

THE
ROMAN HISTORY
OF
AMMIANUS MARCELLINUS.

DURING THE REIGNS OF
THE EMPERORS CONSTANTIUS, JULIAN, JOVIANUS,
VALENTINIAN, AND VALENS.

TRANSLATED BY
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WITH A GENERAL INDEX.

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P R E F A C E.

OF Ammianus Marcellinus, the writer of the following History, we know very little more than what can be collected from that portion of it which remains to us. From that source we learn that he was a native of Antioch, and a soldier; being one of the *prefectores domestici*—the bo y-guard of the emperor, into which none but men of noble birth were admitted. He was on the staff of Ursicinus, whom he attended in several of his expeditions; and he bore a share in the campaigns which Julian made against the Persians. After that time he never mentions himself, and we are ignorant when he quitted the service and retired to Rome, in which city he composed his History. We know not when he was born, or when he died, except that from one or two incidental passages in his work it is plain that he lived nearly to the end of the fourth century: and it is even uncertain whether he was a Christian or a Pagan; though the general belief is, that he adhered to the religion of the ancient Romans, without, however, permitting it to lead him even to speak disrespectfully of Christians or Christianity.

His History, which he divided into thirty-one books (of which the first thirteen are lost, while the text of those which remain is in some places imperfect), began with the accession of Nerva, A.D. 96, where Tacitus and Suetonius

end, and was continued to the death of Valens, A.D. 378, a period of 282 years. And there is probably no work as to the intrinsic value of which there is so little difference of opinion. Gibbon bears repeated testimony to his accuracy, fidelity, and impartiality, and quotes him extensively. In losing his aid after A.D. 378, he says, "It is not without sincere regret that I must now take leave of 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." Professor Ramsay (in Smith's Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography) says, "We are indebted to him for a knowledge of many important facts not elsewhere recorded, and for much valuable insight into the modes of thought and the general tone of public feeling prevalent in his day. Nearly all the statements admitted appear to be founded upon his own observations, or upon the information derived from trustworthy eye-witnesses. A considerable number of dissertations and digressions are introduced, many of them highly interesting and valuable. Such are his notices of the institutions and manners of the Saracens (xiv. 4), of the Scythians and Sarmatians (xvii. 12), of the Huns and Alani (xxxi. 2), of the Egyptians and their country (xxii. 6, 14-16), and his geographical discussions upon Gaul (xv. 9), the Pontus (xxii. 8), and Thrace (xxvii. 4). Less legitimate and less judicious are his geological speculations upon earthquakes (xvii. 7), his astronomical inquiries into eclipses (xx. 3), comets (xxv. 10), and the regulation of the calendar (xxvi. 1); his medical researches into the origin of epidemics (xix. 4); his zoological theory on the destruction of lions by mosquitos (xviii. 7), and his horticultural essay on the impregnation of palms (xxiv. 3). In addition to industry in research and honesty of purpose, he was gifted with a large measure of strong common sense, which enabled him in many points to rise superior to the prejudices of his day, and with a clear-sighted independence

of spirit which prevented him from being dazzled or overawed by the brilliancy and the terrors which enveloped the imperial throne. But although sufficiently acute in detecting and exposing the follies of others, and especially in ridiculing the absurdities of popular superstition, Ammianus did not entirely escape the contagion. The general and deep-seated belief in magic spells, omens, prodigies, and oracles, which appears to have gained additional strength upon the first introduction of Christianity, evidently exercised no small influence over his mind. The old legends and doctrines of the pagan creed, and the subtle mysticism which philosophers pretended to discover lurking below, when mixed up with the pure and simple but startling tenets of the new faith, formed a confused mass which few intellects could reduce to order and harmony."

The vices of our author's style, and his ambitious affectation of ornament, are condemned by most critics; but some of the points which strike a modern reader as defects evidently arise from the alteration which the Latin language had already undergone since the days of Livy. His great value, however, consists in the facts he has made known to us, and is quite independent of the style or language in which he has conveyed that knowledge, of which without him we should have been nearly destitute.

The present translation has been made from Wagner and Erfurdt's edition, published at Leipzig in 1808, and their division of chapters into short paragraphs has been followed.

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One may add to this, that he includes under this head a debtor who is only so through the engagements into which he has entered to avoid a prosecution, as if he were a real debtor, and that he never lets him go till he has obtained the discharge of the debt.

26. On the other side, a wife, who, as the old proverb has it, hammers on the same anvil day and night, to compel her husband to make his will, and then the husband is equally urgent that his wife shall do the same. And men learned in the law are procured on each side, the one in the bedchamber, and his opponent in the dining-room, to draw up counter-documents. And under their employ are placed ambiguous interpreters of the contracts of their victims, who, on the one side, promise with great liberality high offices, and the funerals of wealthy matrons; and from these they proceed to the obsequies of the husbands, giving hints that everything necessary ought to be prepared; and¹ . . . as Cicero says, "Nor in the affairs of men do they understand anything good, except what is profitable; and they love those friends most (as they would prefer sheep) from whom they expect to derive the greatest advantage."²

27. And when they borrow anything, they are so humble and cringing, you would think you were at a comedy, and seeing Micon or Laches; when they are constrained to repay what they have borrowed, they become so turgid and bombastic that you would take them for those descendants of Hercules, Cresphontes and Temenus. This is enough to say of the senatorial order.

28. And let us come to the idle and lazy common people, among whom some, who have not even got shoes, boast of high-sounding names; calling themselves Cimesores, Statarii, Semicupæ, Serapina, or Cicimbricus, or Gluturiorus, Trulla, Lucanicus, Pordaca, or Salsula,³ with numbers of other similar appellations. These men spend their whole lives in drinking, and gambling, and brothels, and pleasures, and public spectacles; and to them the Circus Maximus is their temple, their

¹ This passage, again, seems hopelessly mutilated.

² Cicero, de Amicitia, c. xxi.

³ These are not in reality noble names, but names derived from low occupations. Trulla is a dish; Salsula, belonging to pickles, &c.

home, their public assembly; in fact, their whole hope and desire.¹

29. And you may see in the forum, and roads, and streets, and places of meeting, knots of people collected, quarrelling violently with one another, and objecting to one another, and splitting themselves into violent parties.

30. Among whom those who have lived long, having influence by reason of their age, their gray hairs and wrinkles, are continually crying out that the republic cannot stand, if in the contest which is about to take place, the skilful charioteer, whom some individual backs, is not foremost in the race, and does not dextrously shave the turning-post with the trace-horses.

31. And when there is so much ruinous carelessness, when the wished-for day of the equestrian games dawns, before the sun has visibly risen, they all rush out with headlong haste, as if with their speed they would outstrip the very chariots which are going to race; while as to the event of the contest they are all torn asunder by opposite wishes, and the greater part of them, through their anxiety, pass sleepless nights.

32. From hence, if you go to some cheap theatre, the actors on the stage are driven off by hisses, if they have not taken the precaution to conciliate the lowest of the people by gifts of money. And if there should be no noise, then, in imitation of the people in the Tauric Chersonese, they raise an outcry that the strangers ought to be expelled (on whose assistance they have always relied for their principal support), using foul and ridiculous expressions; such as are greatly at variance with the pursuits and inclinations of that populace of old, whose many facetious and elegant expressions are recorded by tradition and by history.

33. For these clever gentlemen have now devised a new method of expressing applause, which is, at every spectacle to cry out to those who appear at the end, whether they are couriers, huntsmen, or charioteers—in short, to the whole body of actors, and to the magistrates, whether of great or small importance, and even to nations, “It is to

¹ Compare Juvenal's description of the circus in his time:—

“Atque duas tantum resarexins optat
Panem et Circenses.”