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# Persianism in Antiquity

Edited by Rolf Strootman and Miguel John Versluys



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## THE ETERNAL PERSIAN: PERSIANISM IN AMMIANUS MARCELLINUS

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In AD 238 the Roman city of Histria in Lower Moesia, a little south of the estuary of the Danube into the Black Sea, became the target of a large group of tribal warriors who captured and sacked the place and then withdrew, loaded with booty, to the plains to the north of the delta. As we know, the warriors who devastated Histria were the vanguard of a new tribal confederacy that had, unbeknownst to the Romans, formed in southern Russia and Ukraine in the course of the past decades. The Roman observers had largely been ignorant of the profound changes in the ethnographic setup of South-eastern Europe and western Central Asia. To the Athenian historiographer Dexippus, a contemporary of the calamities, the events at Histria were the overture to the “Scythian Wars”.<sup>1</sup>

The nomenclature employed here by Dexippus betrays an ethnographic world-view that is both simplistic and lacking any notion of dynamism. Ethnic groups, in this case ‘Scythians’, are pinpointed in given areas, here the Pontic Steppe to the north of the Black Sea, once and for all. Invariably, changes in the ethnic composition of such areas’ inhabitants go unnoticed for a long time: the ‘successors’ to the Scythians in the Pontic Steppe were, from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC onwards, the Sarmatians. They shared the Scythians’ nomadic lifestyle, their warlike habitus, solid build and Iranian language. Without further ado, Greek historiographers and their Roman counterparts identified them with their predecessors in the northern steppe. The Scythian had become the prototypical northern barbarian, along with the Celt, who, for the Greeks at least, populated the northern space to the west of the Rhine.<sup>2</sup>

‘Scythian’ to Greeks and Romans was hence a placeholder for all those nomads roaming about the northern steppe. Similarly, collective designations such as *Arabes*, *Araboi*, *Arabi*, *Sarakenoi* or *Saraceni* were used, interchangeably but indiscriminately, for the nomads of the Syro-Mesopotamian desert; *Mauri* for those of the Sahara. Greek and Roman ethnographers were not too concerned about the *identity* of their interest’s objects; constructing *alterity* was what they regarded as their primary mission. The nomads from far-flung areas of this world were profoundly different from Greeks and Romans, the champions of the Mediterranean *oikoumene*, whose profile was sharpened through the objectifying view of writing intellectuals: the only reason why such barbarians were noteworthy was the perception that they were exotic and in all their actions did the precise opposite of what Hellenes would have done – like the nations in Herodotos’ Sahara excursus: the

1 Dexipp. fr. 20 (14).

2 Fundamental on the representation of Scythians in Greek literature and art is still Minns (1913). On stereotypes about Scythians in Greek ethnography see now Skinner (2012), 68–79.

Garamantes, for instance, whose cattle walk backwards, or the Atarantes, who have no names, or the Aithiopians, whose language sounds like the buzzing of bats.<sup>3</sup> Names, concepts and stereotypes were impressively long-lived, easily surviving several centuries and diverse historical watersheds. The ancient *oikoumene*'s orientalism was the ethnographers' and historians' 'barbarianism'; as Disraeli put it for the Orient: to Greek and Roman writers, the 'barbarian' was "a career".<sup>4</sup>

Now, where was the Persians' place in this geography of alterity? My working hypothesis for this paper claims that the people inhabiting the only empires that rivalled Rome after the fall of Carthage, the Parthian and Sasanian kingdoms respectively, were pressed into stereotypical patterns similar to those made for the nomadic groups on the Greco-Roman world's northern, eastern and southern fringes. In other words: as the steppe was populated by the eternal *Scythikoi*, *Arabes* and *Mauri*, the imperial enemy in the east was the eternal Persian featuring a whole set of conveniently tailored characteristics.

In order to explore the landscape of stereotypes into which Greek and Roman intellectuals place the Persians, we shall first revisit Herodotus' Persian ethnography and then see as to whether and to what degree this image persists in Ammianus' portrayal towards the end of antiquity. In such a way, it is hoped, we can retrace the continuity of Persia as an idea as it lived in the cultural memory of Greeks and Romans. It can be seen how 'basic patterns'<sup>5</sup> observed by travellers and elaborated into a narrative by Herodotus rapidly crystallised into a solid core of notions of alterity. Such notions, in turn, helped Greeks and Romans to define their respective identities: knowing who the Persians were told those who took pride in their Greek *paideia*, who they were themselves – even in the later, Christianising Roman world.

## 1. MOTLEY CANVAS: HERODOTUS' PERSIANS

The starting point for any exploration of Greek and Roman narratives about Persians has to be Herodotus' famous excursus in book one, beginning with the words: "These are the customs, so far as I know, which the Persians practise".<sup>6</sup> In this digression, aspects of Persian religion, cuisine, social practices, values and onomastics come up. Persians are different from Greeks, as they do not worship ὥγάλματα and have neither temples nor altars. None of the rituals associated with Greek sacrifice is practiced when Persians sacrifice to their gods; instead, a Μάγος ἀνήρ has to be present, and the king and all Persians are included into the prayer.<sup>7</sup> The Magi are said to differ from all other Persians in that they kill and eat any animal, except dogs and men.

3 Herodot. 4, 183–184.

4 Disraeli, Tancred.

5 "Irreduzible Grundbedingungen des Menschseins" or "Grundstrukturen" as described by Assmann (1997), 133.

6 Herodot. 1, 131 (Πέρσας δὲ οἵδια νόμοισι τοιοῦτοις χρεωμένους). See Müller (1972); Bichler (2000); Harrison (2007); Nesselrath (2009); Gruen (2011); Miller (2011); Thomas (2011); West (2011); Dan (2013).

7 Ibid., 131–132.

Herodotus also reports burial customs: corpses are covered with wax before buried, and at least the Magi do not bury their dead until it has been torn by a wild animal.<sup>8</sup>

The meals of the Persians consist of several courses; the main course is followed by several deserts; Persians eat and drink more lavishly than the Greeks, whom they claim to get up from dinner hungry.<sup>9</sup> The Persians frown upon vomiting and urinating in public; which, according to Herodotus, gives evidence of their sternness.<sup>10</sup> The way they greet each other strictly reflects social hierarchy: kisses are in order between coequals or when the difference in rank is only slight; inferiors salute higher-ranking Persians with proskynesis. They give honour in proportion to distance, thinking of themselves very highly and holding those in low honour who dwell furthest from them.<sup>11</sup>

This somewhat contradicts the next item in Herodotus' list: the historian reports that no people is as open-minded as the Persians, who easily borrow innovations from other civilisations – costume from the Medes, armour from the Egyptians, paederasty from the *Hellenes*.<sup>12</sup> In addition, each Persian married to several women. Persians hold bravery and truthfulness in high esteem. They teach their sons only three things: to ride a horse, to use the bow and to tell the truth. Herodotus praises their shunning of death penalty and the absence of parricide.<sup>13</sup> Finally, according to Herodotus, all Persian names end in 's' and are associated with characteristics of the body.<sup>14</sup>

To be sure, this is a crude collection of oddities. What makes it puzzling is the fact that many items from the excursus blatantly contradict Herodotus' own narrative. It is downright opposed to the representation of the individual kings: Cambyses, Kyros, Dareios and Xerxes invariably appear as cruel despots, driven by hubris and corrupted by decadence. Dareios is shrewd, deceitful, manipulative – features that pave his way to supreme power. When, for instance, the Persian king Dareios praises deception as the strategy of choice in warfare, this is hardly reconcilable with the claim that no virtue was held in higher esteem than truthfulness. "For where it is necessary that a lie be spoken, let it be spoken", are the words Herodotus puts into the Dareios' mouth.<sup>15</sup> To make things worse, Dareios does not see any significant difference between the liars and the truth-tellers: "those lie whenever they are likely to gain anything by persuading with their lies, and these tell the truth in order that they may draw to themselves gain by the truth, and that things may be entrusted to them more readily."<sup>16</sup> Xerxes, his son, on the other hand, is a decadent, immature weakling aspiring for world domination. Decadence,

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 133 (καὶ διὰ τοῦτο φασὶ Πέρσας τὸν Ἐλληνας σιτεομένους πεινῶντας παύεσθαι).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 136–138.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 3, 72 (ἔνθα γάρ τι δεῖ ψεύδος λέγεσθαι, λεγέσθω).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. (οἱ μέν γε ψεύδονται τότε ἐπέάν τι μέλλωσι τοῖσι ψεύδεσι πείσαντες κερδήσεσθαι, οἱ δὲ ἀληθίζονται ἵνα τῇ ἀληθείῃ ἐπισπάσωνται κέρδος καὶ τι μᾶλλον σφι ἐπιτρέπηται).

hubris and tyranny – three leitmotivs altogether absent from the excursus – guide Herodotus' representation of his Persian protagonists.

The purpose of such overt discrepancies is not, as Erich Gruen has recently pointed out, “to expose hypocrisy, contrasting lofty principles with shabby behaviour”.<sup>17</sup> Nor is it the historian's intention to portray the Persians as “craven minions of a despotic ruler, by contrast with Hellenic freedom fighters”.<sup>18</sup> What emerges from the eclectic compilation of ethnographic detail and historical action is rather a strikingly multi-dimensional image of the Persians, whose invading armies the Greeks had fought off just a little more than a generation before Herodotus wrote the histories. Again in Gruen's words: “Herodotus presents a motley canvas, no black-and-white images.”<sup>19</sup>

The historian's motley canvas is largely consistent with other voices from the 5<sup>th</sup> and early 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC: In his *Persai*, the tragedian Aischylos, himself a veteran of the Battle of Salamis, combines a differentiated view of the Persians with the topos of Xerxes' despotism and hubris; Timotheos of Miletus, in his poem *Persai*, of which fragments survive, likewise depicts the Battle of Salamis from a Persian point of view; like Aischylos and Herodotus, Timotheos refrains from black-and-white images: the listener suffers with Persian commoners, but is led to condemn Xerxes for his weak-mindedness.<sup>20</sup> Even Xenophon's *Kyrou paideia* paints a picture with many shades of grey: while Kyros, owing to his *paideia*, is of course the prototypical good ruler, the antithesis of an Oriental despot as it were, the Persian empire after Kyros is disfigured by the scourges of despotism and decadence.<sup>21</sup>

As we can see, the perception of the Persians who, albeit enemies and barbarians, were regarded as a civilised people and deemed worthy of a differentiated analysis, was quite different from how the nomadic nations were treated by Greek ethnography. While their portrayal was by no means free from stereotypical patterns, intellectuals at least abstained from obvious absurdities and from reducing them to the role of anti-Hellenes noteworthy only for their spectacular exoticism. In that respect the image of the Persians stands out from the clichés and stereotypes usually nurtured about ‘barbarians’ by Greek historiography and ethnography. While certainly not Greek, Herodotus' and his fellow Greek intellectuals' Persians could still lay claim to participating in the civilised world.

17 Gruen (2011), 74.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 80.

20 Keil (1913); Ebeling (1925).

21 Xen. Cyrop. 8, 8, 27.

## 2. FROM XERXES TO SHAPUR: AMMIANUS' PERSIANS

The set of stereotypes implicit in Persianism proved to be remarkably persistent despite all historical changes and disruptions. As with nearly all ethnic stereotypes, those associated with the Persians were attached to the area where the Persians had once ruled: western Asia in general and the Parthian empire in particular.<sup>22</sup> When, in AD 224 and 226, Ardashir, the representative of a new dynasty from the Persis (Fars), defeated the rivalling Parthian kings, Vologaeses and Artabanos, Cassius Dio was quick to call him a Persian.<sup>23</sup> Even the Hellenised name used by Cassius Dio, Artaxerxes, evokes an unbroken tradition, stretching all the way from the Achaemenid empire to Dio's own days. And of course the imperialist ambition he senses in Ardashir has its roots in the olden days of Achaemenid hegemony over the Near East. According to the Roman historiographer, Ardashir "boasted that he would win back everything that the ancient Persians had once held, as far as the Grecian Sea, claiming that all this was his rightful inheritance from his forefathers."<sup>24</sup>

While it is unlikely that Ardashir and the early Sasanians had any notion of the Achaemenid past, Roman intellectuals, throughout the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, continued to identify the Sasanians with their alleged forefathers, employing wholesale the stereotypes once created by Herodotus and his contemporaries. One particularly striking example for how potent Persianism after so many centuries still was, is Ammianus Marcellinus' *Res Gestae*. At the end of book 23 Ammianus, himself a participant in the emperor Julian's disastrously failed Persian campaign of 363, gives a detailed account, in no less than 88 paragraphs, of what he knows about the Persian empire of the Sasanians, its history, territory and people. This is merely one of many ethnographical digressions in Ammianus' work. In the extant parts of the *Res gestae*, the author interrupts his historical narrative in regular intervals in order to provide background information on, for instance, the peoples of the Rhine area (15, 4–6), the Saracens (14, 4), the Huns and Alans (31, 2) or indeed, even twice, the city of Rome (14, 6; 28, 4).<sup>25</sup>

There is some scholarly debate as to the purpose of such excursions. Were they simply meant to show off knowledge – or was there some sort of hidden narratological concept underneath?<sup>26</sup> At any rate they add, in a manner of speaking, a third dimension to the canvas of events unfolding in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, giving them a degree of historical depth they would otherwise be lacking. The Persian digression makes Julian's campaign the – from Ammianus' perspective – final link in a chain of struggles between west (Greece and Rome) and east (Persia). In order to create

22 On the representation of Parthians in Roman art see Landskron (2005); for a more comprehensive approach Lerouge (2007).

23 Cass. Dio 80,3,1.

24 Ibid. 4,1.

25 For an overview see now Feraco (2011) and Vergin (2012); on the Persian digression Feraco (2004). See also Brok (1975); Drijvers (1999); Teitler (1999); Drijvers (2006), 59–65; Hartmann (2007), 50–52; Drijvers (2011).

26 In favour of the latter Vergin (2012), 287 and passim, who claims that Ammianus created "Er-fahrungsmuster der Welt [...], durch die die Rahmenhandlung sinnkonstituierend untermauert wird."

this effect, Ammianus evokes a historical continuum which is, to put it mildly, idiosyncratic.

The digression is preceded by a speech by the emperor Julian that, in its turn, works like a teaser for the events to follow.<sup>27</sup> First, Julian addresses those (“some evil-minded men”) who believe the campaign to come were just another Roman aggression against Persia.<sup>28</sup> He then recalls the whole series of clashes between Rome and “Persia”, from (wrongly) Lucullus and Pompey all the way down to Gordianus III, whose epitaph Julian visited when invading Babylonia. Julian mentions Trajan, Lucius Verus and Septimius Severus, who all “returned from here victorious and adorned with trophies”<sup>29</sup>, but he omits, for obvious reasons, Valerian and his ill-fated campaign against Shapur I. Julian frankly admits to the fact that the Romans in all these instances were the aggressors: “Those emperors, indeed, their own desire, inclined as they were to lofty enterprise, drove to undertake noteworthy exploits.”<sup>30</sup> His own intentions, Julian claims, are quite different: “we are urged on to our present purpose by the pitiful fate of recently captured cities, by the unavenged shades of armies destroyed, by the great disasters that have been suffered, and by the loss of many a camp.”<sup>31</sup> In order to achieve this purpose, “we must wipe out a most mischievous nation [*natio molestissima*], on whose sword-blades the blood of our kinsmen is not yet dry.”<sup>32</sup> It is good Roman tradition, Julian reminds his soldiers, to get rid of such nations. Julian, he claims, fears nothing “save the craft and treachery of the over-cunning enemy [*dolos et insidias hostium nimium callidorum*].”<sup>33</sup>

This is the first stereotype about the Persians Ammianus, through Julian’s mouth, introduces to his narrative. Downright choke-full of stereotypes is the digression, on which he embarks in the following chapter. It is clearly structured into three sections: one opening paragraph (§ 1) and a very short outline of Persian history (§§ 2–8), followed by a detailed geographical survey (§§ 9–74) and another brief passage on customs and mentalities (§§ 75–84). At last, there is a coda-like and not very elegantly introduced excursus on pearls (§§ 85–88).

Of particular interest for the purpose of this paper is, of course, the history section. The enemy kingdom, Ammianus sets out, was “once small [*quondam exiguum*]” and “for reasons which we have often given was called before by various names [*multisque antea nominibus appellatum*]”.<sup>34</sup> In other words: to Ammianus, the Achaemenid, Parthian and Sasanian Kingdoms are all manifestations of the same political entity, Persia. Arsakes, the mythical founder of the Parthian kingdom, in this version appears as the restorer of Persian power: the king who defeats

27 Amm. 23, 5, 16–23.

28 Ibid. 23, 5, 16 (*ut maledici mussitant*).

29 Ibid. 5, 17 (*hinc sunt digressi victores et tropaeati*).

30 Ibid. 5, 18 (*et illos quidem voluntas ad altiora propensior subire in pulit facinora memoranda*).

31 Ibid. (*nos vero miseranda recens capturarum urbium et inultae caesorum exercituum umbrae et dannorum magnitudines castrorumque amissiones ad haec, quae proposuimus, hortantur*).

32 Ibid., 5, 19 (*abolenda nobis natio molestissima cuius in gladiis nondum nostrae propinquitatis exaruit crux*).

33 Ibid. 5, 21 (*nihil enim praeter dolos et insidias hostium vereor nimium callidorum*).

34 Ibid. 6, 2 (*hoc regnum quondam exiguum multisque antea nominibus appellatum ob causas quas saepe rettulimus*).

Seleukos Nikator, the successor of Alexandria, imposes Persian rule on neighbouring nations and fills his land with cities. After this, Ammianus goes further back in history, to Kyros, Dareios and Xerxes under whom the Persian empire “extended its domain as far as the Propontis and Thrace”.<sup>35</sup> But the hubris (*superbia*) of its leaders brought disaster upon Persia: due to imperial overstretch, Ammianus points out, and because they “lawlessly extended their raids”, the Greeks inflicted catastrophic defeats on the empire.<sup>36</sup> The collapse of the Achaemenid kingdom and the interlude of Alexander the Great is worth no more than a side note to Ammianus. “After this was done and a long time had passed, during which the Roman commonwealth was governed by consuls and later brought under the sway of the Caesars, these nations carried on wars with us from time to time, and sometimes the contest was equal, at other times they were conquered, and occasionally they came off victorious”, he concludes his summary of Persian history.<sup>37</sup>

This historical account is remarkable in three respects:

1. it artificially constructs an historical continuity stretching from Kyros to Shapur II. Alexander is a mere interlude; Arsakes, the founder of the Parthian kingdom, is a restorer of Persian power; the transition from Arsakid to Sasanian rule is not mentioned at all; the appearance of different imperial outfits in the Persian sphere is explained away by – in this context – unnamed *causae* leading to *multa nomina*.
2. it takes up the motif of hubris (*superbia*) we know from the classical period: hubris afflicts Persian leaders and brings about calamity for the empire.
3. vital information is omitted: not a single Sasanian king is mentioned, not even Shapur I, Gordian’s and Valerian’s adversary; he does not refer to any Parthian ruler but Arsakes; no individual conflicts between Parthians and Sasanians on the one hand, the Romans on the others are accounted for.

This being said, it is obvious that Ammianus’ account is neither very accurate nor is it complete – nor indeed very original. For Ammianus, the Persians Julian encounters in AD 363 are essentially the same the Greeks fought at Marathon and Salamis. After all, it does not come as a surprise that the historian shamelessly borrows from the stereotypes Herodotos, Aischylos and the likes of them have created.

The geographic survey, which is likewise flawed in many details, comprises an area far larger than the Sasanian empire. The account starts with a description of the Persian Gulf and neighbouring areas (§§ 10–13) and then proceeds to a list of *regiones maximae* (§ 14), which, according to Ammianus are ruled by *vitaxae*, officials whom he believes to be roughly equivalent to Roman *magistri equitum*.<sup>38</sup> Among the *regiones* he counts well-known provinces of Persian empire, such as Assyria, Susiana, Media, Persis, Carmania, Hyrcania, Sogdiane, Bactria, Arachosia

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 6, 7 (*regna [...] dilatasse ad usque Propontidem et Thracias*).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. (*licenter grassantium per longinqua*).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 6, 9 (*quibus peractis transcursisque temporibus longis sub consulibus et deinceps in potestatem Caesarum redacta re publica, nobiscum hae nationes subinde dimicarunt paribusque momentis interdum, aliquotiens superatae, non numquam abiere vinctrices*).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 6, 14.

and Gedrosia; but also territories well beyond the empire's frontiers (Seria – China, Arabia Felix – Yemen) and such areas which cannot be clearly defined in geographical terms.

The following paragraphs (15–73) provide further information on all these areas and the people inhabiting them, a lot of which is utterly stereotypical: "The Seres themselves are frugal beyond all others", reports Ammianus, "live a quiet life, and avoid intercourse with the rest of mortals."<sup>39</sup> Similarly, the *Arabes beati* are rich, "have an abundance of towns" and know how to take advantage from the natural benefits of their country.<sup>40</sup> Even more curious is the reference to the *Arabes beati*, the inhabitants of present-day Yemen, whom Ammianus takes for neighbours of the Persian heartland of Persis. Evidently, his main point of reference for the geography is Klaudios Ptolemaios, who deals with the areas in question in precisely the same order.<sup>41</sup> Ammianus' dependence on Ptolemaios is further highlighted by his inclusion of places with little or no connection to the Persian empire. Once again, Ammianus shows that he has "only the vaguest of notions" of the topic he writes about.<sup>42</sup> After centuries during which the Indian Ocean was used as a commercial hub by westerners, one should expect intellectuals to know a lot more about the geography of the world beyond Rome's frontiers.

Of particular interest in the present context is his image of the Sasanian empire's core regions. A lengthy digression within the digression is dedicated to the Magi (§§ 32–36). Ammianus outlines their origin and gradual coming to power and then dwells on their role in Persian society. The magi had a very mixed press in the Roman world, but Ammianus seems to take a rather positive view: they are specialists of the divine world, possessing reliable knowledge of all things religious. Nothing of this is very original, and again it is more interesting what Ammianus omits than what he actually tells us: though he mentions Zoroaster and his coming into contact with Brahmins in India, nothing is being said about the role of the Zoroastrian church in contemporary Persia.

The final passage of Ammianus' Persian digression is some sort of 'anthropology': the author lists factual or fictional attributes of Persian physical appearance and mentality: "in general" (*generaliter*) they are "almost all" (*paene omnes*) slender and dark, "with eyes grim as goates", joined , curvy eyebrows, beards and "long shaggy hair";<sup>43</sup> "all of them, without exception", bear swords at all times, which Ammianus believes to be "an old Greek custom".<sup>44</sup> What follows is a list of topical traits all related to decadence: the Persians have an extravagant sex life, are promiscuous, have numerous wives and concubines; on the other hand, they avoid lavish banqueting and "immoral relations with boys"; they also boast impeccable

39 Ibid., 6, 68 (*ipsi praeter alios frugalissimi pacatoris vitae cultores reliquorum mortaliū coetus*).

40 Ibid., 6, 45–47.

41 For instance Aria being treated immediately following Serica (Ptol. 6, 16–17). See Boeht et al. (2000), 209.

42 Ibid.

43 Amm. 23, 6, 75.

44 Ibid., 6, 76.

manners, refraining from urinating and defecating in public.<sup>45</sup> However, they do not eat in fixed intervals, but whenever they are hungry.<sup>46</sup> Ammianus' Persians appear "free and easy" (*dissoluti*) and "move about with such a laxity of their limbs and such an extravagating gait" that one could take them for *effeminatos*. But in fact they are *acerrimi bellatores*, formidable more through sophistication than through strength.<sup>47</sup> While they are "boastful, harsh and offensive", "flay men alive" and treat their servants most rigorously, they are also excessively law-obedient. Some of their laws are "detestable", namely the one that condemns all the relatives of a single offender to death. Ammianus praises Persian jurisdiction: in contrast to the Romans, they employ judges who know their business, not eloquent men. He reports an ancient custom, now defunct or altogether legendary, according to which judges had to sit on the skins of such predecessors who had been condemned for injustice.<sup>48</sup> Then follow some remarks on the Persians' military performance: training is constant, hard and of good quality; the *nobilitas* serves in the cavalry, which outweighs the infantry in vigour and prominence. However, the power of the Persian military is thwarted by constant fighting, which includes civil war.<sup>49</sup> Finally, the Persians wear clothes that "flutter in the wind", cover the whole body and are "gleaming with many colours".<sup>50</sup>

Some of this, in particular the remarks about promiscuity, food and table manners, but also the passage on jurisdiction, is borrowed directly from Herodotos or from sources based on the *pater historiae*'s narrative, like Curtius Rufus and Diодорос. Some bits and pieces conspicuously contradict Herodotos: while the Greek historiographer reports the Persians to have adopted paederasty from the *Hellenes*, Ammianus – along with Curtius Rufus<sup>51</sup> – believes them to abstain from this custom. But even where Ammianus differs from Herodotos, he accepts his analytical toolbox as timelessly relevant. The only subject where Ammianus possibly displays some degree of independence is the Persian military. Here, the historiographer could rely on his autopsy as a participant in Julian's war. Being an officer, he could observe the Persian army in action and judge their performance. Yet, even in this regard his description is hardly analytical and, from a professional point of view, rather poor.

This being said, it is remarkable how profoundly ahistoric this historian's narrative is. In the entire digression about Persia, there is no visible awareness of historical development, diachronic ruptures or structural patterns that may or may not be genetically related to each other. To Ammianus, the "Persians" are simply the "Persians", once and for all. Their portrayal is, hardly surprisingly, saturated with prejudice and stereotype. There is no evidence for any attempt to overcome, deconstruct or replace such established patterns.

45 Ibid., 6, 77–79. See Herodot. 1, 133; Xen. Cyrop. 8, 8, 11.

46 Amm. 23, 6, 79.

47 Ibid., 6, 80.

48 Ibid., 6, 81–82. See Herodot. 5, 25; Val. Max. 6, 3, ext. 3; Diod. 15, 10.

49 Amm. 23, 6, 83–84.

50 Ibid., 6, 84.

51 Curt. 10, 1, 26.

On the contrary. While Herodotos' Persian digression clearly betrays the author's intention to present a multi-dimensional image of the enemy the Greeks fought some two generations before him, the counterpart composed by Ammianus shows no trace of such a motley canvas. There are a few positive characteristics he sees in his Persians, but they are invariably put into perspective with the subsequent sentence: Persians fight gallantly, but their army is the instrument of a despotic system; Persian judges are commendable, but the legal system they represent is unduly harsh; Persians move freely and with grace, but they appear effeminate. This is what the audience expects: an enemy that can be reduced to a few pithy attributes; an enemy that can be abominated.



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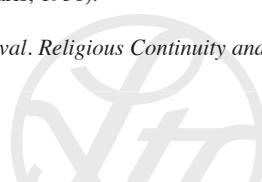
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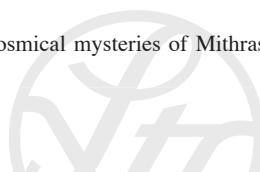
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