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AMMIANUS MARCELLINUS AND THE THUCYDIDEAN HISTORICAL THOUGHT

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Abstract

This study aims to search for the potential influences of Thucydides' historical thought in Ammianus Marcellinus' work. As a historian who pursuits a place in the classical tradition, we nuanced at first the idea of Ammianus' as a continuator of Tacitus by stressing his connection with the classical Greek historiography. After that, we analyzed the methodology professed by both historians and how it was applied in their writing. Subsequently, we approached their notion of historical truth and narrative falseness and errors. Lastly, we examined the goals with the composition of their works that were professed by Ammianus and Thucydides. Taking all that into account, we conclude that, although Thucydides receives very little direct mention in the *Res Gestae*, the influence of the thucydidean historical thought in Ammianus surpasses the mere familiarity that Ammianus was thought to have had with the general precepts of his historical writing.

Keywords

Ammianus Marcellinus; Thucydides; Ancient History; Late Antique Historiography; Late Antiquity.

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Resumo

O presente estudo tem como objetivo buscar as possíveis influências do pensamento histórico de Tucídides na obra de Amiano Marcelino. Na qualidade de um historiador que tenta se inserir em uma tradição clássica, nuançamos no primeiro momento a imagem de Amiano como continuador de Tácito, dando ênfase em sua ligação com a historiografia grega. Depois disso, analisamos a metodologia professada por cada historiador e como ela foi aplicada ao longo das obras. Em seguida, abordamos suas noções de verdade histórica, erro e falsidade narrativa. Por fim, examinamos os objetivos professados por Amiano e Tucídides com a composição de suas obras. A partir disso, concluímos que, apesar de Tucídides ser pouco mencionado diretamente nas *Res Gestae*, a influência do pensamento histórico tucidideano em Amiano Marcelino ultrapassa a mera familiaridade com preceitos gerais de sua historiografia.

Palavras-chave

Amiano Marcelino; Tucídides; História Antiga; Historiografia Tardoantiga; Antiguidade Tardia.

A classicizing historian in Late Antiquity

During the 4th century AD, the Roman Empire found itself in a considerably different situation than the ones it had experienced in the centuries before. The troubles of the 3rd century had led to profound changes in the heart of the imperial administration and Diocletian's reforms and the Christianization of the empire under Constantine shaped the foundations of a world we got used to call now Late Antiquity (Marrou, 1977). The centralization and sacralization[2] of power and the astonishing growth of imperial bureaucracy (Jones, 1964: 67; 409; 1053–1056), direct products of such processes, also had similarly profound impacts on the social dynamics and the intellectual world of the period.

Consequently, Latin, a legal, administrative and military language in the Roman world, gained importance in the Greek speaking parts of the Empire at the end of the century. The military, economic and institutional stability of the eastern part of the Roman Empire, as opposed to the very delicate situation of the western provinces, which had suffered from the successive usurpations of Magnus Maximus (r. 383–388) and Eugene (r. 392–394), urged that the citizens of those regions to learn Latin with an aim to pursue better public careers. Constantinople, after all, had become the New Rome, and large cities such as Antioch turned out to be important administrative and strategic centers, counting on the frequent presence of the Augusti and Caesars responsible for maintaining the eastern praetorian prefectures.

In terms of literary production, these transformations were reflected in the decline of Latin works and the profusion of Greek texts in such a manner that only the last generation of the 4th century and the beginning of the 5th century managed to produce Latin works of comparable quality to their Eastern counterpart (Brown, 1971: 115–117). In this unique context of the 4th century, it is significant that the most eminent Latin poet and the most important Latin historian came from the eastern parts of the Empire, receiving notoriety when they emigrated to Italy: Claudius Claudianus

[2] As a result, the emperor becomes less and less accessible and gradually lost the image of a magistrate to become an autocrat. This can be seen in the epigraphic formula *D*(*ominus*) *N*(*oster*) increasingly adopted in the course of the century. An authority of the kind exercised by the *paterfamilias* over the household emanates from the *dominus*, and imperial power becomes the image of that authority. Therefore, the attainment of privileges and notoriety is directly proportional to one's proximity to the figure of the *princeps*.

was born in Alexandria, Egypt, around 370, and Ammianus Marcellinus was born around 330 in the Syrian region, probably in Antioch.

The History written by Ammianus Marcellinus, called Res Gestae as far as we know[3], is unique in its context in any aspect we analyze. It was composed when the Latin historiographical scene was dominated by chronicles and breviaries. In a more general picture, the Greek intellectual world produced the famous Ecclesiastical Histories, whose tradition was debuted by Eusebius of Caesarea at the beginning of the 4th century. Ammianus Marcellinus, despite knowing all the literary production of his time and having used it to a certain extent[4], shows a clear disdain for the former (something we will discuss later) and very little interest in the latter.

Bearing in mind that Eunapius' work survived only in a few fragments and that we know very little about the annals of Nicomachus Flavianus, Ammianus Marcellinus appears, in fact, as a "lone historian" of his time (Momigliano, 1974). It is not hard to see, therefore, that Ammianus is the only known historian of his time to develop a complex and detailed historical narrative with the aim of elucidating the important events that marked the History of the Roman Empire and transformed it in the last three centuries. Yet, it is worth noting that, when we acknowledge the "solitude" of the historian, we should only consider the literary production of his time, with which he establishes little or no dialogue, and that this is not valid when we direct our attention to the massive number of ancient authors that he mentions.

Throughout his work, Ammianus shows great knowledge of the literary tradition of earlier periods. It is possible to find numerous mentions of classical authors, both Greek and Latin; there are direct and indirect references to canonical Greco-Roman writers from Homer to Cicero, from Valerius Maximus to Ovid (Barnes, 1998: 193). Not without pretension, Ammianus does so in order to assert himself as heir to a classical heritage and to place himself as part of a tradition. The very way in which the *Res Gestae* were written, and the praise given to a valiant and intrepid Greco-

[3] This is the name that appears in the only and oldest mention of Ammiano's work, Prisc. *Inst. Gram*. 2, 487, 1 (Keil). All abbreviations follow the Oxford Classical Dictionary and all translations are our own, unless otherwise indicated.

[4] See, for example, the similarity between Eutr. 10.18.3 (*reliqua stilo maiore dicenda sunt*) and Amm. Marc. 31.16.9 ((...) *procudere linguas ad maiores moneo stilos*) and between Festus, *Breviarius*, 9 (*multa de saevitiis* (...) *potare sint soliti*) and Amm. Marc. 27.4.4 (*saevi quondam... bibentes avidius*).

Roman antiquity, in opposition to the vices of its time (e.g.: Amm. Marc. 31.5.14), is evidence of this.

Because of these peculiar characteristics, scholars of Late Antiquity didn't hesitate to look for a classical historian whose work Ammianus Marcellinus had used as a model for his *Res Gestae*. In addition to the language in which he writes, the time span that his narrative covers, from the accession of the emperor Nerva in 96 to the death of the emperor Valens at the battle of Adrianople in 378 (Amm. Marc. 31.16.9), would be a strong clue that he placed himself as a continuator of Tacitus, whose combined narratives (*Annales* and *Historiae*) would cover the entire period from Augustus to the death of Domitian in 96. A strong argument in favor of this idea is that, in Antiquity, it was common for an author to assert his literary authority by putting himself in the position of the continuator of another renowned author, picking up his writings from where he left off (Marincola, 1997: 237–241). As a tributary of the classical canon, Ammianus would certainly have been attentive to such classical historiographical conventions.

However, the first thirteen books of Ammianus' work, which narrate the events up to 353, have been lost, which means that we have nothing remotely close to an explicit statement such as we find in Xenophon's preface, who in continuing his narrative from where Thucydides had left off opens his work with the *meta de taûta* (after these events). Yet, the idea that Ammianus Marcellinus places himself as a continuator of Tacitus perpetuated itself in the studies that have as their object the *Res Gestae* and its composition. Scholars such as Otto Seck, in his entry for the 1894 *Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, and John C. Rolfe, in the introduction to his 1935 English translation of Ammianus, even considered that his work was called *Res Gestae a Fine Cornelii Taciti* (Histories from the ending point of Cornelius Tacitus). Subsequently, Edward A. Thompson (1947: 121) and Ronald Syme (1968: 503, n. 8) did not hesitate to name Ammianus "heir" to Tacitus.

There are, no doubt, striking similarities between Tacitus and Ammianus Marcellinus. In the Roman period, those are the only Latin historians who narrate a "history of the present time" on such a large scale and with such richness of detail; the *Historiae* and *Annales* of Tacitus, which circulated as a single work, amounted to 30 books, arranged in hexads like the work of

Ammianus, although it was composed in 31 books[5]. These similarities have led scholars to identify inescapable allusions in the *Res Gestae* to passages from Tacitus' works, such as the *sphragis* and the beginning of book 22. Many of these passages, however, are historiographical commonplaces, found also in Sallust and Livy, or poetic, found in Virgil. There are no parallels in Tacitus to the scenes, speeches, characterizations or digressions found in Ammianus Marcellinus; we find in no other historian such a vivid first-person account of his activities as a soldier like when Ammianus reports his actions under Ursicinus, and the narrative of Tacitus' *Historiae*, encompassing twenty-seven years in twelve books, would be considerably denser than that of the thirteen lost books of Ammianus Marcellinus, which should account for 255 years (Kelly, 2010: 350–353).

Indeed, Ammianus' intent to pick up where Tacitus left off does not necessarily imply that he shares the same ideas and beliefs about History, his methods of investigation, or his narrative style. John Marincola (1997: 239) rightly noted that the practice of continuation was a way of claiming the importance and value of contemporary history in such a fashion as to indicate that the author himself wishes to insert himself in a certain historiographical tradition. For this reason, it is worth keeping in mind the well-placed warning of Gavin Kelly (2010: 352), according to whom the exaggerated search for connections between Tacitus and Ammianus can make us ignore other important influences. The soldier historian was, after all, a Greek, and he insists on making this element of identity explicit in his *sphragis*[6] and through his use of deep-read Greek vocabulary throughout the work[7]. His geographical digressions, which in the totality of the narrative should cover if not the whole known world, at least the Roman provinces, find a parallel only in Herodotus; his insertion of earthquakes, plagues and eclipses throughout the narrative and the temporal marking of his history through the seasons of the year certainly refer to Thucydides.

If, on the one hand, Herodotus was later celebrated more for his eloquence and style than for his qualities as a historian (Racine, 2016), on the other

[5] Some scholars suggested the historian's intent to "go a book beyond" Tacitus, others think that the first book could've been only an index, as Pliny does in his *Natural History*. Barnes (1998: 20–31) proposes that there were 36 books, arranged in six hexads, whose numbering was corrupted in the manuscript transmission.

[6] Amm. Marc. 31.16.9: "These things I, as once a soldier and a Greek (...) explained according to the extent of my abilities (*haec ut miles quondam et Graecus* (...) *pro virium explicavi mensura*)."

[7] It is worth mentioning the exceptional digression in Amm. Marc. 17.4.18–23, in which the historian inserts the Greek translation of the text of an Egyptian obelisk in the Circus Maximus.

hand, the Athenian Thucydides continued to be, during the period of the Empire, the great example of historian. Longinus, in his treatise on the sublime, suggests that any writer who wishes to compose a passage that demands "greatness of thought and rectitude of words (*megalo phrosýnē kaiy' psēgoría*)" must compose his narrative bearing "in mind how Thucydides would have made it sublime in his history (Long. *Sub*. 14.1: *pōs d' an hypsōsan* (...) *ē en historía Thoukydídēs*.)". In the second century, Lucian of Samosata is categorical in his statement that it was Thucydides who "ordered in a good fashion [the principles of historical writing] and separated the good historian from the bad (Luc. *Hist. Consc.* 42: *eû mála toût' enomothétēse kai diékrinen aretēn kai kakían syngraphikēn*.)."

Ammianus Marcellinus explicitly mentions Herodotus only once, in Amm. Marc. 22.15.28, to lend authority to his assertion about the difficulty involved in the construction of the pyramids of Egypt. On another occasion, however, he makes a harsh criticism of the "inventive Greece" (*Graecia fabulosa*. Amm. Marc. 18.6.23)" when reporting the magnitude of the Persian troops contained in Doriscus, an event narrated in Hdt. 7.59. On the other hand, Thucydides is mentioned by name at least twice in his work: in Amm. Marc. 19.4.4, when he draws a parallel between the plague that ravaged the city of Amida in Mesopotamia, during the siege of 359, and the epidemic that took Athens during the second year of the Peloponnesian War, in 430 BC; and in Amm. Marc. 23.6.75, when he praises the Athenian by calling him "the most illustrious witness (*auctor amplissimus*)." Moreover, Eunapius of Sardis, one of the historians to whom Ammianus very possibly intended to respond in his narrative of the battle of Adrianople (Kulikowsky, 2012), places himself as a follower of Dexippus of Athens, a historian who modeled his work after his Athenian predecessor (Puech, 2011: 26–29), thus intending to insert himself in the Thucydidean historical tradition.

In view of his Greek heritage, classicizing writing, objectives and peculiar characteristics of his work, it is worth asking: would it be possible to assert, despite the loss of a big portion of the *Res Gestae*, that Ammianus Marcellinus was a Thucydidean historian? What were the influences of the Athenian historian-general on the Antiochene historian-soldier? In order to investigate these issues and their limits, we will place side by side notable and essential aspects of Thucydides' and Ammianus' historical thought in order to seek their similarities and divergences: the methodological elements that both authors construct before their audience and that appear explicit in their own paragraphs and throughout the

narrative; their idea of historical truth and the risks of corruption of the narrative and their goals with the composition of their works.

The relentless pursuit of accuracy in the historical account: the methodology of Ammianus Marcellinus and Thucydides

> I was able **to search for the truth** (*veritatem scrutari*) in every possible way, I described these things **after laying out the order** (*ordine... exposito*) of the numerous events that I was allowed **to see because of my age, or to know by rigorously questioning those involved in the middle of it** (*perplexe interrogando versatos in medio*). The rest, which the text about to follow **will reveal** (*aperiet*), **I will develop in the most precise manner** (*limatius absolvemus*) according to the best of my abilities, not at all fearing the critics of the long work, for brevity is to be praised when it breaks inopportune delays without subtracting in any way from the **knowledge of the facts** (*cognitioni gestorum*). (Amm. Marc. 15.1.1. emphasis added)

> As to the events of the war themselves, however, **I resolved** (*ēxíōsa gráphein*) not to rely in my writing on what I learned from chance sources or even on my own impressions, but both in the cases where **I was present myself** (*autos parēn*) and in **those where I depended on others I investigated** (*epexelthōn*) **every detail with the utmost concern for accuracy** (*para tōn állōn hoson dynaton akribeiāi*). (Thuc. 1.22.2, translated by Jeremy Mynott, emphasis added.)

The modern historian, for whom the analysis of the intertext plays a crucial role, finds no great difficulty in identifying the similarity between the passages that open this item, guided by the contrasted excerpts and highlighted original terms. In a broader dimension the exposition of historiographical methods is part of a historian's assertion of authority before his audience, that is, part of his effort to construct a persuasive and credible persona (Marincola, 1997: 1). This means that there is always a fundamentally dialogical dimension in the writing of History that demands this methodological systematization as part of the rhetoric that is suitable for the historiographical genre. Therefore, it is safe to say that Ammianus and Thucydides not only make these arguments in a similar manner, but they do so with the same goal: to establish a dialogue with their audience and differentiate their work from others of a different nature.

But even though Ammianus composed his work as a personal endeavor and not as an official history commissioned by kings and emperors, like Greek historiography in its early days (Raaflaub, 2013: 4), it should be noted that his world is not the same as the one in which Thucydides lived. Therefore, the arguments that guarantee both authors' literary authority

are constructed for different audiences and opposing narratives of a different nature that are specific to each author's time.

For the Athenian historian, his account differs from that of the poets and logographers in a sense that it is not a heroic and laudatory narrative (Thuc. 1.21.1: *mythōdēs*), stories that, even if they are not necessarily false or intentional lies, cannot be subjected to the test of authenticity (Thuc. 1.20.1: *abasanístōs*) in the light of the precepts that he establishes himself. There are, from the outset, two temporalities that are subjected to his scrutiny and his tools: the previous events and those "even older", considered by the historian as not subject to crystalline apprehension (Thuc. 1.1.3: *saphōs* (...) *heureîn*). The metaphor of light is important for us to understand the limits that Thucydides puts on his own method. Like a lamp, everything in its direct reach can be illuminated, exposed, brought to light, whereas the farther away from it, the less an object becomes visible, clear, distinguishable. The remote past is the one that Thucydides deals with in his Archaeology (Thuc. 1.2–19), a reconstruction based on not-very-reliable evidence, accessible only by oral and written tradition, by the observation of contemporary life and by ancient remains, treated by a calculation of verisimilitude (*eikos*) (Prado, 2013: xlii–xliii).

Contrary to these, the events that he narrates properly are those that are in a certain way "closest to the lamp". The trust placed in them comes from an investigation whose methods are set out in paragraph 22, which produces evidence (Thuc. 1.21.1: *tekmēria*) on which Thucydides bases his search for the truth (Thuc. 1.20.3: *hē zētēsis tēs alētheías*). In this sense, although the methodological part of his first book, namely paragraphs 20 to 23, establishes a series of procedures by which the historian must be guided when constructing his account so as not to make mistakes[8], the search for the truth of which Thucydides speaks is also an opening, an invitation for the reader to investigate with him, to lean over the facts and to establish a dialogue with his method as a way to construct their own historical knowledge (Sebastiani, 2015: 206–208). It is, therefore, not a solitary search by the author for the truth, but above all, a dialogical investigation, therefore rhetorical, in which the reader also participates, is called to share his methods and to judge them pertinent or not for the

[8] The construction by negatives in these paragraphs marks the distance that is taken "respectively from oral traditions (*akoas*), from carelessness (*abasanístōs*), from ignorance (*ouk ísasin*), from forgetfulness (*amnēstoúmena*), from incorrectness (*ouk orthōs oíontai*), from carelessness (*atalaípōros*), from precipitation (*ta hetoîma*), from equivocation (*ouch hamartánoi*) (Sebastiani, 2015: 205)"

apprehension of an event as complex and colossal as the Peloponnesian War.

Ammianus Marcellinus, in turn, also responds to the literary production of his time. By making reservations about the brevity of a work of historical character, the Antiochene historian stands opposed to the breviary writers of his time such as Festus, who already warns at the beginning of his work: "I will state the facts, but I will not elucidate them (Festus 1.1: *res gestas signabo, non eloquar*)". Certainly, as Guy Sabbah (1978: 11–12) has already observed, the difficulty of studying the methodology of Ammianus Marcellinus' historical investigation is twofold: firstly due to the fact that the first book of the work has been lost, and although the *sphragis* of the Res Gestae can bring some aspects about the scope of the work and the objective of the historian to light, we do not have his preface nor a clear methodological statement as we find in Thucydides. We must be content, therefore, with scattered information and statements along the work, from which emerges less of a concise theory of History and more emotional reactions – in a way – to possible criticisms whose meaning seems arguably vague.[9] The second point refers to the number of books that have been lost. Therefore, it does not seem fair to judge how Ammianus' methods were applied to his work as a whole when many important elements of his narrative may have disappeared or transformed in the second part of the text. In any case, Sabbah believes, the major themes of his historiographical methods remain constant throughout the work in a way that the prefaces to books 15 and 16 indicate, it seems, a change in the tone of the narrative rather than the substance of what is narrated.

The mass of events that Ammianus sets out to describe in just 31 books means that the thirteen lost books must encompass an average of twenty years each, in contrast to the little more than a year per book of the remaining eighteen books. For this reason, scholars thought the work was divided in two parts, the first of which would be a kind of "archaeology" much larger than that of the Peloponnesian War, which would serve as an introduction to Ammianus' "Contemporary History" (Matthews, 1989: 27–30). The second part, beginning in the fifteenth book, would be a more elaborate (*limatius*) narrative than the previous one, perhaps because it is closer to the time in which the *Res Gestae* was written (the metaphor of the lamp is also worth mentioning here).

[9] Amm. Marc. 15.1.1: "the critics of the long work (*obtrectatores longi operis*)"; 26.1.1: "the inopportune critics (*examiners intempestivi*)"; 31.5.11: "those who are ignorant about the past (*Ignari antiquitatum*)".

However, it is worth paying attention to the precise meaning of the word *limatius*, which is essential for understanding the opening paragraph of the book. It gets its meaning from the verb *limo*, which literally means to work with the rasp, to polish, to perfect, to finish. It is not enough, therefore, to set forth the order of events which have been seen or scrutinized through witnesses. In order to know the events of the past, it is necessary that the narrative be developed in a concise and clear way, even if this elongates the work. This task becomes even more complicated as the time of the narrative approaches the time of the historian himself. If, on the one hand, the events become clearer, since they happened a short time ago and there is both an abundance of witnesses and the historian's "fresh" memory, on the other hand, one is vulnerable to the criticism of those who may come to demand the reasons why one or another event was neglected. After all, polishing the narrative also means carving, chipping away, choosing the facts with which one works, leaving others aside as slivers of raw material.

In Ammianus' vision, the historian is not simply someone who can enumerate and describe all the minutiae of a period and arrange them in a chronologically established order. Temperance in this aspect of the historian's work is, therefore, fundamental, because if on the one hand the brevity of the epitomes deprives the interlocutor of historical knowledge, a long-winded and flowery narrative, such as that of the panegyrics, makes him lack perspective to understand the totality of the historical process that is intended to be brought to light. More than that, the historian recalls, "not everything that happened among insignificant people is worth narrating, and even if it were necessary to do so, even the records of the public registry offices themselves wouldn't suffice (Amm. Marc. 28.1.15)." Thus, the historical narrative presents itself – let us remember the verb limo – almost like a marble statue: one can sin both by over-thinning the raw material, to the point of disfiguring the work, and by the lack of finishing that can lead to its mischaracterization.

It is in this sense that another methodological paragraph emerges within the *Res Gestae*, composed when the narrative is already advancing to its final hexad, the account of the events under Valentinian, Valens and Gratian:

> The events were narrated with **the most zealous care** *(impensiore cura)* **the farthest reaches of the most recent memory** *(ad usque memoriae confinia proprioris)*. It was fitting that I should now withdraw my foot from the more well-known paths, both to avoid the dangers which often accompany the truth, and in order not to deal with inopportune critics of the fabric about to be woven hereafter, who grumble, as if aggrieved, that what the emperor said at the banquet has been neglected, or why it was omitted the reason why the soldiery

> was coerced to appear before the banners, or why it was not worth mentioning insignificant forts in the description of various regions, or why the names of all those who attended the tenure of the urban praetor were not pointed out, and many similar things **which are at variance with the precepts of history** *(praeceptis historiae dissonantia)*, **accustomed to discussing the greatness of the processes, not to inquiring into the minutiae of small claims** (*discurrere per negotiorum celsitudines assuetae, non humilium minutias indagare causarum*). Anyone who wishes to investigate those would hope to be able to enumerate those indivisible corpuscles that float in the midst of the void: atoms, as we call them. (Amm. Marc. 26.1.1, emphasis added)

At this point, it is worth considering Charles Fornara's (1990) remarks about the two prefaces that we find in book 15 and book 26 of the *Res Gestae*, often interpreted in isolation from the rest of the work and its narrative flow and emptied of its methodological meaning. Excerpt 15.1.1 was long taken as a mere warning of change in narrative style, indicating that the previous books would have been a more concise account, like a breviary. Passage 26.1.1, in turn, has been interpreted as a sign that Ammianus had changed his original plan to end the narrative with the death of Julian in 363, warning about the risks of a contemporary writing of History. Book 14, however, is no less detailed than those that follow it, and there is no textual evidence that Ammianus planned to end his narrative in book 25.

Neither of these interpretations considers that, in these two parts of the historical narrative, Ammianus had to deal with two different problems of methodological nature with regard to his sources. These two passages, therefore, must be read together. In book 15, the passage from the written documents as sources for the events until the execution of Constantius Gallus to the memory of those who experienced the later events, Ammianus included, already under the command of Ursicinus, demanded from the historian a declaration of his competence to write a history based on the account of those who were present at the events and the very clarity of his memory as a young soldier. In book 26, on the other hand, Ammianus is faced with the challenge of writing his history for an audience that certainly had very recent memories of the events he describes. Once again it is necessary to elucidate his historiographical methods in the face of the multiplicity of memories that, if enunciated in its entirety, would make his work impossible.

Thucydides also finds himself in a similar position. There is a kind of "second preface" in his work, located at the point in the narrative where the treaty of non-belligerence between Athens and Sparta comes to an end (5.26) and the second phase of the war begins. In a note to the passage in

his English translation, Mynott considers that the passage was "grafted" after the completion of the composition of the work, at least after 404 BC. The Athenian historian essentially responds to those who argue that the period of non-belligerence between Sparta and Athens was a period of peace, mentioning the times when hostilities erupted between the allies of one side and the other. In this passage, Thucydides reasserts his authority as one who was of an age to examine the course of events and even more: his position as an exile had allowed him to have access to various sides of events and to apply his understanding "to the accurate knowledge of things (Thuc. 5.26.5: *hopōs akribés ti eísomai*)". The events further reported by the Athenian historian are also not chosen at random, Thucydides seeks to demonstrate a point of view "in the light of the relevant facts (Thuc. 5. 26.2: *tois* (...) *ergois hōs diērētai*)", knowingly: that a truce in the midst of war does not mean peace.

The concern with the accuracy of the description of events, the zeal in the construction of the narrative and the dialogue with the readers are, therefore, aspects of both works that appear and reappear throughout the texts. But when it is not possible to clearly establish how an event occurred, that is, when the historian considers the information he receives about a given event to be insufficient or doubtful, it is also part of his methodological strategy, or rather, of his rhetoric of method (Pires, 2006: 285–300), to indicate the mishaps he encountered.

In Thucydides the first of these takes place in Thuc. 2.5, when the accounts of the Thebans and Platians differ on the terms of the release of the soldiers imprisoned in the city of Plataea. Thucydides chooses to report both versions and leaves it up to the reader to ponder them. In Thuc. 5.68, the Athenian admits he does not know the exact number of casualties of the armies that met at Mantinea, for one of the parties concealed their losses and the other exaggerated the casualties of his opponent. In Thuc. 3.113, the historian deliberately chooses not to report the number of ambraciotes killed in the campaign of Amphiloch, because the amount seemed to him absurd in relation to the total number of inhabitants of the city. In a similar way, Thucydides chooses not to register in Thuc. 3.87 the number of Athenians, besides those who were part of the army, who were killed on account of the recrudescence of the plague in the third year of the war, for no one has been able to calculate such a number.

We also find similar passages in Ammianus Marcellinus. In the last book, the Antiochene historian recounts the outcome of the battle of Marcianople, in the following terms:

> I beseech those who will read this, if there ever will be one, **to demand no detailed fact or death toll** (*nequis a nobis scrupulose gesta vel numerum exigat peremptorum*), for no nation was able to recount them. (Amm. Marc. 31.5.10, emphasis added).

The chaotic and disastrous battle of Adrianople also imposes a difficulty and leaves its mark on the work: the emperor Valens dies in the midst of the turmoil so that his body was never found. Faced with the various unverifiable versions of the last moments of the *princeps*, Ammianus is not embarrassed to report two of them that must have seemed to him the most believable: that the emperor died amid the common soldiers struck by an arrow (Amm. Marc. 31.13, 12) and that he took refuge wounded in a hovel that was set on fire by the Goths after the battle (Amm. Marc. 31.13.14–16).

Silence, when consciously announced, and the variety of possible versions of the same fact are therefore no problem for both historians. If all available methods fail, if the historian himself could not be present at the event he describes, or if no witness provides him with important information, it is better to admit it than to build his narrative around dubious accounts supplied by casual witnesses, or to rely on a conjecture which may even remotely pass for error or dishonesty when placed before the experience of those who also lived through the events, or if it does not pass the calculation of verisimilitude (*eikós*) of the readers, invited by historians to share their analysis of the facts.

Truth and lie in the historical account: Thucydides and Ammianus facing the risk of the unverifiable

The methodological rigor professed by the two historians had a clear raison d'être and was related to their notion of historical truth. After all, it was necessary, before a literate audience, to demonstrate full capacity to unveil historical truth through these methods. As Breno Sebastiani (2015: 219) has already noted, Thucydides thought of his narrative, the product of these investigative methods, as an expression of the creator *alētheia* itself. At the end his exposition of methods, Thucydides makes it clear what kind of narrative should be avoided in this quest for truth, through an oppositional construction that is very particular to him:

> Perhaps the absence of **the element of fable** (*men* (...) *to mē mythōdes*) in my work may make it seem less easy on the ear; but it will have served its purpose well enough if it is judged **useful** (*ōphelima*) by those who want to have **a clear view** (*de* (...) *to saphes*) of what happened in the past and what – the human condition being what it is – can be expected to happen again some time in the future **in**

> **similar or much the same ways** (*toiauta kai paraplēsai*). It is composed to be **a possession for all time** (*ktēma te es aiei*) and not just a performance-piece for the moment. (Thuc. 1.22.4, translated by Jeremy Mynott, emphasis added.)

A search for *mythōdes* in the TLG shows us that the term is certainly a Thucydian invention formed by the root of *mythos* (understood as the mythological narrative of gods and heroes, properly speaking) and the suffix -*ōdes*, used in adjectives that usually carry the sense of "smelling like" or "similar to". Thucydides uses this adjective in the neuter (*to*) and with a negative particle (*mē*) to precisely emphasize the fact that, despite dealing with great battles and a war that dragged on for decades, his narrative will not have the feature that was until then typical of war stories. The exaggeration and celebration of the glories of war, the exaltation of Greek virtues before the Persians or of the Athenian superiority over their adversaries would certainly please the listeners of those who wanted to feel flattered by the praise of their countrymen, ancestors or their city. But the production of an account "smelling like a myth" is not compatible with the methodology stated by the historian. In analyzing the use of the term, Stewart Flory (1990) proposes that *mythōdes* should be understood as the "patriotic" narrative, in a more specific sense, and as sentimental chauvinism in a more general sense. As is to be expected, although Thucydides recounts the battles in a very literary way, which could arguably be seen as a contradiction, he does not describe any superhuman act of bravery that changed the course of events in the Peloponnesian War.

Of course, this is not the only neologism Thucydides employs in his narrative, and its meaning, as in the other instances in which the historian conducts experiments with the Greek language, is clarified through its antithesis. In this excerpt, the antithesis made explicit by the use of the particles *men* ... *de* is another noun adjective in the neuter, *to saphes*. Sometimes understood as a paraphrase of truth itself or even exactness, its meaning is given by the genitives of the expressions that follow, of past and future events. The expression *to saphes* is, therefore, the expression of a reasonably clear certainty about human actions and behaviors that is produced by the careful and rational analysis of specific events, such as the Peloponnesian War, which can offer general paradigms for understanding the future (Scanlon, 2002), a subject that we will deal with in more detail in the next item. It is this "clear knowledge" built on empirical data as opposed to mythodes that makes it possible to understand a more fundamental truth about human actions.

In view of this, what constitutes a problem in the construction of this clear knowledge of the truth is the presence in the historical narrative of what

Thucydides skillfully calls *anexelenkta*[10] (Thuc. 1.21.1), the improbable and the unverifiable, which can contaminate the quest for truth with falsehood and damaging the *akribeia* of the work, appearing almost as if it were its antithesis within the Thucydides' historical thought. It is in this sense that emerges the historian's intervention in Alcibiades'[11] speech on the occasion of the second vote on the expedition to Sicily. In arguing for the maintenance of the plan that prevailed in the first ballot, one of Alcibiades' arguments is that the Sicilians did not have as many hoplites as they claimed, to which Thucydides counters by claiming that the other Greeks did not have them either, and that their numbers were greatly exaggerated (Thuc. 6.17.5: *epseusmenos*).

Ammianus, in turn, seems to use the term *veritas* on a few solemn occasions, in such a way that this rarity seems to indicate that it expresses in its purity the distant, if not inaccessible, ideal with which History is ultimately mixed up (Sabbah, 1978: 19). In his *sphragis*, the historian makes it very clear that the great enemies of a historical work are silence (*silentium*) and lie (*mendacium*), which can corrupt it (*corrumpo*). At key points in the narrative, Ammianus strives to dispel suspicions of corruption from his work for these two severe faults. One of these moments is the beginning of the narrative about the reign of Julian, an emperor much admired by the Antioquian due to his military and intellectual qualities (Carvalho, 1996). In stating that, when he was Caesar, Julian was the author of such great deeds in Gaul that he surpassed great achievements of the ancients, he warns us:

> whatever will be narrated, which is not adorned by **melodious falsehood** (*falsitas arguta*), but proven by the **stainless fidelity to the facts, guaranteed by the documentary evidence** (*fides integra rerum* (…) *documentis evidentibus fulta*), will be almost pertinent to the laudatory domain. (Amm. Marc. 16.1. 3, emphasis added).

At the end of the aforementioned battle of Marcianople, another very sensitive point of the work due to its uncertainties, Ammianus seeks to assure the reader:

> **The truth has been in no way concealed by the lie** (*veritate nullo velata mendacio*), surely it is enough to **assimilate** (*digerere*) the very main points of events: for in

[10] An eloquent composition of the negative particle *an-* with the verb *exelenchō*, literally "to refute" or "to confront".

[11] We follow the interpretation of Mynott, for whom the entire excerpt *kai mēn ... hōplisthē* seems like an interpolation made by Thucydides himself or some commentator.

> any case **honest integrity** (*integritas fida*) is needed for the memory of the events to be reported (Amm. Marc. 31.5.10, emphasis added).

The combinations of *integritas* and *fides* with their respective adjectives *integrus* and *fidus* represent the typical tautology of Ammianus' discursive style. It is this reinforcing formula, very incisive, that acts as a shield against anything that may corrupt the veracity of the historical narrative at delicate moments in which the historian can easily be accused of levity. This is, in other words, the historian's own statement of honesty. Through this, he seeks to assure the audience that his narrative runs according to the historical precepts established by the ancients, who saw history as part of the demonstrative genre, having a didactic and moral function (Ambrósio, 2005: 33). As such, history should be committed to the truth and not have as its primary goal merely to please the ears of the audience.

For this reason, the insertion of imperial speeches in the *Res Gestae* may feel somewhat strange. Those excerpts – twelve in total, never exceeding the limit of one per book – appear throughout the work bearing the same rhythmic prose divided into clausulae that we observe in the rest of the narrative. That alone should be a strong indication that they are not authentic (Laistner, 1963: 149–150).

Now, one might think that Ammianus' invention of these speeches would betray the very principles established by the historian, tainting his search for truth with lies, employed in the middle of the narrative for mere literary delight. However, according to the precepts of the ancient rhetoricians, the process of unveiling the truth before an audience requires the use of the art of rhetoric to make it convincing or plausible in such a way to give verisimilitude (*eikos*) the narrative. Certainly, this could involve the forging (*fingo*) of arguments and speeches, resulting in a figment (*ficta*) whose purpose could vary. If understood as a plausible reconstruction of events, made in good faith (*fides*), with the purpose of making clear the understanding of some subject, the integrity (*integritas*) of the work would not be compromised, but if the utterance were extended with the aim of deceiving the audience by lying (*mendacium*) we would be facing an openly false narrative (*falsa expositio*). There is a fundamental difference, therefore, between rhetorical fiction (*fictio*) as a tool that aims at verisimilitude and the invention of things that could not have happened (Kempshall, 2011: 350–352), such as what Ammianus characterizes as fable.

Within the logic of the *Res Gestae*, therefore, imperial speeches have a didactic objective that would keep them in the domain of plausibility and not of melodious falsehood. Certainly, in classical historiography, as a rule,

speeches appeared in pairs so that the audience could distinguish the arguments mobilized by one and the other part of a debate. However, given the autocratic nature of imperial power in Late Antiquity, there was no counterpoint that could be made to the emperor's discourse. Of the twelve speeches elaborated by Ammianus, ten are harangues of the emperors to their troops and seek to reveal to the listener an aspect that he would have considered important about the political reality of the Late Roman Empire: the situation of complete dependence of the rulers on the good will of the troops (Laistner, 1963: 150) and the disappearance from the public scene of anything that could be considered a political debate (Silva, 2007: 178).

Therefore, on his part, Thucydides ponders that the historical narrative cannot be composed "with a view to what is most attractive to the audience rather than what is true (Thuc. 1.21.1: *epi to prosagōgóteron tēi akroásei ē alēthésteron*)", thus differing himself from the logographers and poets, as we have seen. On his side, Ammianus uses the same argument to distance himself from the panegyrists who adorn their speeches with melodious falsehoods and reaffirms his honesty as a historian on several occasions. The *Res Gestae* were conceived, according to Ammianus himself, as "a work that made the truth known (Amm. Marc. 31.16.9: *opus veritatem professum*)", and as such differs from panegyrics in its purpose; of breviaries for their narrative structure, which aims to explain historical processes, and of biographies for not having an anecdotal character about the lives of the great characters[12], seeking more fundamental truths in historical processes.

Ktēma and *digestio*: knowledge of the past as acquisition for life

For both Ammianus Marcellinus and Thucydides, this quest for truth emerges from a purpose that is placed before them by the need to understand events of great proportions, the comprehension of which, in turn, allows the apprehension of certain true principles that tend to repeat themselves in History.

For this reason, in narrating the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides leaves out nothing that contributed to the change of its circumstances, to the increase of afflictions that it brought or that occurred as a result of it. After all, this

[12] Something that Ammianus considers frivolous, since in his description of the vices of the aristocracy and the people of the city of Rome, he criticizes the fact that the only authors who arouse the interest of the Romans are Marius Maximus (Suetonius' continuator) and Juvenal (Amm. Marc. 28.11.1).

was, for him, the greatest commotion (Thuc. 1.1.2: *kínēsis* (...) *megístē*) of his time, which affected much of the known world, both Greek and barbarian. Thus, the plague that struck Athens in the second year of the war (Thuc. 2.47.2–55.1), the earthquake on Delos (Thuc. 2.8.3) and the social upheaval in Corcyra (Thuc. 3.69–85), all contributed to create "the image of a completely disturbed, altered, convulsed reality, as it had never happened before (Vargas, 2017: 67)."

When we turn again to Thuc. 1.22.4, quoted above, we can conclude that, for Thucydides, having a clear understanding of this great commotion, even if it is not a pleasurable undertaking, proves useful (*ōphelima*) because human things tend to repeat themselves. To presume the existence of similar phenomena (*toiauta kai paraplēsai*) in the future, however, does not mean to accept that History repeats itself precisely (identical events), but to recognize patterns in human actions (similar events). After all, there would be no use in a historical narrative in the face of the inevitability of events. If events can take different forms, even if they follow certain patterns, Thucydides could hope that the clear knowledge provided by reading his work would effectively be this element of change, helping future generations who might find themselves facing similar circumstances (Flory, 1990: 205). This usefulness is evident in the characterization of his work as *ktēma*, a treasure, good or possession at the perennial disposal (*aiei*) of its possessor and not a passing pleasure of an embellished tale (Raaflaub, 2012).

The Battle of Adrianople in 378, in turn, ended with the loss of two-thirds of the eastern Roman army, and although we recognize today that this Roman defeat did not represent the end of the Empire's military hegemony in the long run, its scale and the fact that, until the treaty of 382, the Goths roamed practically unimpeded through the diocese of Thrace impressed the authors of posterity. which ended up placing on the event the weight of the misfortunes of their own time in a variety of reactions (Lenski, 1997).

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For Ammianus, the greatest carnage since the Battle of Cannae (Amm. Marc. 31.13.19) should certainly be understood through an analysis of the whole period that preceded it and whose vicissitudes culminated in it. Certainly, his expositions of the vices of the inhabitants of Rome (14.6. 1–26; 28.4.1–35) were intended to call attention to the corruption of the customs that had once led the Romans to the greatness of their Empire. In his harsh judgments of Roman emperors, failures appear as a "stain of vices" that "even in the private and everyday spheres must be avoided (Amm. Marc. 31.14.6: *vitiorum labes etiam in his privatis cotidianisque rationibus impendio est formidanda*)", and their qualities as "things to be imitated by all good men (Amm. Marc. 31.14.4: *Haec bonis omnibus aemulanda sunt*)".

After all, brave men of the past had overcome other adversities that befell the Empire, such as the Cimbrian Wars (113–101 BC), the Marcomanian Wars (166–180 AD), and the incursions of the Goths in the second half of the third century precisely because

> the sober antiquity had not yet been corrupted by the softness of the most unbridled life, nor did it covet ambitious banquets or scandalous favors (Amm. Marc. 31.5.14)

Thus, the usefulness of his work, although we do not have his preface, consists in identifying the situations in the past that led to corruption and, consequently, to the ruin of the present time in order to avoid them. The reading of the *Res Gestae* would enable the reader to anticipate the unfolding of events and warn men about their fate (Silva, 2007: 178–179). After all, Fortune, a stoic allegory of a universal redistribution force, would always punish excesses and vices and reward virtues (Benedetti, 2017).

Perhaps the notion in Ammianus that most closely resembles Thucydides' *ktēma* is indeed the *digestio*, expressed in the paragraph in which Ammianus apologizes for the inaccuracies about the Battle of Marcianople, quoted above. On many occasions, the verb *digero* (lit. to digest) is used in Ammianus' narrative in the sense of "to assimilate" – in constructions with the past perfect participle – plans, determinations, and negotiations on which emperors and generals reflected for some time (Amm. Marc. 14.6.14; 15.4.1; 5.22; 24.7.1; 26.8.1: *consilium digestum* in all sorts of variations). In other cases, the action or decision taken by an emperor upon receipt of news is preceded by the expression "after having assimilated these things (Amm. Marc. 15, 5, 22; 23, 3, 4; 26, 5, 3; 29, 2, 21: *haec digesta* and its variations)".

By using the term to ensure that it is not worth getting caught up in the casualty figures of the Battle of Marciananople, Ammianus places his narrative as something that must be "digested" by the reader, taken for himself as the Thucydidean *ktēma* in order to guide his actions in the future within the understanding of the universal and true laws that govern the course of History. In the same way, there is nothing irrecoverable or inevitable about human events. Ammianus Marcellinus (31.16.8) makes this clear when he ends his narrative not with the catastrophic Roman defeat, but with the swift and salutary reaction, in his view, of the infantry master Julius, who commanded a massacre of the Gothic settlers who had been received into the Empire before the crossing of the Danube by the Thervingi in 376.

Conclusions

Throughout this study, we intended to point out the similarities between aspects of the historical thought of Thucydides and Ammianus Marcellinus, having argued that such an investigation would be fruitful in view of the recent tendency to seek in the latter not only the influences of his Latin peers, but of the Greek world to which he belonged. There is, however, no obvious attempt of *imitatio* in the *Res Gestae*. If in all the points we treated in this study we could establish that the Antiochene historian-soldier definitely resembles the Athenian historian-general, it is noteworthy that in many respects they also differ greatly.

Ammianus is not as critical of Herodotus as Thucydides or even others of the imperial period, such as Plutarch. After recounting the crossing of the Danube by the Thervingi Goths in 376, when faced with the immense number of people crossing the river, Ammianus re-evaluates Herodotus' account of the size of the Persian troops at Doriscus: "also by recent evidence the credibility of the ancients has been restored (Amm. Marc. 31.4.8: *fides quoque vetustatis recenti documento firmata est*.)". When reporting an event as controversial as the death of the emperor Valens, which marks the end of his endeavor, Ammianus presents two different versions: that he died quickly from an arrow wound, and that he was saved in a hovel, which was then set on fire by his enemies (Amm. Marc. 31.13.12–16), something that finds no parallel in the writings of Thucydides but is noticeable in Herodotus (Luce, 1997: 15). Also, there's the geographical digressions which we have already mentioned, and which owe much to Herodotus' descriptions of regions, such as that of Scythia in Amm. Marc. 31.2.

Certainly, it is in the sense of a confident self-representation of the author "as a soldier of old and a Greek (Amm. Marc. 31.16.9: *ut miles quondam et Graecus*)" after the completion of a Herculean task and not an expression of literary modesty (which one would expect in the preface) that we must understand the opening of his *sphragis*. Ammianus considers himself capable of describing such events because of his military experience and describes them in this way because he is a Greek, something that, judging by the use of *Graecus* in other passages, points to an evident attachment to the ideals of Greek culture, its literature and philosophy. The juxtaposition of these two elements certainly evokes other illustrious figures who took part in the events they recount and write about "in the Greek way", such as Polybius (Boeft et al., 2018: 299), perhaps Dexippus and undoubtedly Thucydides.

This also allows us to better understand Ammianus' warning to the new generations who might intend to write the history of the events that followed so that they would perfect their words *ad maiores* (...) *stilos* (Amm. Marc. 31.16.9). Several meanings and translations have been offered for this expression[13], but, considering Ammianus' qualification in the opening of the *sphragis* and the form assumed by the *Res Gestae*, we must understand it as an advice for the next historians to carry on a writing of history as did the greatest historians of old such as Thucydides, among whom Ammianus aims to insert. They must be concerned, therefore, neither with brevity nor adulation or mere entertainment, but with the pursuit for truth and the usefulness of understanding the facts through rigorous, well-established, and proven methods.

In view of all these elements, we can safely affirm that Ammianus Marcellinus carries out in his work something truly original, since he composed his work keeping as fundamental principles those established by the historians of Antiquity, among whom he seeks to be inserted. The *Res Gestae* are, after all, a great late synthesis between the Latin language and the Greek historiography that emerged given the circumstances in which they were written (Benedetti, 2016: 37–39). What has been shown here is that we have much more than an indirect indication of Ammianus' probable familiarity with at least the theoretical reflection of Thucydides (*contra* Sabbah, 1979: 68). His methods and his historical thinking were undoubtedly imbued with the precepts laid down by his Athenian colleague.

[13] For a summary of the long-running debate on the *sphragis*, see Guzmán Armario, 2015.

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