Equitius (Ἐκίτιος).

Finally, one sometimes feels that the commentators could have done a better job at alerting one as to how Ammianus so organizes his narrative in order to manipulate the reader. A good example occurs when he first describes how the governor Messalla was at hand to hurry the princess Constantia back to Sirmium following the invasion of Pannonia by the Quadi (29.6.7) before then describing the reluctant defence of Sirmium by the praetorian prefect Probus (29.6.9–11) as if these events were almost unconnected. The effect of this is to disassociate Probus from the saving of Constantia, even though it was probably her return to the city that forced him to remain there and defend it properly. The commentary does not notice this at all. More importantly, though, if Ammianus can so distort his narrative simply in order to indulge his dislike of Probus, how much further might he have gone to defend the reputation of the current emperor, and himself from charges resulting from any perceived slights to the same?

Ammianus' treatment of the circumstances surrounding the activities of the future emperor Theodosius the Great while *dux Moesiae* in 374 deserves far greater suspicion than it receives here. The succinct summary of the evidence for the career of Theodosius before he became emperor, particularly the statement (p. 243) that 'after the death of his father he retired to his estates in Spain', risks seriously misleading many readers. This gives the impression that Theodosius voluntarily returned to Spain in mourning at the accidental death of his father. However, the general context, the fact that his father was actually executed, and several close parallels, make it probable that he suffered dishonourable discharge and was ordered back to his native town in the manner of the *magister equitum* Marcellus in 356 (16.7.1) and the tribune Valentinian in 357 (16.11.7). Strangely, there is no mention anywhere of an important paper by W. Treadgold, 'Predicting the Accession of Theodosius I', *Mediterraneo Antico* 8 (2005), pp. 767-91, pointing to the potential relevance of the divination controversy at Antioch in 371 to the execution of Theodosius the Elder and the interruption of his son's career. One does not have to agree with everything therein, but it is a timely reminder that divination was taken far more seriously at this period than many commentators seem prepared to allow.

One cannot shake the suspicion that the destruction by the Quadi of two legions described by Ammianus (29.6.13) as the Pannonica and the Moesiaca may have been far more closely connected to the dishonourable discharge of Theodosius the Younger, and the execution of his father, than Ammianus would have us believe, and that he has deliberately composed his account so as to obscure this fact. Much depends on the interpretation of the terms Pannonica and Moesiaca. The commentators simply repeat the identification of these units with the *Pannoniciani seniores* and *Moesiaci seniores* of the *Notitia Dignitatum*, as suggested by earlier commentators, without explaining why these terms cannot have been more loosely used simply to describe the immediate origin of these legions, one from Pannonia and the other from Moesia, where Theodosius, as *dux Moesiae*, could somehow have been blamed for the poor performance of this second unit.

It is always difficult to know what to include in, or exclude from, a commentary, and judgements as to the correct balance between reporting on existing interpretations and venturing new interpretations will probably vary. This team of commentators has produced a fine volume which will assist all in deepening their understanding of Ammianus' history. It has certainly renewed my interest in this work, and provoked several ideas for potential investigation at a later date, which is precisely what one would expect of a good commentary. As should be clear from the above remarks, my only real complaint is that they have left me wanting more. Yet this may be no bad thing. One hardly needs to add that no serious student of Ammianus, or of the mid-fourth century AD, can afford not to buy this book.

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