

THE PREFACES OF AMMIANUS MARCELLINUS

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The prefatory remarks of the historians of antiquity¹ are singular as well as prominent testimonia because they openly engage the reader and inform him directly about the work in contemplation. Elsewhere in the text, as is well known, tradition required the sublimation of the writer; even when he decided to introduce himself into his narrative, as the critic of a prior authority or statesman or political movement, or as an expert in geography or *Realien*, he is a sort of chorus in his own drama, the prosecutor or the expert witness of his own trial. In such passages the writer speaks to his subject and only obliquely to the reader. The preface, however, places the writer and the reader on a level together, with the historical work serving as the object of the equal attention of both. The writer informs the reader *in propria persona* about the relevant matters peculiar to himself and conditionally definitive of his work as a whole. Here he must use his authentic voice *de persona, de materia, de historia*² in order to explain himself and justify his work to the audience.

Such at least is the preface *in theory*. In actuality, however, these explanatory dialogues with the reader prove less informative than their inherent function might seem to require. Their utilitarian character was clouded from the very beginning by the reluctance of the author to descend into “vulgar detail” about himself and the conditions under which he wrote. Why historiography took this turn is of course a speculative question incapable of definitive answer, though in all probability, after Homer, the influence of the Milesian tradition proved decisive. Hecateus felt no obligation to parade his credentials before the reader: the operative presumption was that the work must supply its own justification, like any other “philosophical” work. We may infer, additionally, that these early writers took for granted the ventilation of their fame among the cognoscenti and disdained the belaboring of it. The same applies to Herodotus, the first of the historians, whose recitations in effect paved the way for the publication of his history as something of a known quantity. Thucydides’ instincts, it is true, prompted him to be more specific and personal about himself (in the “second preface”) and a (narrow) biographical element occasionally reappears in later writers—e.g., Theopompus, Polybius, Dio Cassius. By and large, however, the development of history as high literature incited its practitioners to display an aloof *persona* in which a bare allusion in general to one’s credentials (e.g., as by Tacitus) was

conceived to be a sufficient nod in the direction of self-justification or self-explanation. Thus the dialogue [164] with the reader tended to become a formality veiling rather than revealing the circumstances of authorship.

In addition, there are natural limits to the kind of instruction we can legitimately expect from a proemium. Such pieces are apt by nature to be general. Whenever written—before or after the genesis of the work—it must subsume the work as a whole without detailing too specifically the material circumstances governing the writer's recollection of events or immersion in them. It sometimes happens, however, that the ancient historians delivered themselves of multiple prefaces in portions of the continuous history, to the substantial increase of our knowledge of some aspect of the writer or his methodology. For by a kind of law of proportionality, further exchanges with the reader introductory to new segments of the history entail communications of a greater degree of specificity either about the nature of the new material or about some shift in the vantage-point of the writer. For the latter, see, e.g., Thucydides 5.26; for the former, Livy 6.1. But even here the gain usually is nugatory. The stylization of such prefaces after they became *de rigueur* in some quarters (an Ephoran refinement)³ watered down their utility to the reader. They are less the authentic communications of the writer to his audience than an artful inveiglement written purely *ad hoc* for the individual book or historical segment thereby introduced.

Hence the special interest of the prefaces of Ammianus Marcellinus, for they constitute a significant exception to the general rule by re-establishing or, better, inaugurating a dialogue with his readers, his immediate readers, expressing highly pertinent information about the various stages of his own historical recollection and about the distance separating him in these recollections from the audience for which he wrote. It is a remarkable fact that for all that Ammianus' mind was replete with the rules of ancient historiographical theory, the concomitant practice and even the *ipsissima verba* of the best Latin authors, his approach to the writing of history is sometimes radically new and uninformed by the age-old conventions. The interpolation of his own experiences into the *res gestae* is a famous example of his original approach to historiography. But his ingenuous and revelatory multiple prefaces provide another example which deserves notice. The dialogues Ammianus sustains in them with his readers are dominated, novelly, by the important and single idea of the historical memory of both himself and his audience in their different relation to the subject-matter covered in his history.⁴ These relationships in turn justify his adoption of two successive historical procedures. For this reason, these prefaces are rather more interesting than is generally supposed, and it seems highly appropriate to the interests of the scholar whom we honor in this volume to analyze so telling an example of the strict and unusual coincidence of form and execution.

Ammianus introduced brief prefatory remarks in two books (15, 26) of the eighteen now extant (14-31). Each signals the emergence of a new historical period (the rise of Julian and his reign, 15-25; the rule of Valentinian and

Valens, 26-31) and signifies the mode in which Ammianus intends to treat of them. He explains in 15.1 that he will henceforth write more expansively than hitherto, when he relied as best he could on his own inchoate memory and the [165]recollections of the participants in events; among the points he makes in 26.1, one of the chief is that he will not parade minutiae merely because his readers possess an independent memory of the period and crave such circumstantial detail. Both prefaces, therefore, are based on analogous considerations depending on the relative distances in time separating Ammianus, on the one hand, and the generation of his readers, on the other, from the material coming under consideration. As will appear, the presence of these equations, and the logic underlying them, substantially help to clarify the historiographic procedure followed by Ammianus not only in the preserved portion of his work but, as well, in the immediately antecedent section which is now lost to us.

The first preface found in the extant text introduces Book 15 by informing us that Ammianus' forthcoming account will be more detailed than the preceding narrative, which culminated in the death of Gallus in 354:

Utrumque potui veritatem scrutari, ea quae videre licuit per aetatem vel perplexe interrogando versatos in medio scire, narravimus ordine casuum exposito diversorum; residua, quae secuturus aperiet textus, pro virium captu limatius absolvemus nihil obtrectatores longi, ut putant, operis formidantes. tunc enim laudanda est brevitatis, cum moras rumpens intempestivas nihil subtrahit cognitioni gestorum.
(15.1.1)⁵

Using my best efforts to find out the truth, I have set out, in the order in which they occurred, events which I was able to observe myself or discover by thorough questioning of contemporaries who took part in them. The rest, which will occupy the pages that follow, I shall execute to the best of my ability in a more polished style, and I shall pay no heed to the criticism which some make of a work which they think too long. Brevity is only desirable when it cuts short tedious irrelevance without subtracting from our knowledge of the past.

Now it should be observed that in this passage Ammianus has *formally* stated only that the ensuing material will be more closely textured than the preceding section of his history. If, then, we were to regard only that which Ammianus expresses in a positive and explicit manner, the reason behind his decision to amplify the forthcoming narrative might well elude us. We would be at leave to suppose, for instance, that Ammianus (as is conventionally assumed)⁶ reached his decision to expand his narrative because he believed that the events of Julian's reign, now commencing, were intrinsically more memorable and deserved a broader canvas. Indeed, to judge from the sympathies evinced by

Ammianus in the subsequent books, and his own words in praise of Julian (e.g., in 16.1.1-3), that assumption has much to recommend it. Nevertheless, as a careful reading of both clauses of this complex and elliptical sentence makes clear, the issue is not the competing claims for thorough attention of one epoch against another, but *the temporal location* of Ammianus within the enfolding sequence and the comparative expansion of his historiographical [166]faculties at this important juncture. Ammianus has coordinated epochal division with the relative development of his own historical memory and personal control of the living tradition. The implication is that Ammianus was in a better position to relate the history of the period 354/5-363 than he enjoyed when detailing the principle events of the immediately prior epoch, ?-354/5. That is why his narrative will blossom and why he emphasizes the change by rhetorically defending his decision to be less brief.

Observe the complexity of the first sentence of the preface. It consists of two halves which mutually inform each other on the subject of historical memory. It differentiates the old procedure from the new by conceding the limitations of the former, when Ammianus was younger and of necessity reliant upon the memory of others. For the phrase *per aetatem* can mean nothing else in this concessive and limitative clause written to contrast directly with the following and main clause which (implicitly) affirms Ammianus' title to intellectual maturity at the date now reached.⁷ The sentence is structurally Greek, a “*μέν*-clause,” *ea ... diversorum*, a “*δέ*-clause” following with *residua quae...* Both clauses, evidently, turn on the quality of his historical credentials. The first conceded that he had hitherto been handicapped by age (as in fact he must have been)⁸ and yet up to the task within the inherent limitations because of his reliance on vicarious authority. On the other hand, the second clause, which carries the main weight, postulates an alteration in the circumstances—*residua pro virium captu limatius absolvemus*. He is older and, moreover, a participant in events throughout the entire upcoming epochal continuum, no longer dependent on the recollections of the *versati in medio*. True enough, the neatness of the antithesis is somewhat marred by Ammianus' introduction (*more suo*) of a new idea disrupting the geometry of the sentence—his repudiation of critics of lengthy works and his definition of “proper brevity.” But it is characteristic of Ammianus to rush from one idea to the next in disregard of syntactical balances. Unless we assume that what I have called the “*μέν*-clause” was written without regard to the “*δέ*-clause,” there is no alternative to the conclusion that each clause was intended tacitly to supplement the other by marking a change in methodology caused by the altering state of Ammianus' historiographical competence.

Ammianus' second preface, preserved in 26.1, shares an objective affinity with 15.1.1 because it too introduces a new epoch. Valentinian and Valens now rise to power and the final segment of the history is in contemplation. But the direction of the preface is so far changed that Ammianus speaks not of his credentials as a historian (15.1.1 had settled that question) but of the dangers

and vexations of writing the history of developments within the active memory of his readers:

(1) dictis impensiore cura rerum ordinibus ad usque memoriae confinia prioris convenerat iam referre a notioribus pedem, ut et pericula declinentur veritati saepe contigua et examinatores contexendi operis deinde non perferamus intempestivos strepentes ut laesos, si praeteritum sit, quod locutus est imperator in cena, vel omissum, quam ob causam gregarii milites coerciti sunt apud signa, et quod [167]non decuerat in descriptione multiplici regionum super exiguis silere castellis quodque cunctorum nomina, qui ad urbani praetoris officium convenere, non sunt expressa, et similia plurima praeceptis historiae dissonantia discurrere per negotiorum celsitudines assuetae, non humilium minutias indagare causarum, quas si scitari voluerit quispiam, individua illa corpuscula volitantia per inane, atomos, ut nos appellamus, numerari posse sperabit. (2) haec quidam veterum formidantes cognitiones actuum variorum stilis uberibus explicatas non edidere superstites, ut in quadam ad Cornelium Nepotem epistula Tullius quoque, testis reverendus, affirmat. proinde inscitia vulgari contempta ad residua narranda pergamus.

(1) It would have been fitting for me, having spared no pains in relating the course of events up to the beginning of the present epoch, to steer clear of more familiar matters, partly to escape the dangers which often attend on truth, partly to avoid carping criticism of my work by those who feel injured by the omission of insignificant detail, such things, for example, as the emperor's table-talk or the reason for the public punishment of soldiers. Such folk also complain if in a wide-ranging geographical description some small strongholds are not mentioned, or if one does not give the names of all who attended the inauguration of the urban prefect, or passes over a number of similar details which are beneath the dignity of history. The task of history is to deal with prominent events, not to delve into trivial minutiae, which it is as hopeless to try to investigate as to count the small indivisible bodies which we Greeks call atoms which fly through empty space. (2) Fears of this kind led some older writers not to publish in their lifetime eloquent accounts they had composed of various events within their knowledge. For this we have the unimpeachable testimony of Cicero in a letter to Cornelius Nepos. Now, however, I will proceed with the rest of my

story, treating the ignorance of the vulgar with the contempt it deserves.

All is again straightforward, though the period is complex. It is another “*μέν ... δέ* construction,” again involving ellipsis, of which the structure may best be illustrated by a paraphrase. “Though it were better now to avoid the several perils of writing contemporary history, and there is ancient precedent for publishing material of this kind posthumously, [neither the captious criticisms of contemporaries nor the danger of alienating powerful people] will prevent me from continuing the rest of the narrative I have proposed for myself.” Ammianus has observed that although it might have been prudent (*convenerat iam*) to end his history when it came to coincide with the memory of the generation now flourishing (*ad usque memoriae confinia prioris*), he has no [168]intention of renouncing his task (*ad residua narranda pergamus*: cf. *residua* 15.1.1).⁹ The coincidence of thought between the two extant prefaces is striking. The same theme of historical memory is struck, though now it is that of his reader, not his own, and critics are again invoked, though this time they are not the *obtrectatores longi operis* but, quite the reverse, enthusiasts of detail. The very people who might prefer brevity when it is a matter of past history beyond their direct knowledge (though not beyond Ammianus’) seek excessive detail when it is a question of contemporary events they well remember. The guiding thought remains the same. Both prefaces unite in their focal concern with the status of historical memory and its influence on Ammianus’ methodology of history. The first preface marked an epochal change for Ammianus, the second testifies to a comparable development on the part of his audience.

When we consider both prefaces together, a further inference seems not only allowable but mandatory. These prefaces form a series which is incomplete as it stands. The consistent pattern of thought displayed by the two preserved prefaces requires their association with still another: at least one more preface to the reader (apart from the proemium) is entailed by these others. The missing preface observed that point in time at which the events of Ammianus’ history shaded into the *confinia memoriae* of Ammianus himself. Something prior to 15.1.1 to which the “*μέν*-clause” of 15.1.1 responded must have been written to signal Ammianus’ emancipation from written authority and the emergence of his new-found ability to draw on the memory of living men *versati in medio* who linked him to bygone events. The writer who alludes backwards at the year 354/5 to his comparative youth in the immediately preceding years, and who establishes the coequality of events of the epoch, viewed as a continuum, commencing after 363 with the contemporary memory of his readership, will have been compelled by the logic of his criteria to register the point in time, calibrated epochally, at which his own (imperfect) historical memory began. This assumption, moreover, is corroborated by the structure of the sentence Ammianus wrote in 15.1.1. That sentence is formulated in such a way as to show, with its backward look, a missing link in the chain, some previous point at which Ammianus formulated another “*μέν ...*

δέ sentence” characterizing his own autopsy and sending an *envoi* to written materials. The “*μὲν*-clause” of 15.1.1 (*utcumque potui veritatem scrutari, ea, quae videre licuit per aetatem vel perplexe interrogando versatos in medio scire, narravimus*) was formed in response, in other words, to the “δέ-clause” of a previous preface precisely as the first part of the “*μὲν*-clause” of 26.1 connects with the “δέ-clause” of 15.1. The existence of the two prefaces therefore allows us to regain the following sequence: (1) dismissal of written sources / advent of young memory buttressed by reliance on the *versati in medio*; (2) dismissal of the *versati* / advent of mature memory; (3) advent of the mature memory of contemporaries.

If this interpretation is plausible, it will inform our view of the point at which Ammianus drastically expanded the substance of his history. As all scholars recognize who assume the integrity of a single history in 31 books reaching *a principatu Caesaris Nervae ... ad usque Valentis interitum* (31.16.9), [169]Ammianus could not have traversed the period 96-353 in 13 books without at some point markedly graduating his scale of narrative to that which we perceive in the extant work.¹⁰ Now the usual solution to this problem is arbitrarily to posit some likely epoch in the fourth century, if not before it, which may serve hypothetically as a reasonable starting-point for Ammianus’ radically expanded historical coverage. The death of Constantine in 337 has for that reason occurred to many as suitable and, indeed, this assumption seems intrinsically plausible though, in the nature of the case, unfortunately no more than that. However, the inferential evidence provided by the prefaces gives the assumption independent and substantial support.

If Ammianus correlated his access of mature memory with the epoch completed by Julian, and the *confinia memoriae prioris* of his contemporaries with the reigns of Valentinian and Valens, it is a safe assumption that he identified the preceding stage with the epoch begun at Constantine’s death, the earliest point, in fact, at which Ammianus could begin to combine his incipient memory with the recollections of those *versati* still accessible to him when he began to compose his history. Ammianus, as is well known, became *domesticus protector* sometime before the year 354, and had been attached to Ursicinus, who served under Constantine (15.5.19), but whose career flourished after that emperor’s death.¹¹ Ursicinus attained the rank of *magister equitum* in the East (349-359).¹² Now it need hardly be stated that Ursicinus and his coevals will have possessed a reliable memory of the history of the empire from the time of Constantine’s death, when a new epoch roughly coterminous with Ammianus’ earliest years initiated its course. Therefore, when we keep in mind that Ammianus coordinated his narrative treatment with the successive stages of his own memory and that of his audience, and that he calibrated these stages with epochal changes in the imperial succession, these considerations, taken together, make it evident that 337 must have marked the watershed of Ammianus’ history, when the narrative could swell from a thin stream into a great river because the *type* of history which now could be written had altered from “ancient” to “contemporary,” from literary to oral. Ammianus

divided his lengthy history into two unequal parts in subservience to the categorical separation of ancient history from contemporary recollection.

Thus far I have discussed the prefaces of 15.1 and 26.1, together with their ramifications, without reference to their place in the learned literature.¹³ It proved expedient since they are generally viewed in isolation from each other instead of being taken together as the fundamentally coherent documents that they are. It may fairly be said, moreover, that observation of what appears to be their primary purport has been replaced by concentrated attention on certain of their secondary or accidental features, so that possible implications of Ammianus' prefatory remarks have been allowed to take precedence over their ostensible and primary purpose. 15.1, for instance, has been studied as if its purpose were to provide a key to Ammianus' use or non-use of written sources for the period 354-378.¹⁴ The ruling contention, that Ammianus was content to follow the oral tradition in reliance on his own memory, may well be valid, but it seems a mistake to suppose that it was the purpose of this preface to speak to that subject; on the contrary, as we have seen, Ammianus' concern was to [170]enunciate a principle bearing on a related but quite different point. The treatment accorded to 26.1 has been comparable. This preface has been coerced into a larger theoretical framework turning on *Kompositionsgeschichte*. In brief, 26.1 is taken as a sign that at this point in the work Ammianus altered his *original plan* to end his narrative with the death of Julian by continuing with the final section of more strictly contemporaneous history terminated by the battle of Adrianople in 378. Needless to say, whether or not Ammianus began his work with the intention of concluding it with Julian's death is a question shaping our conception of his motives when occupied with Books 14-25 and, beyond this, affecting our theories about the date of the composition of his history.¹⁵ It is imperative to observe, therefore, that this ruling theory, whether probable or not, derives support neither from the logic of the passage in 26.1, taken as a whole, nor from any of its component parts. The apparently crucial sentence, though quoted above, may be repeated here: *dictis impensiore cura rerum ordinibus ad usque memoriae confinia proprioris convenerat iam referre a notioribus pedem, ut et pericula declinentur....* The uncommitted reader will admit, I think, that the author's expression of a rejected theoretical possibility provides not the slightest clue to his original intentions, much less is the sign of any alteration in them. The sentence expresses a conventional piece of wisdom which Ammianus only invokes in order to transcend. *Convenio*, when used impersonally, alleges what is "suitable" or "proper" (cf. 24.1.3); the pluperfect indicative has been used instead of the pluperfect subjunctive (cf. Plautus, *Miles* 53) to stamp the expression with vividness. We may translate: "It would have been better etc."; but an alteration in a previously conceived design is not conveyed either by the verb or by the sentence in which it appears.

Indeed, the idea developed here is categorically different from that which it has been taken to suggest. An address to critics about the propriety of carrying history forward to the most recent past is not the same as a confession that Ammianus has altered his plan, and it is one which finds sufficient

explanation in Ammianus' predilection for *topoi*.¹⁶ The dangers inherent in writing contemporary history were a *topos* (Polybius 38.4.2-4; Livy 1.1.5; Pliny *ep.* 5.8.12-14), elegantly inverted by Tacitus (*Hist.* 1.1) and recurring in Hieronymus (*Chron. praef.* 2.3) and Eunapius (F 73 Müller = F. 66.1 Blockley), though its presence in Cicero, whom Ammianus loved to quote, is explanation enough for its appearance in 26.1. The formulation of this sentence, therefore, does not even inferentially suggest Ammianus' renunciation of a preconceived idea. It expresses a (self-laudatory) recognition of the new circumstances against which Ammianus must contend as he proceeds, apparently in conformity with his original purpose, precisely as the explicit statement *ad residua narranda* makes clear. In short, the idea that Ammianus intended to end his work with Julian's death is devoid of textual support. The preface of 26.1, like that of 15.1, instead sheds light on another aspect entirely of the historiography, namely, Ammianus' division and treatment of the historical past according to the principle of the operative memory of himself and his contemporary audience.¹⁷



NOTES

1. See, in general, H. Lieberich, *Studien zu den Proömien in der griechischen und byzantinischen Geschichtsschreibung* (diss. München 1889); G. Avenarius, *Lukians Schrift zur Geschichtsschreibung* (Meisenheim/Glan 1956) 113-18; C. W. Fornara, *The Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Berkeley 1983) 54-55.

2. Cato, fr. 3, in H. Peter, *Historicorum Romanorum Reliquiae*² (Leipzig 1914-16) I.56.

3. *FGrHist* 70 T 11, with Jacoby's commentary.

4. Similarity with Thucydides 5.26 is remote, for his direct experience with the war was never in doubt and the purpose of 5.26.3 was to insist on the pains he took to observe it carefully, even after his exile from Athens. *αἰσθανόμενος τῆι τε ἡλικίαι* was written by him to attest not his age but the maturity of his judgment. Ammianus takes all this for granted and advances beyond it. It is worth mentioning that Praxagoras of Athens (Müller, *FHG* IV.2-3), who wrote a history of Constantine in two books, informs his readers that he was (only) 22 years old when he wrote it. This information was presumably included by Praxagoras in the same spirit which prompted the historian A. Postumius Albinus to "apologize" for any inelegancies of expression arising from his use of Greek instead of Latin (Gellius *Noct. Att.* 11.8.2). For Cato's retort see Plut. *Cato maior* 12.6.

5. The text is quoted from *Ammiani Marcellini rerum gestarum libri qui supersunt*, ed. W. Seyfarth, adiuvantibus L. Jacob-Karau et I. Ulmann (Teubner, Leipzig 1978); I do not reproduce the *clausulae*. The translations are taken (with a modification in the opening sentence of 26.1) from Walter Hamilton, *Ammianus Marcellinus. The Later Roman Empire (A.D. 354-378)* (New York 1986).

6. K. Rosen, *Ammianus Marcellinus (Erträge der Forschung 183, Darmstadt 1982)* provides a very useful review of the scholarship. For this subject see pp. 73-74.

7. It also follows that from another perspective *per aetatem* indicates (when taken in conjunction with 26.1) Ammianus' possession of relatively greater age than his readership (Rosen [supra n. 6] 36). But the point intended by Ammianus in this context is not his (current) possession of "great age" but his reliance (for past time) on comparatively tender memory.

8. For the data see A. H. M. Jones, J. R. Martindale, J. Morris, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* (Cambridge 1971) I.547 (Ammianus Marcellinus 15).

9. See below, pp. 169-70.

10. For the background of this question see E. A. Thompson, *The Historical Work of Ammianus Marcellinus* (London 1947) 34-36; A. Momigliano, *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* (Oxford 1977) 130-31. Thompson assumes that Ammianus extended the scale of his work at the beginning of Book 14; Momigliano places the change in Book 15 (see infra n. 14). Rosen (supra n. 6) 76 is inclined to be sceptical about all hypotheses. Other scholars, from H. Michael, *Die Verlorene Bücher des Ammianus Marcellinus* (Breslau 1880) to H. T. Rowell, *Ammianus Marcellinus, Soldier-Historian of the Late Roman Empire* (Cincinnati 1964) 16-17, consider 337 the logical break-point, although Michael and Rowell also postulate that Books 1-13 commenced

with that epoch. For they suppose (without justification) that Ammianus published his history from the death of Nerva to that of Constantine in a separate work.

11. See *PLRE* (supra n. 8).

[172]12. *PLRE* (supra n. 8), Ursicinus 2.

13. See Rosen (supra n. 6) 74.

14. See Thompson (supra n. 10) 21ff. Momigliano (supra n. 10) 130-31 is intriguing: "Ammianus seems to have considered Book 15 rather than Book 14 the beginning of his detailed account. He prefaced it with a methodological declaration which is puzzling in its ambiguity and has not yet been adequately interpreted (15.1): it was an answer to critics. Another preface indicates that Book 26 was the beginning of the last section. Ammianus seems to imply that there had been an interval before he started to write in Book 26 his account of the reigns of Valentinianus and Valens." As to the latter remark, see immediately below in the text.

15. On this matter see most recently C. T. P. Naudé, *AJAH* 9 (1984) 70ff.

16. Cf. Rosen (supra n. 6) 47.

17. It is a pleasure to register here my deep appreciation to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation for enabling me to devote the 1988/89 academic year purely to scholarship.