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Classical Perspectives in Late Antiquity

Jakob Froelich



Introduction

The Roman Empire at the end of the Fourth Century was undoubtedly a very different place from the the Empire of the first and second centuries. Some were very conscious of and resistant to these changes.

Romans placed a high value in their ancestral customs and that the older something is, the better it is. The importance of tradition is also reflected in the Classical Tradition, which is, in part, the canon of literature that formed the basis of Roman education.

Research Question

The authors of Late Antiquity are generally absent from Classics reading lists unless Late Antiquity is what is being studied. This is largely for good reasons as time is limited. However, does this say something about the author's themselves? Are they, in true Roman fashion, lesser because they are later? How should we interpret the critical and traditional views they espouse in their writings?

Method

Through a close reading of Ammianus' *Res Gestae* (historiography) and Symmachus' *Relatio* 3 (an imperial dispatch) and his epistles, this paper examines various aspects of their respective texts within the larger historical framework of the works and the lives of the authors.

The project considers three separate, though related, aspects of Roman society: Rome's changing cultural prestige in Ammianus, Ammianus' evaluation of the degrading *Romanitas* in Rome, and Symmachus' response to Christianization.

Examples



From: Progetto Traiano

"Some men detest learning as a poison. They read with a more attentive zeal only Juvenal and Marius Maximus. They ought to read extensively many things because of the greatness of their ancestors. To hear of Socrates, marked for death and placed in prison, who asked a certain man skilled at playing the songs of the lyric poet Stesichorus so that he might learn to do it while he could. When the musician asked what this could offer him, Socrates, who was going to die on the next day, replied 'so that I might depart life knowing something more.'"

(Ammianus Marcellinus 28.4.14-15)



Above, From: Archaeology Illustrated
Right, From: Classical Numismatic Group,
RIC 1 255, Denarius from 30-31 BCE

"When [Constantius] came to the forum of Trajan, a unique construction under the heavens and also deemed a marvel by the gods, he stopped and was transfixed as he turned his mind to the surrounding, giant structures, which are beyond description and cannot be achieved again by mortals." (Ammianus Marcellinus 16.10.15)



Romans during the Decadence (1847)
Thomas Couture, Musée d'Orsay

"Who is so familiar with the barbarians that he does not need an Altar of Victory?" (Symmachus *Relationes* 3.3)

"Revere my age, which your piety towards the religious rites won for me." (Ibid 3.9)

"Let [the gods] defend you, let us be worshiped by us. We ask that our religion be reestablished. [The religion] preserved the empire for your deified father. [The religion] furnished legitimate heirs to a fortunate emperor. That older deity [emperor] looks from his starry citadel on the tears of the priests and he thinks himself to blame for the violated custom, which he gladly preserved." (Ibid 3.19-20)

Conclusions

Ammianus and Symmachus lived in a world that was still Antique, if only barely.

They each resisted and criticized the changes in the world around them, but failed to appreciate the magnitude of these changes.

They were deeply indebted to their past and past authors, whom they had read. Ammianus and Symmachus modeled themselves after these authors that they read and idealized.

Although very different in many respects from these authors, their respect for tradition and the past allows for their viewpoint to be looked at, in some respects, as a Classical viewpoint.

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