



# REVISTA INCLUSIONES

HOMENAJE A NATALIA MILANESIO

Revista de Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales

Volumen 7 . Número 4

Octubre / Diciembre

2020

ISSN 0719-4706

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**STRANGERS IN ROME: THE ATTITUDE OF THE ROMANS TOWARDS IMMIGRANTS  
IN LATE ANTIQUITY (ACCORDING TO AMMIANUS MARCELLINUS)**

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**Fecha de Recepción:** 17 de julio de 2020 – **Fecha Revisión:** 29 de julio de 2020

**Fecha de Aceptación:** 19 de septiembre 2020 – **Fecha de Publicación:** 01 de octubre de 2020

**Abstract**

The last great Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus (ca. 330 – ca. 400) in his monumental work “Res gestae” gave a prominent place to the description of life and customs of contemporary Roman society. The writer pays special attention to the attitude of the Romans towards immigrants. Ammianus’ attention to the issue is due to the fact that he was not a native of the city of Rome, and the Roman city community perceived him as a stranger throughout his life. However, when Ammianus accuse the Romans of xenophobia, he is not guided solely by personal hostility. Hostile attitude towards strangers resettled to Rome was a characteristic of the Roman mentality as a whole. In the eyes of the citizens and authorities of Rome, the immigrants have a lower status than any native Roman, and sometimes xenophobia became one of the basic principles of Roman domestic policy. The strengthening of xenophobic attitudes within the Roman society Ammianus connects with the crisis of the Roman value system in the contemporary period. One more reason for the increase in xenophobia in Late Rome consisted in increasing the barbarization of the Empire and the massive penetration of barbarians into diverse spheres of the life of Roman society. The extremely negative attitude of the Romans towards immigrants was also due to the intensification of the onslaught of barbarian tribes on the borders of the Empire in the 3rd – 4th centuries AD.

**Keywords**

Ammianus Marcellinus – Later Roman Empire – Immigrants – Xenophobia – Discrimination

**Para Citar este Artículo:**

Dmitriev, Vladimir y Alieva, Liudmila. Strangers in rome: the attitude of the romans towards immigrants in late antiquity (according to Ammianus Marcellinus). Revista Inclusiones Vol: 7 num 4 (2020): 598-603.

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## Introduction

Ammianus Marcellinus was one of the last great Roman historians. His monumental work “*Res gestae*”<sup>1</sup> is the most important source for studying the history of the Later Roman Empire in the 4th century AD – the period of decline of the Classical world.

## Development

Ammianus was a no ordinary author. Unlike other classical writers, he is interested in not only political and military events but also many other aspects of the life of Late Roman society. Being a critically thinking historian and acutely worrying about the crisis in the Roman world and the decline of the power of the Empire, Ammianus Marcellinus pays special attention to the life and customs of the contemporary Roman society<sup>2</sup> by focusing on the characteristics of the moral qualities of the Romans<sup>3</sup>. The author of the “*Res gestae*” formed a vivid picture of the degradation of the traditional Roman value system and not the least criterion in this respect for Ammianus – is the attitude of the Romans towards immigrants (lat. *peregrines*), i.e. people (foreigners or provincials) who came to the capital of the Empire in search of a better life<sup>4</sup>. Information on this issue is contained mainly in two passages (or so-called excurses), devoted to criticism of the Romans vices (Amm. Marc. XIV.6.7–26; XXVIII.4.6–35).

Ammianus’ attention to the problem of the attitude of the Romans towards immigrants is largely due to the fact that Ammianus himself was not a native of the city of Rome – he was born in Antioch of Syria, one of the largest cities in the Roman East. Despite many years of service in command positions in the Roman army, long-term residence in Rome, and even, thanks to his writing talent, popularity among the educated part of the Roman public, Ammianus Marcellinus was still unable to become a member of

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<sup>1</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Roman History. During the Reign of the Emperors Constantius, Julian, Jovianus, Valentinian, and Valens*, transl. by C. D. Yonge (London; New York: George Bell & Sons, 1894).

<sup>2</sup> For moral excurses in Ammianus Marcellinus’ “*Res gestae*” see: J. Gimazane, *Ammien Marcellin, sa vie et son œuvre* (Toulouse: Imprimerie et librairie Édouard Privat, 1889): 316–345; E. A. Thompson, *The Historical Work of Ammianus Marcellinus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1947); A. Demandt, *Zeitkritik und Geschichtsbild im Werk Ammians* (Bonn: Habelt, 1965); K. Rosen, *Ammianus Marcellinus* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1970): 117–130; V. S. Sokolov, “Ammian Martsellin kak poslednii predstavitel antichnoi istoriografii”, *Vestnik drevnei istorii*, Vol. 70, No: 4 (1959): 43–62; V. D. Neronova, “Otrazhenie krizisa Rimskoi imperii v ‘Istorii’ Ammiana Martsellina”, *Uchionie zapiski Permskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, Vol. 20, No: 4 (1961): 71–101; Z. V. Udaltsova, “Mirovozzrenie Ammiana Martsellina”, *Vizantiiskii vremennik*, Vol. 28 (1968): 38–58; Z. V. Udaltsova, *Ideino-politicheskaya bor’ba v rannei Vizantii (po dannim istorikov IV–VII vekov)* (Moscow: Nauka, 1974), 7–82.

<sup>3</sup> In this article the word “Romans” means not the free inhabitants of the Roman Empire in general but the citizens of the city of Rome.

<sup>4</sup> *Peregrines* in Ancient Rome were a free people of non-Roman descent who did not possess the full Roman citizen rights. Towards peregrines was applied not Roman civil law (lat. *jus civile*) but the so called “law of nations” (lat. *jus gentium*). The court cases involved peregrines were heard by a special judge – *praetor peregrinus*. For more information about peregrines and their status, see: A. H. M. Jones, *The Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937); G. Burton, “Government and Provinces”, *The Roman World*, Vol. 1, ed. J. Wachter (London; New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987).

the Roman city community. Throughout his life, Ammianus remained a stranger to them, a “new man” (lat. *homo novus*), an “upstart”, and any representative of the Roman rabble who was a hereditary inhabitant of the city of Rome had a higher status in comparison with Ammianus and his ilk.

Ammianus Marcellinus says clearly that in contemporary times attitude of the Romans towards provincials was more than hostile: “But now, in their empty arrogance, some persons look upon everything as worthless which is born outside of the walls of the city” (Amm. Marc. XIV.6.22); “In imitation of the people in the Taurio 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” (Amm. Marc. XXVIII.4.32).

This is not to say that when Ammianus accuse the Romans of xenophobia, he is guided solely by personal hostility or that such an attitude towards immigrants was typical only for any one group of Roman citizens. Based on Ammianus’ information we can conclude that the negative and even hostile attitude towards strangers resettled to Rome was a characteristic of the Roman mentality as a whole, and sometimes this xenophobia could become one of the basic principles of Roman domestic policy. Ammianus reports that “no very long time ago<sup>5</sup>, on account of an apprehended scarcity of food, the foreigners were driven in haste from the city” (Amm. Marc. XIV.6.19; cp.: Symm. *Ep.* II. 7). As the author notes, they were mainly “those who practiced liberal accomplishments”; at the same time, “three thousand dancing-girls had not even a question put to them, but stayed unmolested with the members of their choruses, and a corresponding number of dancing masters” (Amm. Marc. XIV.6.19). Thus, in the eyes of the citizens and authorities of Rome, the immigrants (regardless of their occupation) have a lower status than even dancers and singers who had an extremely bad reputation in Antiquity.

How does the author of “Res gestae” explain such a hostile attitude of the Romans to the immigrants? In this regard, Ammianus Marcellinus demonstrates himself as a typical representative of the Classical literary tradition: in his opinion, all the misfortunes that befell the Roman Empire are due to moral depravity. Historian says: “But this magnificent splendour of the assemblies and councils of the Roman people is defaced by the inconsiderate levity of a few, who never recollect where they have been born, but who fall away into error and licentiousness” (Amm. Marc. XIV.6.7).

The strengthening of xenophobic attitudes within the Roman society Ammianus connects also with the crisis of the Roman value system in the contemporary period. He notes that “when at one time Rome was the abode of all the virtues, many of the nobles... allured foreigners of free birth by manifold attentions of courtesy and kindness” (Amm. Marc. XIV.6.21). According to Ammianus, the attitude of the Romans to immigrants is “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” (Amm. Marc. XXVIII.4.32).

Such an explanation is logical for a fourth-century writer and his readers, but it cannot be considered satisfactory for us. Besides, the tendentiousness of Ammianus Marcellinus who blames only representatives of the *contemporary* Roman urban

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<sup>5</sup> In 383 AD; see: O. Seeck, *Geschichte des Untergangs der antiken Welt*, Bd. 5 (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1922), 496.

community for negative attitude towards immigrants is obvious. Being a highly educated intellectual for his era, the author of “Res gestae” could not have been unaware of phenomena of the same type in the history of Rome of the republican era (for example, the famous exile from Rome in 155 BC of Diogenes, Critolaus and Carneades who were well-known Greek philosopher-skeptics (Plut. *Cat.* 22)).

The reasons for Ammianus’ explanation of the negative attitude to the foreigners by moral depravity should be sought in the pessimistic nature of the historical conception followed by Ammianus Marcellinus. He was a disciple of Tacitus, so his ideal was in the distant (namely republican) past of Rome. Even Ammianus’ repeated remarks about the greatness of Rome, the future revival of the Empire’s power do not obscure the bleak picture of Roman life in the 4th century AD.

One more reason for such a clear increase in xenophobia in Rome in the 4th century AD should be noted. It consists in increasing the barbarization of the Empire and the massive penetration of barbarians into diverse spheres of the life of Roman society. Moreover, in the Late Antiquity period barbarians (though only those of them who were of noble birth) sometimes made a dizzying career that the Romans never dreamed of. Indicative in this regard is the example of the Persian prince Hormisdas, brother of Sasanian shahanshah Shapur II the Great (309–379). Because of the outbreak of dynastic conflict, Hormisdas was forced to flee from Sassanian Iran in 324 AD and found asylum in the Empire, where he was warmly received by emperor Constantine I the Great (306–337). Subsequently, Hormisdas was a member of the close circle of the emperors Constantine the Great and Constantius II (337–361) and held high command posts in the Roman army (for example, he was *comes rei militaris*). Moreover, Emperor Julian the Apostate (361–363) intended to erect Hormisdas to the Persian throne in case of victory over Iran in the campaign of 363 AD<sup>6</sup>. And there were a lot of foreigners like Hormisdas in the Late Roman elite. Of course, this was also one of the reasons for the rise of xenophobic attitudes among the inhabitants of the Roman Empire in general and among the citizens of the city of Rome in particular.

Finally, it should not be ignored that the extremely negative attitude of the Romans towards immigrants was due to the intensification of the onslaught of barbarian tribes on the borders of the Empire in the 3rd – 4th centuries AD. The inhabitants of Rome were aware of the danger posed by the barbarians and were afraid of them. This fear, too, was the reason for hostility (bordering on hate) towards strangers in general, which was described by Ammianus Marcellinus so emotionally and vividly. By the way, Ammianus (as we remember, he criticized the Romans because of their xenophobic attitudes) himself really hated the barbarians who were in the Roman service. Thus, he describes with undisguised joy the massacre of the Goths that took place in the Roman Empire in 378 AD shortly after the defeat of the Roman army by the Goths at Adrianople. In particular, he writes: “When he<sup>7</sup> learnt what had happened in Thrace<sup>8</sup>, he sent secret letters to all the governors of the different cities and forts, who were all Romans (which at this time is not very common), requesting them, on one and the same day, as at a concerted signal, to put to death all the Goths who had previously been admitted into the places under their charge; first luring them into the suburbs, in expectation of receiving the pay which had

<sup>6</sup> For more details see: A. H. M. Jones, J. R. Martindale, J. Morris, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 443.

<sup>7</sup> A certain Julius who was one of the Roman generals.

<sup>8</sup> I.e. battle of Adrianople.

been promised to them. This wise plan was carried out without any disturbance or any delay; and thus the Eastern provinces were delivered from great dangers” (Amm. Marc. XXXI.16.8).

Lastly but not least, if we distract from the figure of Ammianus Marcellinus and his work, and look at the issue under review more widely, it should be noted that the historical roots of xenophobia in the Late Roman period (and it seems, as well as whole Antiquity) should be sought in one of the key features of polis citizens’ worldview which was largely preserved in the period described in “*Res gestae*”. This feature was in the fact that the citizens of polis perceived their community as “the genuine, worthy, good and close little world, which was opposed by the rest countries and peoples who were hostile, bizarre and evil”<sup>9</sup>. That is why everyone who was not a native member of the polis community was seen as a stranger, potentially dangerous for the polis community.

Thus, xenophobia was an essential part of the Roman daily life and domestic policy in the 4th century AD. At the same time, should be noted that this phenomenon was criticized by some representatives of the Roman intellectual elite (such as Ammianus Marcellinus), who considered xenophobic attitudes as the sign of moral decay and as the manifestation of the crisis of Late Roman society. And, of course, it should be noted, that study of the historical dimension of the phenomenon of xenophobia and attitude to immigrants can be useful in our time because the problem of immigration flows has become globalized and turned into a cutting-edge issue for many countries around the world.

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<sup>9</sup> G. S. Knabe, *Kornelii Tatsit* (Moscow: Nauka, 1981), 126.

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