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GIBBON'S GUIDES: THE SCHOLARLY RECEPTION OF AMMIANUS
MARCELLINUS AND PROCOPIUS OF CAESAREA AFTER *THE DECLINE AND FALL
OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE*

by
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CHAPTER I

“It is not without the most sincere regret that I must now take leave of an accurate and faithful guide, [Ammianus Marcellinus,] who has composed the history of his own times without indulging the prejudices and passions which usually affect the mind of a contemporary” (I.430). Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*¹

“For the troubles of Africa I neither have nor desire another guide than Procopius, whose eye contemplated the image, and whose ear collected the reports, of the memorable events of his own times” (II.610 fn.1). Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*

Edward Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was a monumental work. It is without any hint of exaggeration or irony that J.W. Burrow wrote, “*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is the epic of the European Enlightenment and of Augustan England as Milton’s poem is that of the European Renaissance, Dante’s of the high Middle Ages and Virgil’s of Augustan Rome” (108). Beginning in the second century AD and ending in the fifteenth, Gibbon takes his readers from the Age of the Antonines, “the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous” (I.32), through “the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire; the greatest, perhaps, and the most awful scene in the history of mankind” (II.598). His final chapter rests on “the Ruins of Rome” (II.590).

In seventy-one chapters and well over a thousand pages, Gibbon must narrate over a millennium of history. Fortunately, he has help. Gibbon mines numerous ancient texts for information, from the polemical letters of bishops to the panegyrics of court poets. Of the hundreds of sources which Gibbon consults, two in particular deserve our attention: the ancient historians Ammianus Marcellinus and Procopius of Caesarea, of the fourth and sixth

¹ All citations include the page number of the quotation being used. For citations from Gibbon, I include the volume number and footnote number where applicable. Except where indicated, all of Gibbon’s citations have been excluded. Consult the Bibliography for further bibliographical information.

centuries respectively. Gibbon's text, especially in the two quotes above, reveals how their histories were not merely primary sources for him to consult. Rather, each of the men was himself a "guide," leading him through the murky history of Rome's decline. His debt to them is clearest in statements such as those above, but it can also be found in the way that his own text closely parallels what is said in their histories.

Given Gibbon's esteem for them in the quotations above, one may be surprised to learn that Ammianus Marcellinus and Procopius of Caesarea are both incredibly polarizing subjects in modern scholarship. Their importance is never doubted, as they often represent the only available source on a particular topic, but their basic trustworthiness has been debated for centuries. Gibbon had no qualms about asserting that Ammianus was "accurate and faithful," and he found Procopius' account of the Vandal War so reliable that he proclaimed "I neither have nor desire another guide." Whatever doubts and criticisms he might have had about the two historians—and as we shall see, he had many—he was confident enough to place his trust in them. In today's scholarship, there are a wide variety of views about their trustworthiness. As all English scholarship on Late Antiquity since the eighteenth century has been influenced in some way by Edward Gibbon, we will learn that it is not so much in spite of Gibbon's esteem, but rather because of it, that these ancient historians have generated so much debate.

This thesis aims to explore the scholarly reception of Ammianus and Procopius, from Gibbon to today. This includes reception of not only the histories written by the two authors, but also the characters of the historians themselves, reconstructed from both their own writings and the scholarly imagination. We will find that the figures of Ammianus and Procopius as human beings loom large in the minds of modern scholars as much as they did

for Gibbon, although their reputation as faithful guides has at times been challenged.

I write of the reception of Ammianus and Procopius not merely because these two ancient historians are intriguing, but particularly because scholarly discussions about them lead to important questions about the very study of history. The events and consequences of the period known as Late Antiquity were world-shaking, and our understanding of this period is constructed by both the surviving texts and scholarly interpretations of those texts. It is these interpretations, even more than the words of the ancient historians themselves, which have interested me.

Scholars face great challenges in their analyses of these historians, and these challenges can seriously impact our understanding of the period they describe. When there is little to no other contemporary evidence for something written in Ammianus or Procopius, as is often the case, we must decide whether or not we can trust their account. When one of the authors commits an irreconcilable error, we must determine how that impacts our evaluation of the rest of his work. And when a scholar makes the claim that a deep bias pervades one of the histories, we must re-contextualize everything that historian has told us and wonder to what extent we have been led astray by a dubious guide.

We also cannot forget the interests of the scholars themselves. In the preface to his *World of Late Antiquity*, Peter Brown writes, “I do not imagine that a reader can be so untouched by the idea of classical Greece and Rome or so indifferent to the influence of Christianity, as not to wish to come to some judgment on the Late Antique world that saw the radical transformation of one and the victory over classical paganism of the other” (8). Although he speaks here of the readers of his own book, the same can be said of anyone studying the Late Antique world. It may be a happy coincidence that Ammianus and

Procopius provide detailed accounts of two of the reigns most interesting to scholars—that of the Emperor Julian and the Emperor Justinian—or it may be that the existence of their histories and the interpretations of the two historians have given undue weight to these two figures. Either way, Julian and Justinian played interesting roles in the “radical transformation” which Brown describes, and we may rightly ask how much scholars’ views on this transformation inform their interpretations of Ammianus and Procopius, rather than the other way around. In certain cases, for example, it may appear that the historical credibility of the pagan Ammianus is being emphasized to make some grander point about the end of great classical historiography coinciding with the end of paganism; or Procopius’ classical style is maligned as a way of demonstrating that a new Byzantine historiographical model was needed for an empire that was no longer truly Roman. We will see these and many more examples at work in the interplay between scholars’ views of Ammianus and Procopius, and their views on the transformation, or perhaps the decline, of the Roman world. And at times we will wonder who is guiding whom.

There is much more at stake, then, in the reception of these two historians than may first appear. A scholarly analysis might begin with a specific passage in one of the histories and end with a realization about the fate of Rome itself.² Even when it does not, every scholar who closely analyzes Ammianus or Procopius is both reacting to and contributing to the scholarly discourse. On its own, an article might only be examining one small episode in a lengthy ancient history; its conclusions may seem specific, but its implications are likely much greater. Edward Gibbon, with his massive history, and the scholars who write

² J.W. Mackail, in his article “Ammianus Marcellinus,” mostly discusses that author, but near the conclusion asks if he “may perhaps be permitted to say a word” about his own explanation for the decline and fall of Rome, which is not derived from the *Res Gestae* (116). Many scholars of Ammianus and Procopius feel it important to end their work with at least some allusion to Rome’s fall, even if it is not the specific focus of their study.

specifically about Ammianus or Procopius, have something in common, after all—they want to understand what happened. And while I myself will not be making any grand conclusions about truth or otherwise in these ancient historians' accounts, I will be tracing the debates and analyzing the views of other scholars. By the end of this work, readers will have a thorough understanding of the topics of debate and controversy among modern scholars surrounding these two figures, and they can begin to judge Gibbon's guides for themselves.

Methodology

As we examine closely how scholars have approached Ammianus and Procopius, we will find many contradictions and few happy resolutions. Although a few early questions have been resolved over the centuries, the debate about these historians is intense and still very much ongoing. Late Antique scholarship has not reached a consensus on these two controversial figures, and we shall see that recent decades have produced just as much, if not more, variety of scholarly opinion.

Given the popular status of these two ancient historians, it is impossible for me to do full justice to their reception. I have limited my study to scholarly texts in English and, with two exceptions,³ have not consulted translations of works written first in other languages; because of this, we can search more confidently for the influence of Edward Gibbon, whose presence is almost unavoidable in English studies of Ammianus and Procopius, however recent.

Even with this language limitation, there are still far too many scholarly sources in

³ Those are Andreas Mehl's *Roman Historiography* and Paolo Cesaretti's *Theodora: Empress of Byzantium*, originally written in German and Italian respectively.

English for me to discuss here. This is especially true because I have chosen not only to examine essays and books about Ammianus and Procopius specifically, but also to search for references to these historians and applications of their histories in scholarly works with broader subject matter. The reasoning behind each individual choice will be made clear. That being said, some prominent Ammianus and Procopius scholars will not be present. With such a vast collection of available resources, it is not a question of what to leave out but of what to include. I am not content to summarize the opinions of groups of scholars; the voices of individual scholars will describe their own views. In order to give enough attention to these individuals, I have narrowed the amount of scholarship covered significantly. Nevertheless, these scholars have been chosen for a reason, and while they may not exemplify all that modern scholarship has to offer on this topic, they represent enough interesting perspectives to give the reader a sense of what the debate about these two historians looks like and what the prevailing arguments and problems are.

To that end, I will begin my next chapter with Edward Gibbon, examining his detailed views of Ammianus and Procopius. After establishing Gibbon's model, we can see how it has been tweaked and transformed by more modern scholars. But before we can do that, I must first introduce Ammianus, Procopius, and their works—a deceptively difficult task.

The Miles quondam et Graecus and the Sometime Secret Historian

The *Oxford Classical Dictionary* entry on Ammianus Marcellinus, written by John

Matthews,⁴ begins thus: “**Ammianus Marcellinus** (c. AD 330-95), the last great Latin historian of the Roman empire, was born at Syrian Antioch...” (73). One might expect that a reference book, especially one for which there is a limited amount of space for any given topic, would adhere entirely to facts and avoid opinionated commentary such as the “last great” designation—particularly in the opening words. R. C. Blockley, in his book *Ammianus Marcellinus: A Study of his Historiography and Political Thought*, does perhaps a better job, opening his introduction with this simple, factual statement: “Some time before 335 A.D., and probably before 330, Ammianus was born in Syria” (8). Blockley avoids drawing the reader into his introduction with any claims that the historian was great or his history monumental. Instead, he states the very same facts that the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* does, in what appears to be a very objective way.⁵ I might have modeled my own introduction of Ammianus after his, with a statement such as “The first ancient historian we will be discussing, Ammianus Marcellinus, was born in Syria around 330 A. D.” But rather than merely leave the reader satisfied with this bit of knowledge, I will instead add this quote from Timothy Barnes’ *Ammianus Marcellinus and the Representation of Historical Reality*: “Ammianus came from Syria or Phoenicia, his city of origin being perhaps either Tyre or Sidon” (63). Suddenly we are introduced to the idea that Ammianus may have been born in Phoenicia, and if he was born in Syria, it was not necessarily, as the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* states so factually, in Antioch.⁶ We now have “facts” from different scholarly sources that manage to be both vague and mutually exclusive. Interestingly, we shall see that

⁴ We will later see that John Matthews is one of the premier Ammianus scholars and his book, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus Marcellinus*, will be discussed in Chapter 4.

⁵ Blockley also includes a footnote referencing a book by E. A. Thompson as the source of what he calls this “sketch of relevant details” (8).

⁶ Barnes emphasizes that Ammianus “knew Antioch well and admired the city. But that does not make him a native of the city” (60). He carefully deconstructs the popular idea that a letter written to an Antiochene Marcellinus was Ammianus, and makes the case for Tyre or Sidon as the historian’s true birthplace, in his very detailed chapter, “Origin and Social Status.”

Ammianus' birthplace—unlike his religious beliefs—is not even acknowledged as debatable by most scholars,⁷ who feel perfectly confident (as Matthews did in his dictionary entry) to state that he was born in Antioch.

Does it really matter whether or not Ammianus was born in Antioch? When Andreas Mehl introduces the topic of Ammianus' early life in *Roman Historiography*, he writes, “The historical writer’s life did not follow a straight path. Ammianus was born around AD 330 in one of the Roman empire’s largest and most magnificent cities, Antioch on the Orontes in northern Syria, and he grew up the son of a wealthy family...Despite this background, he enlisted in the emperor’s bodyguard as a young man” (208). Antioch, large and magnificent, has a character of its own in Mehl’s narrative of Ammianus’ life. Mehl’s Ammianus is a man who was born in splendor but chose a military life; Barnes’ Ammianus is a vague figure, associated with a variety of places but not fixed in any specific location. This seemingly small detail can actually create in the reader’s mind a different idea of who Ammianus was.

Despite some scholars’ fascination with Ammianus’ birthplace, we may wonder how much it truly affects our understanding of Ammianus’ history. There are certainly topics, like Ammianus’ religion, which seem far more worthy of discussion, and these will indeed be discussed at greater length. But for the purposes of this introduction, Ammianus’ birthplace provides an important example of a concept that we will see again and again—a statement like “Ammianus was born in Antioch” might be basic fact for one scholar, and conjecture, or simply wrong, for another. When we read that “Ammianus Marcellinus (c. AD 330-95), the

⁷ John Matthews, for his part, utterly rejects Barnes’ notion that the famous letter could have been written to a different Marcellinus from Antioch, and is so comfortable with this fact that he uses the letter to extract a great deal of evidence: “The identity of Libanius’ correspondent as Ammianus Marcellinus is inescapable, and the letter makes it possible to reconstruct in some detail the political and social setting in which Ammianus’ work was nearing completion” (8).

last great Latin historian of the Roman empire, was born at Syrian Antioch,” we now realize that there are several questionable elements in this statement.

Neither Ammianus nor Procopius provided us with a full biography of their lives, and we can only guess so much from contextual clues or the rare external reference. Scholars may debate about anything that the historians do not say, and indeed much of what they do say. It is certainly not this thesis’s intention to explore all of the arguments about facts pertaining to Ammianus or Procopius; I could fill the remaining pages with a discussion of Ammianus’ birthplace alone. Rather, I will now begin my promised introduction to the backgrounds of Ammianus and Procopius, with the apology that it will not follow the usual format of a series of facts and suppositions about the historians’ lives.⁸

The *Res Gestae* was written by Ammianus Marcellinus in the late fourth century AD. A literal translation of *Res Gestae* would be “things done,” but Andreas Mehl points out that this was “a common Latin idiom for ‘history’” (209).⁹ Although Ammianus himself was Greek, he chose to write his history of the Roman Empire in Latin, a choice which has excited a great deal of discussion in modern scholarship.¹⁰ In the concluding words of his history Ammianus writes that it spans “the reign of the emperor Nerva to the death of Valens” (443),¹¹ or 96 AD to 378 AD. Unfortunately, only the comparatively brief period

⁸ Anyone wishing for more details can consult any of the sources listed in the bibliography. For Ammianus, Barnes’ “Origin and Social Status” chapter especially engages with most of the popular presupposed facts about Ammianus’ life; however you feel about his own conclusions, his overall discussion of the relevant information is enlightening. Procopius is rather more difficult, for as we shall see much of the debate about his life is deeply tied to scholars’ individual understandings of his histories; in particular, the years in which he wrote his histories and the year of his death are controversial topics. Averil Cameron points out in *Procopius and the Sixth Century* that “the argument can only be circular” when scholars attempt to use hypothetical dates for the writing of the *Buildings* and the *Secret History* in order to explain Procopius’ personal attitudes, since the dates are not secure (3); in this case, the dates which scholars ascribe to Procopius’ histories rely heavily upon their interpretation of the text.

⁹ I will be using the original Latin name to refer to Ammianus’ text, although some of our scholars refer to it as the *History*.

¹⁰ We will see Timothy Barnes in particular draw attention to Ammianus’ Greek-ness in Chapter 4.

¹¹ All English translations of passages from the *Res Gestae* are from the Penguin Classics edition.

from 354-378 has survived, represented as Books 14-31 of his original completed history.¹²

Ammianus himself lived during the time of his extant books and occasionally relates his own role in the events he is describing. For this reason he can be placed into the category of historians who wrote about their own times, a tradition in classical historiography which was established by the ancient Greek historian Thucydides. And while Ammianus certainly does belong in this group of contemporary historians, it is important not to forget that, as John Burrow points out in his *History of Histories*, “his history is exclusively contemporary by accident” (149).

The late fourth century was an intriguing time of transition for the Roman Empire, and Ammianus’ history narrates many of the important events of his time. Ammianus describes himself as “*miles quondam et Graecus*”—“a former soldier and a Greek” (443)—and his history is largely focused on greater military and political events in the empire, some of which, like the siege of Amida, he personally took part in (Book XIX).¹³ Ammianus also describes the politics and personalities of the different emperors of his time, beginning with Constantius and ending with Valens. Books XV-XXV, a majority of the history, feature the

¹² It is impossible to ignore how odd it is that Ammianus appears to have devoted the first half of his history to the period of 96-353 (257 years) and the second half to 354-378 (only 24 years). Scholars have various theories on why this is the case. Most agree with Mehl, who states that “like other historical writers, Ammianus also condensed the more distant past, and related recent history or current events in great detail” (209). Others suspect that our surviving information may be somehow incorrect. Barnes, in an argument that does not solve the problem of the stark contrast in detail given to the two halves of the history, actually argues that “it is reasonable to conclude that [the surviving book numbers] may be erroneous and that the extant Books XIV-XXXI were originally numbered XIX-XXXVI, so that the first eighteen books of the *Res Gestae* have been lost and the second eighteen books have survived” (31). Barnes certainly stands out in this regard, as most other scholars accept the 31-Book format without comment.

¹³ Of much less interest to most (but certainly not all) scholars are his lengthy digressions or excursions on topics such as the geography of a distant land or the culture of a barbarian tribe. These passages are particularly difficult for scholars to study and extract information from. M.L.W. Laistner criticizes them: “One may admit that he has not exercised sufficient care or restraint in these parts of the *History*. He mixes up facts or scientific data with mythology, not so much because he believes these fictions, but because for the moment the rhetorician in him is stronger than the historical inquirer” (155). Ronald Mellor, on the other hand, creates an interesting analogy: “Like a saxophonist’s riff in jazz, or a stand-up comedian’s monologue, or an operatic cabaletta, a digression could be a virtuoso display to be enjoyed for its own sake” (128).

character of Julian very prominently. Julian was only emperor from 360-363 AD, but he is a fascinating figure for most modern scholars. Whereas the Emperor Constantius was a Christian, his successor Julian, often referred to now as “the Apostate,” was a devout pagan, and his attempts during his brief reign to revive paganism (as well as directly oppose Christianity) have immortalized him in historical scholarship. Ammianus’ descriptions of Julian are what the historian is most famous for. Another key feature of the *Res Gestae* is the fact that it ends with the immediate aftermath of the disastrous battle of Adrianople (or Hadrianople), a defeat to the Goths during which the Roman emperor Valens was killed. Many modern scholars see it as a definite turning point in Roman history. One of our sources, J. W. Mackail, even claims in his article “Ammianus Marcellinus” that the battle of Adrianople led directly to “The collapse of the Roman empire”: the battle “was a turning point which was decisive; before which, hope was still possible; after which, there was no effective recovery” (104). Ammianus himself never makes such a claim, but it is intriguing that his history, of which the high point is the aspirations and failures of Julian to revive the Roman Empire’s classical pagan roots, should end with one of Rome’s greatest defeats.

Our other historian writes much later. Procopius of Caesarea¹⁴ lived during and wrote about the early to mid-sixth century AD. For Ammianus we have only the second half of the *Res Gestae*, but we have three historical texts from Procopius: the *History of the Wars of Justinian*, the *Buildings*, and the *Secret History* (or *Anecdotes*).¹⁵ Justinian’s reign saw multiple wars with different theaters of operation, and for this reason Procopius’ *History of*

¹⁴ The epithet “of Caesarea” helps distinguish our historian from other people named Procopius, since it was a very common name in the ancient world. (Fortunately, Procopius tells us himself in both the *History of the Wars* and the *Secret History* that he is from Caesarea, so there is no debate about his birthplace.) Another very famous Procopius was a fourth-century political figure whose failed usurpation of the throne is described by Ammianus in Book XXVI of the *Res Gestae*.

¹⁵ In this case I shall be using the most common English names.

the Wars of Justinian is often divided into the *Persian Wars*, *Gothic Wars*, and *Vandal Wars*, although I will refer to the history as the single text.¹⁶ *The Wars* covers the 530s to 550s AD and, not unlike Ammianus' *Res Gestae*, is written in a secular, classical style that focuses on major political and military events and the historical actors who played their parts in them; there is a particular focus on the general Belisarius, with whom Procopius was personally close as his secretary for many of his campaigns. The other two texts are dramatically different. The *Buildings* describes the building operations commissioned by Justinian, and is stylistically closer to panegyric, praising the divinely-inspired emperor for his accomplishments. The text that has come to be known as the *Secret History*, on the other hand, claims to be a revision of the *Wars*, and describes, among other things, the evil, demonic nature of the Emperor Justinian; the sordid, shameful history of the Empress Theodora; and the pathetic personal life of the general Belisarius, whom Procopius asserts was manipulated by the machinations of his wicked wife Antonina. Understandably, the *Secret History* was not published until after Procopius' death. Although modern scholarship is in agreement that Procopius wrote all three histories,¹⁷ they differ in style, expressed opinions, and occasionally facts. Scholars have long had difficulty reconstructing the political and personal attitudes of Procopius based on all of them.

Despite their differences, all three histories are about the same time period and feature many of the same historical characters. Principal among these is the Emperor Justinian,

¹⁶ Since Procopius wrote his history in eight books and jumped between the different geographical wars, this has led to some confusing enumeration and referencing in modern scholarship; for instance, Averil Cameron refers to the different books of Procopius' history not by their actual book numbers (I-VIII) but by numbers corresponding to their geographical war. Therefore Book VIII of the *History of the Wars of Justinian* is referred to as *Gothic Wars IV*, since it is the fourth book concerned with the Gothic War. I will refer to the books only by their proper numbers as part of the *History of the Wars* as a whole.

¹⁷ This has not always been the case, but all of the sources I will be treating here unanimously agree, and the more recent ones (such as Cameron) scoff at any suggestion to the contrary. Even Gibbon's eighteenth-century history confidently recognizes Procopius as the author of all three works.

whose reign, much like Julian's, is of great interest to modern scholarship. During Ammianus' time, the seat of government for the Roman Empire resided in Constantinople in the east, but the city of Rome itself still had recognized importance; Ammianus describes how the Emperor Constantius celebrated a triumph in Rome (Book XVI). By Procopius' time, the western half of the empire had been lost. Shortly after Ammianus' death the empire was divided with different rulers for east and west. Barbarian incursions and a memorable sacking of Rome in 410 changed the prospects of the western half, and Rome finally rid itself of emperors in 476; even before that the title had become a formality, as the role and rhetoric of the Roman emperors was adopted and transformed by the barbarian rulers who followed them. Justinian, therefore, became a Roman emperor during a time when Rome itself had been under barbarian control for some time. But he sought to change all of that. Justinian undertook multiple campaigns to reconquer the formerly western half of the empire and place it once more under the rule of a Roman emperor. These campaigns, first led by the general Belisarius, represent much of the material in Procopius' *History of the Wars*. Procopius' narrative of the reconquest is, however, incomplete, and the *History of the Wars* was continued by a contemporary, the poet-historian Agathias.

While Procopius' *History of the Wars* has provided a great deal of historical information about Justinian's reconquest of the West, Procopius himself is more famous as the so-called secret historian. His detailed descriptions of the Empress Theodora's sexual history, which make up much of the beginning of the *Secret History*, have unsurprisingly received a great deal of attention from scholars for centuries. One scholarly argument is that

the fame of the *Secret History* has tarnished the reputation of the *History of the Wars*,¹⁸ while another view argues that the reputation of the *Wars* has caused scholars to turn away from the *Secret History* as a source of valuable information, unnecessarily elevating the *Wars* as the true account of Justinian's reign.¹⁹ And let us not forget that somewhere in the midst of all of this Procopius also wrote the panegyric *Buildings*. The debate about Procopius' intentions for his three works will be the principal topic of discussion in the later chapter on Procopius.

In brief, then, I have described the four historical texts which this paper will be discussing, and I have avoided any hypothetical facts about the lives of the historians. More information about the historians and their works will certainly be revealed in the following discussions.

The Last Great Historians of Rome

With this simple understanding of what Ammianus' and Procopius' histories were, it may seem odd that I have chosen these two as the topic of my analysis. One wrote in the fourth century, the other in the sixth; and while the *Res Gestae* and *History of the Wars* might be similar enough stylistically to offer a comparison, scholars have enough trouble comparing Procopius' separate works to each other. Ammianus and Procopius are major sources for their respective subjects, but they do not always represent the only source, and they are certainly not the only historians of Late Antiquity; Gibbon, as we noted, used hundreds of written sources. We shall see that it is very uncommon for Ammianus scholars

¹⁸ J.A.S. Evans, in *Procopius*, laments that the *Secret History* has "become the most famous of Procopius' works and the most read, a fact which is less than fair both to the historian and to the emperor whom he lampooned" (16).

¹⁹ We will see in Chapter 5 that Averil Cameron in particular is bitter about the *History of the Wars*' privileged treatment.

to draw comparisons between him and Procopius, and vice versa. Perhaps the selection of these two seems arbitrary.

We shall discover, however, that there are many similarities and points of comparison. Some of these are inherent, such as the fact that both wrote contemporary histories. And Procopius, like Ammianus, was a former soldier and a Greek when he wrote his histories. Additionally, as mentioned before, the *History of the Wars* and the *Res Gestae* were both written in a style that was popular with much more ancient historians—a style which avoids discussing religion, something that most of their contemporaries did. There are, then, some similarities between the two historians that immediately come to mind. But this thesis is not about Ammianus and Procopius; it is about the scholarly reception of these two authors. And it is here that the similarities become striking. For in the case of both historians, scholars may utter “great” and “problematic” in the same breath. Gibbon and many since him have owed a great deal of their historical information to the histories of Ammianus and Procopius, but that has only given more urgency to the scholarly debate about understanding the past using their texts.

Despite the fact that Ammianus and Procopius lived centuries apart, they still both lived during Late Antiquity, a time period constructed by scholarship. It is a time when, as Peter Brown described, classical Greece and Rome were being transformed into something different and unfamiliar. If it was a strange time to live through, it is certainly a strange time to study. Ammianus’ *Res Gestae* and Procopius’ *Wars* read in many ways like the works of Thucydides or Tacitus, historians who themselves wrote centuries apart but still belong to the canon of classical historiography. At times we might feel that Ammianus and Procopius are comfortingly classical. It certainly helps that both historians wrote about emperors who in

some way attempted to revive the classical heritage of the Roman Empire—Julian with his promotion of paganism, and Justinian with his reconquest. The classical world in these texts has not yet been transformed into something unrecognizable. But for someone like Edward Gibbon, there is enough evidence in Ammianus and Procopius to suggest that it is declining in that direction. And for many scholars, Ammianus—or Procopius—is, in fact, the last great Roman historian.

Ammianus is a common choice. We already saw how John Matthews, in his entry for the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, called him the last great *Latin* historian, but others go much further, elevating him above his Greek-writing successors. In John Burrow's *History of Histories*—a book which starts with Babylonian records and ends with twentieth-century postmodern historiography—Ammianus concludes his unit on Rome, in the chapter “Ammianus Marcellinus: The Last Pagan Historian.”²⁰ M.L.W. Laistner also dignifies Ammianus with the final chapter in his book *The Greater Roman Historians*. Ronald Mellor's *Roman Historians*, too, chooses him for last, claiming in his chapter on Ammianus that he is the “last great historian of Greco-Roman antiquity” (131). And the introduction to the Penguin edition of Ammianus' history in English states bluntly, on the very first line of the first page, “AMMIANUS MARCELLINUS was the last great Roman historian” (1).

It is curious, then, that Andreas Mehl's *Roman Historiography* does not follow in this trend. Mehl's book discusses Roman history from its earliest annalistic beginnings and does not limit itself to only the more famous historians. In one of our rare examples of a scholarly source that contains both of our ancient authors, he does include a section on Ammianus, but he concludes his work with Procopius. Mehl does not only discuss “great” historians, so his

²⁰ Zosimus, a famous pagan Roman historian who lived over a hundred years later, would be outraged, and he would not be alone.

choice to end with Procopius means he sees Procopius as the last Roman historian. In the appendix “Chronology: Select Dates in the Political History of Rome,” he concludes with the year 565, the end of the reign of Justinian, who “for a short time partially restores the Roman empire in the West” (254). As far as Mehl is concerned, the end of Procopius’ history is the end of Roman history itself.²¹

For the scholars who chose Ammianus, perhaps Procopius was not “great” enough to be the last great Roman historian. But another explanation is that for them Procopius was not Roman. Although I have referred to both Ammianus and Procopius as Roman historians, many scholars choose to identify Procopius as Byzantine. The division between Roman history and Byzantine history is subjective in modern scholarship, as different scholars choose different dates or emperors to represent the end of Rome or the beginning of Byzantium. J.A.S. Evans’ *Procopius* states that “The Roman world ends with Justinian, and the Byzantine world begins” (18). Averil Cameron agrees, referring to Justinian and the eastern Romans throughout *Procopius and the Sixth Century* as Byzantines, and claiming that one of the goals of her book is to “present a more homogenous and a more Byzantine Procopius, in the sense that he will seem more closely related to his own culture and less of a stray from classical historiography who happened occasionally to reveal his Byzantine origins in an unfortunate lapse” (4). For Cameron, the Byzantine designation is particularly important because it forces people to accept that Procopius’ culture was different from the classical Roman one. On the other hand, someone in Mehl’s line of thinking might argue that referring to Procopius as Byzantine would distance him too greatly from the Roman historiographical tradition to which he belonged—not as a “stray” who was harkening back

²¹ This is particularly remarkable given the fact that Procopius had a direct successor, Agathias, who continued his history of the Gothic War.

to an earlier tradition that was now out of date, but as the final true representative of that tradition.²² The terminology battle between Byzantine and Roman is confusing and debatable enough that some writers, such as Peter Sarris in his introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of Procopius' *Secret History*, feel safer using both: "Procopius is our primary literary source for the reign of the sixth-century Byzantine (or Eastern Roman) Emperor Justinian I (527-65), whose period of rule stands out from the pages of Roman and Byzantine history" (vii).

Individual scholars' attitudes about the chronology of Roman or Byzantine history will be addressed again later. For now, it is interesting enough to note that both ancient historians, though separated by over a hundred years, wrote during a time which is difficult for modern scholarship to classify. These two authors—by no means the only historians of their time—are popular enough that many scholars seek to mark their work as the end or beginning of an era. And the statements that Ammianus was the last great Roman historian, or that Procopius was the first Byzantine one, come charged with ideas about the Roman Empire's decline and fall. As we examine how scholars have attempted to understand the past using these two authors' histories, we must not forget the history of the Roman Empire as a whole. Each scholar's interpretation of when the Roman Empire truly ends heavily impacts his or her understanding of Ammianus' or Procopius' work. And while we will see many other similarities between the two ancient historians in the succeeding chapters, it is because each one has some claim to the title of "the last great historian of Rome" that I find

²² Confusingly, Mehl titles his section on Procopius "Procopius of Caesarea: The History of Current Events in Transition from Rome to Byzantium" (237). At the beginning of the section he notes that Priscus of Panium and Malchus of Philadelphia, two late fourth-century writers, refer to Byzantium (237-8). Mehl then claims that "the two halves of the empire were drifting apart" (238). After that, he introduces Procopius, and never mentions Byzantium or the drifting apart of Rome again. Despite the section title, Mehl never addresses the "transition" with respect to Procopius, and in fact does not conclude with any satisfactory explanation for why Procopius is considered the last Roman historiographer.

the comparison between Ammianus and Procopius so compelling.

Edward Gibbon, for his part, saw the end of the empire much later than the rest of our scholars. In his mind the Roman Empire—the same empire of the Antonines at the start of his history—continues to decline through the fifteenth century. There is no doubt in Gibbon’s mind that Justinian is just as much a Roman emperor as Marcus Aurelius. Modern scholarship’s idea of Ammianus or Procopius as the last Roman historian does not come from Gibbon. What does come from him is the distinction of *great*. Gibbon’s praises of Ammianus and Procopius and especially, as we shall see, his favorable comparison of them to other contemporary historians, is partly responsible for making Ammianus and Procopius so popular. And in the following chapter, we shall examine what exactly Gibbon thought of these two ancient historians and what their histories might teach us.

CHAPTER II

“Ammianus almost alone describes the councils and actions which were terminated by the fatal battle of Hadrianople. We might censure the vices of his style, the disorder and perplexity of his narrative; but we must now take leave of this impartial historian; and reproach is silenced by our regret for such an irreparable loss.” *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (I.808 fn.91)

“According to the vicissitudes of courage or servitude, of favour or disgrace, Procopius successively composed the *history*, the *panegyric*, and the *satire* of his own times.” *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (I.648-9)

Edward Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is a narrative masterpiece, and due to its sheer scope and density it can be difficult to select individual moments in the book during which we can say Gibbon is at his best. J. W. Burrow, however, does just that in his book *Gibbon*. Addressing “The reader who wants simply to sample Gibbon as narrator” (94), he selects as examples two and only two chapters from the 71-chapter text: Chapter 22 and Chapter 40 (94-96). For the former, Burrow praises especially “Gibbon’s depiction of Julian’s character” (95), and for the latter, his “extraordinary” address of material that includes “the early careers of the Emperor Justinian and his scandalous Empress Theodora” (96). Indeed, the two chapters which Burrow has selected as Gibbon’s finest fall under the purview of the two historians with whom we are concerned, Ammianus Marcellinus and Procopius of Caesarea.²³

²³ Burrow actually notes Gibbon’s debt to Ammianus in his discussion of why Chapter 22 is so excellent: “Gibbon here had an unusually detailed and reliable source, the historian Ammianus Marcellinus” (94). He refuses, though, to give Ammianus too much credit for a narrative that Gibbon adheres to with closeness, asserting, “But even though Ammianus was one of the best ancient historians used by Gibbon, and the latter paid tribute to his impartiality, there still remained much for Gibbon to do in the shaping and dramatic organization of his chapter” (95). Curiously, Burrow does not mention Procopius (or any other source) when he discusses Chapter 40, despite the fact that Gibbon’s now famous quote about Procopius as historian, panegyrist and satirist comes from the main body of this chapter (as part of a very lengthy discussion of Procopius).

With the realization that Gibbon owes some of his best work to the histories of Ammianus and Procopius, it is understandable why he praises them in the two quotes from the previous chapter. But as the altogether different quotes which I have chosen above suggest, Gibbon did not merely follow his guides to the letter and copy their accounts. Ammianus the “accurate and faithful guide” receives high praise in the main body of *Decline and Fall*, but in his footnotes, Gibbon is condescending to the ancient author, criticizing Ammianus’ deficiencies as a historiographer. With Procopius, whose account of “the troubles of Africa” was so excellent that Gibbon needed no other guide, the relationship is even more complicated; “According to the vicissitudes of fortune,” Procopius is only sometimes a reliable guide.

Ammianus’ *Res Gestae* is disorderly and perplexing, and evidently only Procopius’ *Wars* can rightly be called “*history*.” How did Gibbon come to these conclusions, and more importantly, how was he able to decide when he might treat these historians as reliable guides in spite of these opinions? Gibbon does not provide us with a clear answer, but his footnotes and occasionally his main text give us various examples that, when pieced together, can reveal how one of Rome’s greatest historians managed two of his most significant primary sources.

The Impartial Historian

During the middle of Chapter 24, Gibbon’s narrative, now fully into the brief reign of the Emperor Julian, touches upon one of *Decline and Fall*’s familiar themes: the

Instead he highlights “the extraordinary control [Gibbon] was able to keep of his diverse materials” (96), perhaps hinting at Gibbon’s use of both Procopius’ *Secret History* and *History of the Wars*.

disorderliness of the Roman soldiers. “After the siege of Persiabor,” Gibbon writes, “the firmness of the emperor was exercised by the insolent avarice of the army, who loudly complained that their services were rewarded by a trifling donative of one hundred pieces of silver” (I.370). Having set up the scene, Gibbon then employs a historiographical technique which today belongs more to the ancient world than the modern: “[Julian’s] just indignation was expressed in the grave and manly language of a Roman. ‘Riches are the object of your desires; those riches are in the hands of the Persians; and the spoils of this fruitful country are proposed as the prize of your valour and discipline...’” (I.370). Julian’s “manly” speech continues for almost half the page; the response, naturally, is “the unanimous applause and cheerful obedience of the Romans, who declared their confidence of victory while they fought under the banners of their heroic prince” (I.370). Gibbon did not fabricate this speech himself;²⁴ he lifted it from Book XXIV of Ammianus’ *Res Gestae*. And if anyone should question his choice to copy a speech—in ancient historiography, typically the literary invention of the historian, rather than an accurate report—Gibbon justifies himself in a footnote: “I give this speech as original and genuine. Ammianus might hear, could transcribe, and was incapable of inventing, it. I have used some slight freedoms, and conclude with the most forcible sentence” (I.791 fn.63). Gibbon is confident in both Ammianus’ faithful reporting skills, which would cause him to transcribe such a speech accurately, and his somewhat lacking writing ability, which would prevent him from being able to write it himself. In a rather circular fashion, then, Gibbon has read and extracted these two qualities of Ammianus from his history, and he can use these qualities to determine factual accuracy in the text.

²⁴ His translation, as he himself implies, is not exactly literal. That first line in Ammianus’ text reads: “*Persae circumfluentes rerum omnium copiis: ditare vos poterit opimitas gentis, si unum spirantibus animis fortiter fecerimus*” (Book XXIV). All Ammianus quotations in Latin are from the Latin Library.

Whenever Gibbon references Ammianus, we see the same two assumptions at work. If Gibbon's close adherence to the *Res Gestae* should provoke any criticism, he need only remind readers in his footnotes that Ammianus is impartial by nature and reported the truth as he saw it. Later in the notes for Chapter 24, "The whole relation of the death of Julian is given by Ammianus, an intelligent spectator" (I.793 fn.99). Shortly thereafter, when Julian's successor Jovian is chosen, "The modest and judicious historian [Ammianus] describes the scene of the election, at which he was undoubtedly present" (I.793 fn.100). And shortly after that, "Ammianus has drawn from the life an impartial portrait of Jovian" (I.793 fn.103). Gibbon may use the *Res Gestae* as a reliable resource for the death of Julian and the accession of Jovian because Ammianus was an "intelligent spectator," "modest and judicious" and "impartial." Even when Ammianus' personal favor for an individual—his own former commanding officer Ursicinus—might be expected to interfere with his objective narration of events, Gibbon is satisfied that the ancient historian's account is true based on simple logical analysis: "Ammianus represents the merit and disgrace of Ursicinus with that faithful attention which a soldier owed to his general. Some partiality may be suspected, yet the whole account is consistent and probable" (I.757 fn.62). Gibbon does not identify where the partiality might occur; he simply accepts that the account is probable, and even suggests that any partiality in this instance might favor Ammianus' good character—if Ammianus gives undue weight to Ursicinus' story, it is because he is giving Ursicinus "the faithful attention which a soldier owed to his general." In all of these cases, Gibbon focuses more on the character of the historian than the text of the history, using Ammianus' excellent observational skills, impartial nature, and obedience as a soldier to explain how he judges evidence from his source material.

But Gibbon does not find only reliable truth in the pages of the *Res Gestae*, and other comments make it clear that while he may trust the guide, he is often frustrated by the guidebook. In Chapter 19, Gibbon describes the cruelty of the Caesar Gallus, Julian's older brother. Jovian may have received an "impartial portrait" in Ammianus' history, but Gallus' wife Constantina does not appear to be so lucky. Gibbon writes that she "is described, not as a woman, but as one of the infernal furies tormented with an insatiate thirst of human blood" (I.273). Although he uses the description in his own narrative, Gibbon reveals in a footnote that that may have been excessive; after quoting some of the Latin from the *Res Gestae*, Gibbon writes, "The sincerity of Ammianus would not suffer him to misrepresent facts or characters, but his love of *ambitious* ornaments frequently betrayed him into an unnatural vehemence of expression" (I.754 fn.16). Gibbon has no doubt that Ammianus' portrayal of Gallus' villainous wife was sincere; it is only his "expression" which should be questioned. Similarly, when Gibbon describes the aftermath of a terrible earthquake in Chapter 26, he notes that "large vessels were stranded on the mud" and cites Ammianus for his source (I.409). In his footnote, he comments, "Such is the bad taste of Ammianus that it is not easy to distinguish his facts from his metaphors. Yet he positively affirms that he saw the rotten carcase of a ship, *ad secundum lapidem*, at Methone, or Modon, in Peloponnesus" (I.803 fn.1). Again, Ammianus has "poor taste" in writing, but this should not lead us to doubt his factual accuracy. In this instance, because he "positively affirms" seeing the wreckage, we can trust him. Gibbon does not believe that Ammianus is capable of deceiving the reader with fanciful stories, just as he is not capable of misrepresenting a woman's character even when he describes her as "*humani cruoris avida*."²⁵

There are rare cases, however, in which Gibbon does not defend Ammianus' account.

²⁵ I.754 fn.16 in Gibbon and XXIV.2 in Ammianus.

In Chapter 25, Gibbon glosses over the death of Jovian rather quickly, noting that there may have initially been “malicious whispers” about the circumstances of the emperor’s death but his “reign and person were soon forgotten” (I.383). A footnote references Ammianus, but not as a supporting source; rather, Gibbon disagrees with his account, stating that “Ammianus, unmindful of his usual candour and good sense, compares the death of the harmless Jovian to that of the second Africanus, who had excited the fears and resentment of the popular faction” (I.796 fn.17). Gibbon does not cite a passage from Ammianus’ history;²⁶ he simply wishes to note that he found Ammianus’ comparison of Jovian to Scipio bizarre. This is not a glaring factual inaccuracy, merely a silly historical allusion, and it is a rare mistake for Ammianus, whose character is usually comprised of good sense. His other criticisms are equally frivolous; for example, Ammianus describes the barbarian leader Chnodomar with “inflated eloquence” (I.757 fn.74) and includes a “rash” and “unseasonable” digression on astronomy (I.796 fn.24). Gibbon only once describes Ammianus as writing something other than (even bad) history: “The curious passage of Ammianus, in which he paints the manners of contemporary lawyers, affords a strange mixture of sound sense, false rhetoric, and extravagant satire. Godefroy supports the historian by similar complaints and authentic facts” (I.744 fn.124). Gibbon admits that this digression on lawyers (which is several pages long) might contain “false rhetoric” and denotes it “curious,” but he does not use the opportunity to comment on how this impacts his understanding of the impartial historian. In fact, despite the accusation of false rhetoric and

²⁶ Ammianus’ own words seem rather harmless to me: “*cumque huic et Aemiliano Scipioni vitae exitus similis evenisset, super neutrius morte quaestionem conperimus agitatum*” (XXV.10.13).

extravagant satire,²⁷ Gibbon cites Godefroy's commentary on the Theodosian Code in support of Ammianus' unfavorable view of lawyers. When faced with the opportunity to question Ammianus' validity as a historian—or at the very least his ability to present an impartial portrait of lawyers—Gibbon skirts the issue. Ammianus is certainly capable of writing poorly; very briefly he might resort to satire; but his status as a trustworthy historian remains unchallenged.

As we have seen, then, Gibbon is quick to praise and slow to criticize Ammianus. We may wonder how Gibbon has developed such great trust for him, and we need look no further than the moments where Ammianus is discussed alongside other sources. When Gibbon is describing the Emperor Julian's functions as a judge in Chapter 22, he references three sources, but only one favorably: "Ammianus has impartially stated the merits and defects of his judicial proceedings. Libanius has seen only the fair side; and his picture, if it flatters the person, expresses at least the duties of the judge. Gregory Nazianzen...suppresses the virtues and exaggerates even the venial faults of the Apostate" (I.780 fn.83). While Gibbon might extract useful information from all of the sources (or at least the first two), it is only Ammianus whose opinion about the controversial Emperor Julian is respected. Similarly, when Gibbon describes the character of Valens in Chapter 25, he references both Ammianus and the younger Victor, but Ammianus' observation has "more candour and judgment" (I.798 fn.54). The pattern continues. In a note for Chapter 25, Gibbon writes, "Ammianus has described the events, without the dates, of the Persian War. Moses of Chorene affords some additional facts, but it is extremely difficult to separate truth from fable" (I.802 fn.136). The *Res Gestae* might be deficient in a superficial way, such as

²⁷ One of Ammianus' lines about lawyers includes this description of their profession, which Gibbon might concede as satire: "*circumlocutionibus indigestis ita scatentes, ut conluvionis taeterrimae audire existimes ululabili clamore Thersiten*" (XXX.4.15).

the absence of dates, but other ancient sources cannot be trusted with a truthful account. The fact that Moses wrote later than Ammianus might explain Gibbon's preference for the more contemporary source, but his comments about how it is "extremely difficult to separate truth from fable" in Moses' account imply that there is a great deal more to criticize than temporal separation. Moses receives more scrutiny, along with another later historian who might be familiar, in a different reference about the Armenian campaigns of Sapor from the same chapter of Gibbon: "The evidence of Ammianus is original and decisive. Moses of Chorene and Procopius [*History of the Wars*] have been consulted; but those historians, who confound distinct facts, repeat the same events, and introduce strange stories, must be used with diffidence and caution" (I.802 fn.133). Gibbon is more clear about what these less favorable historians have done wrong, and has no doubts about the superiority of the *Res Gestae* to their histories on this particular matter.²⁸ While he consistently defends his acceptance of Ammianus as a faithful guide, Gibbon is not beyond using "diffidence and caution" when examining other primary sources.

Sometimes other sources pale in comparison to Ammianus specifically because of their biased religious views. We saw Gibbon claim that Ammianus was an "intelligent spectator" of Julian's death; he also adds, "The calumnies of [the Christian] Gregory, and the legends of the more recent saints, may now be *silently* despised" (I.793 fn.99). Gibbon is so convinced by Ammianus' account that he will not even cite the conflicting Christian sources. He is able to lump "the Christians" into one biased category when he writes, "The chastity of Julian is confirmed by the impartial testimony of Ammianus, and the partial silence of the Christians" (I.779 fn.50). But Gibbon does recognize that there is partiality coming from both pagan and Christian writers—just not Ammianus. In the aftermath of Julian's death in

²⁸ Procopius will receive full attention in due time.

Chapter 25, he states that “the genius of Paganism, which had been fondly raised and cherished by the arts of Julian, sunk irrevocably in the dust” (I.383). Gibbon then describes how the philosophers “thought it prudent to shave their beards and disguise their profession,” and the Christians “rejoiced” and contemplated either to forgive or revenge “the injuries which they had suffered under the preceding reign” (I.383). Gibbon’s footnote cites his sources: “Socrates, Gregory Nazianzen, and Libanius express the *living* sentiments of their respective factions” (I.795 fn.9). These sources may be associated with “factions,” and may express their “sentiments” accordingly, but Ammianus is not. Despite the fact that Gibbon never doubts his paganism, he also never claims that Ammianus represents a pagan viewpoint. Ammianus is evidently far too enlightened to become embroiled in the rhetoric of paganism (or anti-Christianity), making his account easily superior to those of the Christians or other pagans who often only represent the perspective of their own side.

But the other sources do not have to have obvious biases. Whenever Gibbon is able to consult another source reliably about a topic that is also addressed by Ammianus, it is clear whose account he always prefers. When Gibbon discusses the diplomatic and military victories of the young Gratian in Chapter 26, he notes, “The full and impartial narrative of Ammianus might derive some additional light from the Epitome of Victor, the Chronicle of Jerom, and the History of Orosius” (I.808 fn.87). Gibbon has nothing bad to say here about Victor, Jerome, or Orosius, but they cannot compete with the “full and impartial narrative” of Ammianus; their usefulness lies only in providing “additional light” to the *Res Gestae*. Gibbon is clearly delighted when, near the beginning of Chapter 19, his historical narrative finally reaches the period during which the surviving half of the *Res Gestae* begins: “Instead of being obliged to collect scattered and imperfect hints from various sources, we now enter

into the full stream of the history of Ammianus, and need only refer to the seventh and ninth chapters of his fourteenth book. Philostorgius, however, though partial to Gallus, should not be entirely overlooked” (I.754 fn.21). Gibbon concedes that another ancient source, not impartial like Ammianus, “should not be entirely overlooked”—just, it seems, mostly overlooked, since we “need only refer to” the *Res Gestae*. In his narrative of Julian’s campaign in Chapter 22, shortly after the speech we discussed earlier, Gibbon does not even mention names: “Whatever circumstances we may borrow else where, Ammianus still supplies the series of the narrative” (I.778 fn.34). Any sources supplementary to the *Res Gestae* are so insignificant that only Ammianus needs citing. It can be even more jarring when he does choose to name other sources; in his reference for the end of the disastrous battle of Hadrianople, Gibbon notes that “We have gained some faint light from” the accounts of Jerome, Victor, Orosius, Jornandes, Zosimus, Socrates, Sozomen, and Idatius, “But their united evidence, if weighed against Ammianus alone, is light and unsubstantial” (I.808 fn.94). Ammianus may be held high above all eight of these other historians for the evidence he provides.

Gibbon’s narrative of late fourth century events is clearly driven by Ammianus, with other narrative sources serving as supplementary material. It is convenient that Gibbon may faithfully use Ammianus’ version of events whenever his narrative reaches a moment that is covered by the *Res Gestae*; it is an obvious inconvenience whenever Gibbon must seek other sources and “The course of genuine history is interrupted by a most unseasonable chasm in the text of Ammianus” (I.792 fn.77). The passages in which Gibbon laments having to leave Ammianus as a guide are unexaggerated. While he may not always appreciate Ammianus’ historiographical technique, the “vices of his style” do not interfere with the reliability of

Ammianus' text. Gibbon sincerely values the *Res Gestae* as a true account of what happened, and he has reached this conclusion based on his estimation of Ammianus himself as an impartial witness. Significantly, this same value cannot be applied to any of the other sources which Gibbon uses for the period. Once Gibbon is forced move past "the last pages of Ammianus" in Chapter 26, he is "reduced to cherish" Zosimus (I.808 fn.98), and observes that "the rising generation was not disposed to accept [Ammianus'] advice, or to imitate his example":

[W]e are reduced to illustrate the partial narrative of Zosimus by the obscure hints of fragments and chronicles, by the figurative style of poetry or panegyric, and by the precarious assistance of the ecclesiastical writers, who, in the heat of religious faction, are apt to despise the profane virtues of sincerity and moderation. Conscious of these disadvantages, which will continue to involve a considerable portion of the decline and fall of the Roman empire, I shall proceed with doubtful and timorous steps (I.430-1).

There is no impartial guide to lead Gibbon through the remainder of the fourth century.

Ammianus' narrative ends with the immediate aftermath of the battle at Hadrianople, "the principal and immediate cause of the fall of the Western empire of Rome" (I.810 fn.136), and from there Gibbon must rely on less amenable sources.

The Historian, the Panegyrist, and the Satirist

With perhaps the very small exception of the digression on lawyers, we have seen Gibbon wholly accept the historical truth of the *Res Gestae*, favoring Ammianus to all other fourth-century historians. Gibbon was able to privilege Ammianus as a source because he believed in the historian's impartiality, candor, and good sense. And so when Gibbon states that he has no desire for another guide than Procopius for the history of the Vandalic War, we

might expect the same sort of esteem for Procopius' character. Perhaps these two men stand out among their Late Antique contemporaries for their impartial natures, allowing us a clear window into a period of history that is typically obscured by heavily biased perspectives and false rhetoric.

One passage at least seems to indicate this. Gibbon discusses Procopius' histories at length in the main text of *Decline and Fall*, rather than restricting his comments to the footnotes. Near the beginning of Chapter 40, he writes:

[Procopius'] facts are collected from the personal experience and free conversation of a soldier, a statesman, and a traveler; his style continually aspires, and often attains, to the merit of strength and elegance; his reflections, more especially in the speeches, which he too frequently inserts, contain a rich fund of political knowledge; and the historian, excited by the generous ambition of pleasing and instructing posterity, appears to disdain the prejudices of the people and the flattery of courts (I.649).

Procopius is given many of the attributes which Gibbon identified in Ammianus, namely a rich share of personal experiences and a unique ability to reject contemporary prejudices. From this passage we can reconstruct Gibbon's image of Procopius as a sixth-century Ammianus—a Greek soldier-historian whose excellent observational skills informed an impartial history of his own times. Excepting his propensity for speeches, Procopius even achieves a higher level of stylistic elegance than Ammianus.

But Gibbon had a great deal more to say about Procopius than the passage above, complicating his picture of the ancient historian. That passage, in fact, refers only to “The eight books of the Persian, Vandalic, and Gothic wars” (I.649) which make up the *History of the Wars of Justinian*. Procopius' two other self-described histories do not share this esteem. Gibbon narrates Procopius' writing of the three texts as a series of unfortunate events which impacted his character: After writing the eight books of the *History of the Wars*, Procopius

“respectfully laid them at the foot of the throne;” but Justinian’s pride “must have been wounded by the praise of a hero who perpetually eclipses the glory of his inactive sovereign,” the general Belisarius. Procopius’ “conscious dignity of independence was subdued by the hopes and fears of a slave,” and the historian wrote the *Buildings* “for pardon and reward” from the slighted emperor. But “Disappointment might urge the flatterer to secret revenge; and the first glance of favour might again tempt him to suspend and suppress a libel...in which both the emperor and his consort Theodora are seriously represented as two daemons who had assumed a human form for the destruction of mankind” (I.649). And this is how, “According to the vicissitudes of courage or servitude, of favour or disgrace, Procopius successively composed the *history*, the *panegyric*, and the *satire* of his own times” (I.648-9).

Ammianus’ unrefined style might occasionally betray his good sense, but Gibbon never argues that his character is inconsistent throughout the *Res Gestae*; as far as Gibbon is concerned, Ammianus represents all historical events and topics (except maybe lawyers) with the same degree of accuracy. Procopius, on the other hand, changes his nature in reaction to the emperor’s favor. Gibbon’s positive assessment of the historian of the *Wars*, who so resembled Ammianus, describes Procopius before Justinian disapproved of his work. Once Procopius begins to see himself as a “slave,” he produces two altogether different texts—a panegyric and a satire. None of this information comes directly from any surviving texts; we do not know how Justinian reacted to the *Wars* or the *Buildings*. Gibbon has created this narrative of “courage or servitude” as a way of explaining the discrepancies in Procopius’ three works. This model allows him to see how the faithful guide from the *Wars* became the satirist from the *Secret History*.

Given this understanding of Procopius' character, how does Gibbon use Procopius as a source in his own history? It was easy for Gibbon to follow the trustworthy Ammianus as a guide, but Procopius is an entirely different matter. We shall now examine how Gibbon applies Procopius' works, mainly the *History of the Wars* and the *Secret History*, and how his thoughts about Procopius' fluctuating character impact his use of the texts.²⁹

While writing his own narrative of the wars of Justinian, Gibbon often consults Procopius' *History of the Wars*, and his favor for that text might seem comparable to that of the *Res Gestae*. Gibbon begins his notes for Chapter 41 with the statement, "The complete series of the Vandal war is related by Procopius in a regular and elegant narrative; and happy would be my lot, could I always tread in the footsteps of such a guide" (II.599 fn.1). When Gibbon describes Procopius' second book of the Vandal War in Chapter 43, he notes all of the major events from Procopius' narrative, then comments, "nor can I discern any symptoms of flattery or malevolence in his various portraits" (I.610-11 fn.1). This praise is not limited to Procopius' account of the Vandal War. In a note for Chapter 41 he writes, "The first two Persian campaigns of Belisarius are fairly and copiously related by his secretary" (I.599 fn.6). He also notes two impartial characterizations of individuals from Procopius' Gothic War: "Procopius does ample and willing justice to the merit of Totila" (I.611 fn.10) and "the historian is equally true to the merits and defects of [Bessas'] character" (I.611 fn.12). For all three of Justinian's wars, Gibbon finds Procopius an able guide, representing facts and characters with fairness and justice.

This esteem, however, does not always hold true. Gibbon finds many more faults with Procopius' *Wars* than Ammianus' *Res Gestae*; at times these are not superficial

²⁹ For the *Secret History* Gibbon used not only the primary source itself but also the commentary of a certain Nicolaus Alemannus, who translated the text into Latin. Gibbon occasionally refers his readers to Alemannus' notes, but I will not be discussing them here. See the footnotes for *Decline and Fall* Chapters 40-41 especially.

criticisms of style but more pressing concerns that the historian's facts are wrong. Earlier we saw Procopius and Moses of Chorene compared unfavorably to Ammianus for their "strange stories" about Sapor's Armenian campaign. Similarly, in Chapter 38 Gibbon expresses skepticism over Procopius' account of the first Frankish king, Clovis: "This important digression of Procopius illustrates the origin of the French monarchy. Yet I must observe, 1. That the Greek historian betrays an inexcusable ignorance of the geography of the West; 2. That these treaties and privileges, which should leave some lasting traces, are totally invisible in Gregory of Tours, the Salic laws, etc." (I.876 fn.36). Procopius' geographical difficulties come up again near the end of that chapter, when Gibbon observes that he is confused about the difference between Britia and Britain (I.884 fn.161). In all of these cases Gibbon is concerned about the factual accuracy of parts of Procopius' *History of the Wars*. Importantly, however, the errors in question do not come from Procopius' main narrative of the campaigns that he lived through; they are all topics that he would have researched as a historian. These inaccuracies do not mean that Procopius is partial and misleading his audience; they mean that Procopius is occasionally a poor researcher and geographer, and he sometimes "must be used with diffidence and caution" when he is reporting about events or places unknown to him personally.

It would have been simple for Gibbon to accept the *History of the Wars* in all of the ways that we have discussed—to assume that Procopius was a trustworthy and truthful guide for the wars he witnessed, and to be cautious with the extraneous material in his digressions. But to do so would require Gibbon to denounce the *Secret History*, which claims multiple times to be revealing the truth in contrast to the *History of the Wars*. According to the *Secret History*'s introduction, "it was out of the question to tell the story in the way that it should

have been recorded as long as those responsible for what happened were still alive” (1).³⁰ In Procopius’ “previous writings”—certainly at least part of the *History of the Wars*, and perhaps also the *Buildings*³¹—Procopius “dared not reveal the causes for what happened” (1). The introduction to the *Secret History* makes the claim that Procopius deliberately hid the truth about events in the *History of the Wars*. If Gibbon wanted to argue that Procopius was as valuable and impartial a guide in the *Wars* as Ammianus was in the *Res Gestae*, he would have to assume that Procopius’ introduction to the *Secret History* was a lie. Gibbon’s claim that the *Secret History* is a “satire” and not a true history might indicate that he did not value the text at all—perhaps it was merely the fanciful “revenge” of a man whose flattering work had been met with disappointment. But Gibbon takes a decidedly more complex approach to Procopius’ works by recognizing the value of the *Secret History*: “Such base inconsistency must doubtless sully the reputation, and detract from the credit, of Procopius: yet, after the venom of his malignity has been suffered to exhale, the residue of the *anecdotes*, even the most disgraceful facts, some of which had been tenderly hinted in his public history, are established by their internal evidence, or the authentic monuments of the times” (I.649). Procopius’ *Secret History* may, in fact, reveal the causes which could only be “hinted” in the *Wars*, and despite his malignant character the secret historian still reveals factual information. But if the facts of the *Secret History* and the *Wars* are at times inconsistent, we will see that Gibbon’s treatment of them as reputable sources is also inconsistent.

Sometimes Gibbon finds an agreement of sorts between the different histories of Procopius, and he draws his readers’ attention to it. In a couple of instances, Gibbon claims

³⁰ All English translations for the *Secret History* are from the Penguin edition.

³¹ The dating of Procopius’ texts is the most complex and significant debate among modern scholars. Although Gibbon claims that Procopius successively wrote the *Wars*, then *Buildings*, and then the *Secret History* according to his model of “courage or servitude,” other scholars will argue for different ordering.

that the panegyric *Buildings* and the satirical *Secret History* relate the same facts in different styles. In Chapter 40, Gibbon uses both of these texts for information about the convent founded by the Empress Theodora and the summer palace constructed for the Emperor Justinian. For the former, he notes, “How differently may the same fact be stated!” (I.893 fn.35), and for the latter, “Compare, in the Edifices and in the Anecdotes, the different styles of adulation and malevolence: stripped of the paint, or cleansed from the dirt, the object appears to be the same” (I.897 fn.109). In these cases, Gibbon is able to reconstruct a clear picture of the past by removing Procopius’ rhetorical trimmings—the basic facts in both texts are the same, they are simply stated differently. But sometimes the differences go deeper than style, and Gibbon hints this even when he is describing an agreement between Procopius’ texts. When Gibbon discusses the hippodrome factions elsewhere in Chapter 40, he expresses disgust at the “pestilence” that was the spreading conflict between the Greens and the Blues and notes Procopius’ concord: “In describing the vices of the factions and of the government, the *public* is not more favourable than the *secret* historian” (I.893 fn.45). Although he is describing an agreement of the sources, this comment is still acknowledging that there is a difference between the public and the secret Procopius, and is highlighting the fact that in this instance they share the same opinion. Gibbon does this again later in the chapter when he describes Justinian’s Praetorian praefect, John the Cappadocian. In the main text of the chapter, Gibbon writes that “Procopius has justified his anecdotes by the portrait which he exposes, in his public history, of the notorious vices of John of Cappadocia” (I.660), adding in a footnote, “The agreement of the history and anecdotes is a mortal wound to the reputation of the praefect” (I.896 fn.92). The shared opinion between the two texts is indeed compelling, but the implication is that a criticism of John from the

Secret History alone would not be enough to wound his reputation. The *Wars* is the more trustworthy source, and it can be used to justify any of the negative opinions which Procopius might express in his libelous anecdotes.

But in other cases Gibbon indicates the opposite. When he narrates a plot to assassinate Belisarius in Chapter 43, Gibbon cites the *Gothic War*: “This conspiracy is related by Procopius [*History of the Wars*] with such freedom and candour that the liberty of the Anecdotes gives him nothing to add” (II.611 fn.19). Gibbon notes, as Procopius did himself in the introduction to the *Secret History*, that the posthumous pamphlet allowed the secret historian to express himself more freely than he could in the *History of the Wars*. The story of this conspiracy is remarkable because it can be found in the public history. To reverse directions again, when Gibbon describes Belisarius’ brief campaign against Chosroes in Chapter 43, he cites the “public” *History of the Wars*, claiming that “with some slight exceptions, we may reasonably shut our ears against the malevolent whisper of the Anecdotes” (II.608 fn.63). In this specific instance, Gibbon prefers Procopius’ public account; the secret history is merely a malevolent whisper to be ignored. So is the *History of the Wars* the more trustworthy source, because it was written at a time when Procopius was more clear-minded about events and less vengeful against Justinian and his inner circle? Or should we put more faith in the *Secret History* because it was the only one of Procopius’ writings in which he was permitted to tell the truth? Gibbon does not provide a definitive answer. One footnote in particular encapsulates this confusion. In Chapter 41, when Gibbon narrates the “hasty” execution of the governor of Spoleto by Belisarius (II.25), he notes, “This transaction is related in the public history with candour or caution; in the Anecdotes with malevolence or freedom” (II.604 fn.95). Gibbon is unable to come to a clear judgment

on the reliability of the *Secret History* when it is compared against the *History of the Wars*.

This makes it all the more problematic when the *Secret History* is Gibbon's only source for a particular fact or event. We have seen that he does not reject it entirely, but he will in specific cases advise us to "shut our ears" against its claims. If a fact from that text cannot be justified by its confirmation in the *History of the Wars*, can we trust it? We saw with Ammianus that Gibbon is very concerned with the characters of individual historical actors, and Ammianus' impartial portraits of the emperors especially gave Gibbon great confidence in representing them in his own narrative. The vast differences between the representations of historical figures in Procopius' three texts presented a special challenge for Gibbon.

When Gibbon advised his readers to shut their ears against the *Secret History*'s "malevolent whisper," he was rejecting that text's account of Belisarius' bittersweet victory against Chosroes, in which he repulsed the Persian forces but did not pursue them. The secret historian claims that prior to the campaign Belisarius cruelly abandoned his stepson to torture and "it is not surprising that in all his subsequent undertakings he found the hand of God against him" (15). These undertakings included his driving away of the Persian forces; after Chosroes "enslaved tens of thousands of Romans, Belisarius did not bother even to pursue the army, leaving people to think that one of two things must be true: he had hung back either through willful neglect of his duty or through sheer cowardice" (15). Gibbon chooses to describe the scene very differently, claiming that Belisarius was "at the head of an army without pay or discipline" and that "if the skill of Belisarius had been seconded by discipline and valour, his success might have satisfied the sanguine wishes of the public" (II.43). Indeed, Belisarius is one of the standout figures in Gibbon's history, and the English

historian grants him a moving tribute:

The great Pompey might inscribe on his trophies that he had defeated in battle two millions of enemies...but the fortune of Rome flew before his eagles...In this view the character of Belisarius may be deservedly placed above the heroes of the ancient republics. His imperfections flowed from the contagion of the times; his virtues were his own, the free gift of nature or reflection; he raised himself without a master or a rival (II.32).

It is not surprising, then, that Gibbon rejects the *Secret History*'s charge of cowardice as a "malevolent whisper." Procopius is even more explicit in his criticisms later in the *Secret History*. Gibbon mentions how after Belisarius returned to Constantinople for the last time, the honor of his daughter was "sacrificed to the revenge of an unfeeling mother" when her marriage to Theodora's nephew, whom she loved dearly, was canceled by her mother, Antonina (II.59). Gibbon notes that "The ἀμαρτήματα, or sins, of the hero in Italy and after his return, are manifested ἀπαρακαλύπτως, and most probably swelled, by the author of the Anecdotes" (II.612 fn.22). Gibbon does not note anything further about Belisarius' supposed sins,³² but Procopius chooses the cancellation of Belisarius' daughter's marriage to comment that this "was the moment when the man's character was laid bare for all to see" (22): Belisarius "was dismissed with contempt as a hopeless fool. Such then is the record—unvarnished and essentially correct—of the misdeeds of Belisarius" (22). Despite Procopius' claim that this version is the "correct" one, Gibbon would rather believe that it is an exaggeration and focus his narrative of Belisarius on the general's great military victories and unrivaled virtues.

³² Gibbon does claim here in his main narrative that "The first of the Romans still submitted to be the slave of his wife; but the servitude of habit and affection became less disgraceful" after the death of Theodora (59). Gibbon never denies that Belisarius foolishly submitted himself to the tyranny of his wife—a charge made by Procopius in the *Secret History*—but he chooses to ignore Procopius' claims that this influenced the general on the battlefield. Compare Chapters 40-43 of Gibbon and Book 1 of the *Secret History* and you will see that in the former Belisarius' mishaps on the battlefield are typically blamed on the lack of discipline in his officers; in the latter, on some machination of Antonina. Procopius ridicules Belisarius for his devotion to Antonina, but Gibbon would rather shift the blame to Antonina herself, claiming that "the fame and even the virtue of Belisarius were polluted by the lust and cruelty of his wife" (II.29).

Although Gibbon has much less praise for Justinian than Belisarius, his most thorough admonition of the *Secret History* defends that emperor against the criticisms of Procopius. Gibbon claims, in a lengthy discussion that forms part of the main text of his history, that

[A] lover of truth will peruse with a suspicious eye the instructive anecdotes of Procopius. The secret historian represents only the vices of Justinian, and those vices are darkened by his malevolent pencil. Ambiguous actions are imputed to the worst motives: error is confounded with guilt, accident with design, and laws with abuses; the partial injustice of a moment is dexterously applied as the general maxim of a reign of thirty-two years: the emperor alone is made responsible for the faults of his officers, the disorders of the times, and the corruption of his subjects; and even the calamities of nature, plagues, earthquakes, and inundations, are imputed to the prince of the daemons, who had mischievously assumed the form of Justinian (I.659).

Gibbon's continuing narrative notes this "precaution" (I.659) when he moves into a discussion of the miseries under Justinian's reign; he wishes to warn his readers that the following information comes from the secret historian's "malevolent pencil," and that they should be suspicious of these facts. It is one thing to claim that Procopius has exaggerated someone's faults; it is another to accuse the ancient historian of the vast misunderstandings which Gibbon identifies in this passage. Gibbon clearly does not welcome the supposed facts which Procopius provides about the true character of the Emperor Justinian, and he is so concerned about them that he alerts his readers to their suspect nature in the main body of his book.

Gibbon may have salvaged Belisarius' reputation by claiming that "His imperfections flowed from the contagion of the times" and seriously questioned many of Justinian's supposed vices, but their wives are not so lucky. Apparently when Gibbon stated that "even the most disgraceful facts" about individuals in the *Secret History* were truthful, he was referring only to the women. Procopius spends most of the text slandering the reputations of

Theodora and Antonina, going into great detail about their pasts. Rather than dismiss these stories for being pure gossip or simply for being irrelevant to his history, Gibbon takes these “facts” very seriously, in particular devoting an entire section of several pages to the character of Theodora. He begins with Theodora’s life before becoming empress, for which Procopius’ *Secret History* is his only source, and is content to reproduce all of his eyebrow-raising information, such as a description of her as “the prostitute who had polluted the theatre of Constantinople” (II.651) and the claim that “when she passed through the streets, her presence was avoided by all who wished to escape either the scandal or the temptation” (II.650). Gibbon does not refrain from mentioning some of Procopius’ most famous passages, although he dares not translate them: “The satirical historian has not blushed to describe the naked scenes which Theodora was not ashamed to exhibit in the theatre...but her murmurs, her pleasures, and her arts, must be veiled in the obscurity of a learned language” (I.650).³³ Near the middle of his section on Theodora, Gibbon seems almost willing to redeem her character, stating, “Those who believe that the female mind is totally depraved by the loss of chastity will eagerly listen to all the invectives of private envy or popular resentment, which have dissembled the virtues of Theodora, exaggerated her vices, and condemned with vigour the venal or voluntary sins of the youthful harlot” (I.651). Although

³³ However one might feel about Procopius’ sexually explicit passages, Gibbon’s footnotes are amusing. After quoting (in Greek) a passage in which Theodora performed a sexual act involving geese, Gibbon notes, “I have heard that a learned prelate, now deceased, was fond of quoting this passage in conversation” (I.892 fn.24). Procopius also relates a story in which Theodora (“often”) attended a dinner party and “would lie with all her fellow-diners the whole night through; and when she had worn them all out she would turn to their servants, as many as thirty on occasion, and copulate with every one of them—but even so she could not satisfy her lust” (SH 38). Gibbon presents it rather differently: “At a memorable supper thirty slaves waited round the table; ten young men feasted with Theodora. Her charity was *universal*.” (I.892 fn.25). Gibbon also provides a particularly poetic paraphrase for one of the most obscene passages in Procopius, in which Theodora laments that she could not “devise another variety of intercourse” using additional orifices (SH 38); Gibbon presents the Greek and then comments “She wished for a *fourth* altar on which she might pour libations to the god of love” (I.892 fn.26). Gibbon’s entertaining remarks are only one example of scholarly response to these now infamous passages, which have excited the attention of scholars and students for centuries. Averil Cameron quotes the first of these remarks at the beginning of her chapter on the *Secret History* in her book *Procopius and the Sixth Century*.

he suggests that Theodora likely had virtues which have been “dissembled,” Gibbon has no doubt that the “youthful harlot” did indeed commit these sins, whether they happened to be “venal or voluntary.” He also writes that “the reproach of cruelty, so repugnant even to her softer vices, has left an indelible stain on the memory of Theodora, ” and describes her propensity for subjecting her enemies to physical torture; he even quotes her as having said, ““If you fail in the execution of my commands, I swear by him who liveth for ever that your skin shall be flayed from your body’” (I.651).

Gibbon’s section on Theodora does not cast her in an entirely negative light, however; he observes how “the sympathy of the empress for her less fortunate sisters” led to the creation of a monastery for five hundred prostitutes, “the most benevolent institution of [Justinian’s] reign” (I.651).³⁴ Ultimately, she is not quite the sinful demon’s mistress whom Procopius describes in the *Secret History*, but Gibbon has no difficulty accepting the truth of the scandalous stories which are told about her past as a prostitute and her cruelty as empress. He footnotes, after his first mention of “the famous Theodora” (I.649), “For the life and manners of the empress Theodora see the Anecdotes” (I.892 fn.20). Unlike Justinian, Theodora deserves no precautions about the secret historian’s malevolent pencil.

Belisarius’ wife Antonina receives the very same note when she is introduced in Chapter 41: “See the birth and character of Antonina, in the Anecdotes” (II.599 fn.7). Although Gibbon has less to say about Antonina than Procopius did—perhaps because so many of the stories about her in the *Secret History* implicate Belisarius as well—his treatment of her is notable. In fact, Gibbon’s comment about the first four chapters of the *Secret History*, which largely concern her scheming, reveal one of the most interesting

³⁴ He cheapens the benevolence somewhat by noting that the women were put into “perpetual confinement” and although most were grateful to “their generous benefactress” some “threw themselves headlong into the sea” (I.651).

insights into his approach to understanding ancient sources: “Of these strange Anecdotes, a part may be true, because probable; and a part true, because improbable. Procopius must have *known* the former, and the latter he could scarcely *invent*” (II.605 fn.112). This questionable logic allows him to accept Procopius’ more unusual stories about Antonina; in one such tale, which Gibbon repeats with full narrative force and even dialogue, Belisarius walks in on his wife and a secret lover “almost naked”: “Anger flashed from [Belisarius’] eyes. ‘With the help of this young man,’ said the unblushing Antonina, ‘I was secreting our most precious effects from the knowledge of Justinian.’ The youth resumed his garments, and the pious husband consented to disbelieve the evidence of his own senses” (II.29). This highly improbable story must belong to Gibbon’s latter category, although one wonders how Procopius learned of this incident in such detail, since he could not have invented it.

In an unusual way, then, Gibbon finds some of Procopius’ most bizarre anecdotes inherently credible. The idea that Procopius could not have invented these stories might remind us of Gibbon’s treatment of Julian’s speech in the *Res Gestae*, discussed earlier; in that instance, Gibbon’s judgment was that the speech was “original and genuine,” and that it would have been impossible for Ammianus to have authored it.³⁵ But these judgments can certainly seem arbitrary. Any reader can agree that Procopius’ “most disgraceful facts” about the characters in the *Secret History*—his strangest and most “improbable” anecdotes—are not about Antonina’s duplicity or Theodora’s shameful past; they concern the literal demonization of Justinian. Gibbon lists these off in a footnote without giving them any analysis:

³⁵ Gibbon also does this with a letter, supposedly written by Belisarius and included in Procopius’ *History of the Wars*. In Chapter 43 he narrates the letter as Belisarius’ “own epistle” (II.55). A modern reader may have less difficulty accepting that a letter, rather than a speech, could be accurately reproduced by a historian, especially given that Procopius was Belisarius’ secretary; but Gibbon’s evidence for Belisarius’ authorship is based on the observation that “The soul of a hero is deeply impressed on the letter” (II.611 fn.11).

Justinian an ass—the perfect likeness of Domitian—Anecdot. c. 8—
Theodora’s lovers driven from her bed by rival daemons—her marriage
foretold with a great daemon—a monk saw the prince of the daemons, instead
of Justinian, on the throne—the servants who watched beheld a face without
features, a body walking without a head, etc., etc. Procopius declares his own
and his friends’ belief in these diabolical stories (I.892 fn.18).

According to Gibbon’s logic, how could Procopius have possibly invented such improbable stories? If they can be dismissed as malicious gossip—whether or not Procopius actually believed them—why not also dismiss the anecdotes about Theodora’s sexual escapades and Antonina’s manipulative scheming? Gibbon does not give us an answer. If the *Secret History* was really Procopius’ revenge—an attack on the reputations of Justinian, Belisarius, Theodora, and Antonina—he would be glad to know that his scandalous portraits of the women at least would be reproduced, often verbatim, over a millennium later in Gibbon’s history.

Sources vs. Guides

Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* does not attempt to argue consistently a single thesis about why Rome fell.³⁶ His lengthy history reads mostly like a narrative of important figures and great conflicts, all of which have been drawn from his primary sources. It is certainly important to him to present past events as truthfully as possible, but when he must consult primary sources for information about late antiquity’s great historical characters—all of whom were, to some party, controversial—evaluating accuracy can be a very difficult task. Gibbon’s elegant style—to some extent present even in his footnotes—does not include the sort of intricate description of his historiographical

³⁶ Far too much emphasis has been placed in modern scholarship on Gibbon’s supposed “Christianization thesis,” with material mostly drawn from only one of his seventy-one chapters.

method that we might expect in more recent scholarship. Much of the time we can only guess how Gibbon picked and chose among his available materials in order to recreate so many ancient people and events in his beautiful narrative. Occasionally, however, we are offered a glimpse into his specific evaluation of sources.

At the beginning of Chapter 18, Gibbon describes his approach to one of history's most famously controversial figures: Constantine the Great. Gibbon observes that "the character of Constantine is considered, even in the present age, as an object either of satire or of panegyric" (I.255-6). The ancient sources certainly conflict in their interpretations of the first Christian emperor. But Gibbon has a clear method for finding the truth about Constantine: "By the impartial union of those defects which are confessed by his warmest admirers, and of those virtues which are acknowledged by his most implacable enemies, we might hope to delineate a just portrait of that extraordinary man, which the truth and candor of history should adopt without a blush" (I.256). Gibbon does not put his faith into a single source; instead, he pieces together the real character of the man by taking into account the biases of the various sources about him. Later, on the very same page, Gibbon describes one of Constantine's "defects": his "vices of rapaciousness and prodigality" and the corrupt actions of his "unworthy favourites" (I.256). Has he surmised this using the method he just described? Gibbon cites his sources for this information in a footnote: Eusebius' *Life of Constantine* and some Imperial laws hint at these facts, but the *Res Gestae*—written long after Constantine's death—is quoted directly, because "The impartial Ammianus deserves all our confidence" (I.748 fn.5).

Other sources might deserve close scrutiny, but Ammianus is always trustworthy. We saw how Gibbon privileges Ammianus' account for virtually every episode that is

recounted in the *Res Gestae*, with all other late-fourth-century histories occupying a supporting role. Gibbon's reading of the *Res Gestae* caused him to believe that Ammianus was an impartial human being, and because of that belief he defends the entire history.³⁷ The quote about "the impartial union" of facts from various sources from which "we might hope to delineate a just portrait" does not describe Gibbon's historiographical method entirely; he only has recourse to that process when he is lacking in a trustworthy guide.

We might question—as many of the scholars whom we shall be turning to next do—labeling Ammianus as a completely trustworthy source, but a reader of the *Res Gestae* can also appreciate how the ancient historian avoided many of the more blatant biases of contemporaries and kept his portraits free of the kind of obvious malevolence or flattery that is evident in Procopius' writings. This makes it all the more alarming that Procopius is occasionally also elevated to a trustworthy guide. Gibbon treats the sixth-century episodes of the *History of the Wars of Justinian* with the same calm acceptance as the *Res Gestae*—except in the very rare moments where he identifies a conflict with the *Secret History*, in which case the analysis becomes much more confused. Gibbon accepts some accuracy from the *Secret History*, and perhaps even attempts a sort of "impartial union" between its facts and the *History of the Wars*, but while he notes Procopius' malevolence and emphasis on vices, he reproduces and defends many—but not all—of Procopius' most scathing anecdotes. The portrait which Gibbon forms of Justinian does not allow his sole responsibility for the negative occurrences of his reign, as Procopius accuses; the portrait of Belisarius admits a certain amount of foolishness regarding his wife, but not the abject neglect of his duties that Procopius describes; and the portraits of Theodora and Antonina, by contrast, coincide quite well with the scandalous anecdotes about them.

³⁷ Admittedly, Gibbon falls a bit short of defending that one digression on lawyers.

Ultimately, there is certainly room to question the validity of Gibbon's characterizations of historical figures. Might Ammianus have been elevated as "impartial" because Gibbon happened to share his partial favor for an individual like Julian, who was reviled by so many other contemporary sources? Was Gibbon too blinded by the appeal of a Late Antique Pompey Magnus, possessed of such heroic virtues, to accept all of Procopius' revisions about the character of Belisarius? And did the eighteenth-century historian far too easily accept the characterizations of the bloodthirsty Constantina, scheming Antonina, and promiscuous Theodora without skepticism?

Certainly Gibbon had his own biases.³⁸ But his narrative, flowing from one emperor to the next and relating battle scenes and court intrigue with the excitement and descriptive detail of a novel, has an often enticing simplicity. If we only trust Ammianus to be our guide, we find an Emperor Julian who fits well into a narrative about the decline and fall of a once-pagan empire. Gibbon's readers would have had a hard time fathoming Procopius' demonic claims about Justinian, but the idea that Theodora and Antonina at times schemed and controlled the men around them forms a perfect episode in a history which largely attributes Rome's decline to its loss of manly strength and virtues.

We know that Gibbon wrote a history about Decline and Fall, and we have seen how he evaluated the histories of Ammianus and Procopius. His acceptance of the *Res Gestae*

³⁸ In a quite odd passage from *Gibbon*, Burrow claims to have easily identified every single one of Gibbon's biases in *Decline and Fall*: "Gibbon's particular biases are easy enough to recognize and allow for: his identification with the senatorial class of Rome and his distaste for the reorganizations of Diocletian and Constantine; his military conservatism, with its nostalgia for the legions of the Republic and early Empire and its suspicion of newfangled heavy cavalry and artillery; his general prejudice against Byzantium—his weakest spot; and his hatred of monks" (109). This extremely specific list omits the major prejudices which I have encountered in the chapters concerned with Ammianus and Procopius. In particular, Gibbon exhibits extreme racism and white supremacism, especially in his description of "the most perfect of the human race" in Chapter 42, or virtually any passage about barbarians; misogynistic attitudes toward women, of which we saw only a brief glimpse regarding Theodora, Constantina, and Antonina; and a hatred of eunuchs, "that imperfect species" (I.272), whom he launches a tirade against in the beginning of Chapter 19, echoing his guide Ammianus.

and the *History of the Wars*, but only parts of the *Secret History* and the *Buildings*, informed the most popular and influential history of Late Antique Rome in the English language, and one of the most popular histories of all time. We will now turn our attention to modern scholars and examine the ways in which they have been influenced by Gibbon.

CHAPTER III

“Gibbon’s book is literature, but it is also history, and it is as history—whatever that means—that it has to be read.” (J.W. Burrow, in *Gibbon*, 109).

Edward Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was written over two hundred years ago. Gibbon was not the first person to write about Ammianus or Procopius, and he would certainly not be the last. Each subsequent century would produce more scholars who would apply increasingly more modern historiographical techniques to their study of the two ancient historians. *Decline and Fall* may have become, in J.W. Burrow’s words, “perhaps the most famous work of history ever written” (*Gibbon* 3), but it is hardly beyond reproach. Gibbon’s elegant style continues to charm new generations of readers, but many of the various factors which he identifies as responsible for Rome’s decline and fall—the entire point of his book—have been challenged and largely rejected since the twentieth century. J.A.S. Evans, writing *Procopius* in 1972, observes, “Gibbon’s thesis that Constantinople was in a state of decay for a thousand years is a trifle farfetched if we think about it, but nevertheless it became the conventional wisdom of the nineteenth century, and only in the last generation or so has Byzantium received greater, and less prejudiced, attention” (7-8). Today, most scholars would likely claim that their views have become increasingly “less prejudiced” even in the half-century since Evans wrote his book. Burrow’s insistence that *Decline and Fall* should be read as a history, “whatever that means,” is a response to the fact that Gibbon’s work is usually now read as literature. Hundreds of scholars since Gibbon have had access to more resources and more scientific approaches to studying history, and the eighteenth-century *Decline and Fall*—remarkable for its own time—can no longer be studied seriously

as an accurate history of the Roman empire. For a scholarly analysis of Ammianus and Procopius specifically, there are dozens of sources written after the late 1700s to which one might turn.

But Gibbon is not without his diehard fans. We have just seen how Burrow wrote a book, *Gibbon*, in which he argued for *Decline and Fall*'s continued relevance as a history. In the first chapter of this thesis we also saw that Burrow wrote about Ammianus, in a section of *History of Histories* called "Ammianus Marcellinus: The Last Pagan Historian." Edward Gibbon, in fact, appears on the very first page of Burrow's chapter about Ammianus (149). This might seem unusual; Gibbon, after all, wrote about over a thousand of years of history; why should any scholar, especially one writing in 2007, introduce an ancient Roman writer with a *Decline and Fall* reference? Evidently Burrow was so infatuated with Gibbon that he could not resist noting his work and opinion of Ammianus, however irrelevant it might be today.

But *is* it irrelevant today? Evans scoffed at Gibbon's "farfetched" thesis, but decided it was important enough to mention on the very first page of his preface in a book about Procopius.³⁹ When we examine the rest of the modern scholarly sources about Ammianus and Procopius that will be used in this paper, we begin to see an interesting trend.

My two oldest sources, C.D. Yonge and J.W. Mackail, both writing about Ammianus in 1862 and 1920 respectively,⁴⁰ refer to Gibbon on the second and fourth pages of their texts. The next oldest, M.L.W Laistner, in a 1947 book called *The Greater Roman Historians*, brings in Gibbon on the third page of his chapter "Ammianus Marcellinus." It

³⁹ Even before that quote, in the very first paragraph, Evans quotes *Decline and Fall* (the passage about the "troubles of Africa") and notes Gibbon's "reliance on" Procopius (7). He does not mention the fact that, as we have seen, Gibbon also criticized Procopius, especially concerning the *Secret History*.

⁴⁰ Mackail wrote an article called "Ammianus Marcellinus;" C.D. Yonge translated Ammianus into English, and I refer here to his preface. As usual, see the Bibliography for more detailed bibliographical information.

may not be surprising to discover Gibbon's presence in these relatively early books and articles, since his influence then was perhaps stronger than in later decades. But the trend continues. Gibbon makes it onto the first page of the preface of John Matthews' *The Roman Empire of Ammianus Marcellinus* (1989) and the first page of the introduction to Averil Cameron's *Procopius and the Sixth Century* (1985), although she manages to wait until the second page in *The Later Roman Empire* (1993). Jan Willem Drijvers and David Hunt mention him on the first page of their introduction to *The Late Roman World and its Historian* (1999), a collection of essays about Ammianus. Gibbon also graces the second pages of R.L. Rike's introduction to *Apex Omnium: Religion in the Res Gestae of Ammianus* (1987) and Timothy Barnes' *Ammianus Marcellinus and the Representation of Historical Reality* (1998). Ammianus' chapter in *Latin Historians* (1966), written by E.A. Thompson, mentions Gibbon on the third page, while his chapter in *The Roman Historians* by Ronald Mellor (1999) includes a sizeable quote from *Decline and Fall* on the first page. Paolo Cesaretti's *Theodora, Empress of Byzantium* (2004), A. Daniel Frankforter's "Amalasantha, Procopius, and a Woman's Place" (1996), and Robert Browning's *Justinian and Theodora* (1971) all include references to Gibbon, with the latter including a passage about him in the epilogue. Even the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* entry on Ammianus talks about how the *Res Gestae* was "justly admired by Gibbon" (73). And while Peter Brown's *World of Late Antiquity* (1971) does not mention Gibbon specifically, he is echoed in this mocking statement from the first page of the preface: "It is only too easy to write about the Late Antique world as if it were merely a melancholy tale of 'Decline and Fall'" (7). Only three of our major sources do not directly mention Gibbon or *Decline and Fall*.⁴¹

⁴¹ Andreas Mehl's *Roman Historiography* (2011) avoids comments on modern scholarship, and the "omission" of Gibbon (if we may call it that, given the trend) could be due to the fact that the book was originally written in

An alarming number of our sources,⁴² then, feel it necessary to bring up Gibbon in their books, chapters, or articles, and most of these begin their texts by acknowledging him or *Decline and Fall* in some way. This is true of scholars writing about Ammianus, Procopius, or their eras in general. Gibbon's pervasive presence in this branch of English scholarship, from the nineteenth through the twenty-first centuries, cannot be doubted. At the same time, his particular influence is not clear. Some of our sources mention him only in passing; others discuss him more fully. And even when they do not mention him by name, we can still see traces of his perspectives on Ammianus and Procopius being engaged with, positively or negatively. In *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, Averil Cameron begins her chapter on the *Secret History* with some quotations from Gibbon, and states that he "set the tone of all subsequent reactions" (49) to that particular work. To a certain extent, it may rightly be said that Gibbon set the tone of all subsequent reactions to Ammianus and Procopius in a larger sense. In this chapter we shall examine the ways in which some of our sources engage with Gibbon directly; in the subsequent chapters we will look at their views on Ammianus and Procopius in general, and identify Gibbon's lasting influence in some of the most current debates about the two ancient historians.

While merely mentioning Gibbon has been constant throughout modern historiography, the sources' treatment of him changes considerably over the course of the centuries following the publication of *Decline and Fall*. Our oldest source, C.D. Yonge's preface to his English translation of the *Res Gestae* from the mid-nineteenth century, makes a

German, not English (although Cesaretti, initially writing in Italian, does include Gibbon references). R.C. Blockley's *Ammianus Marcellinus: A Study of his Historiography and Political Thought* (1975) and E.D. Hunt's "Christians and Christianity in Ammianus Marcellinus" (1985), for whatever reason, simply do not appear to mention him, although I argue why Hunt may have excluded Gibbon later in the next chapter.

⁴² I did not choose these sources because of their debt to Gibbon; I selected scholars based on their interesting analyses of Ammianus or Procopius. I was initially surprised to discover how many paid tribute to Gibbon.

remarkable claim about Ammianus' history: "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" (vi). In Yonge's time—by his estimation, at least—no one disagreed with Gibbon's view of the impartial historian, and this distinguished the *Res Gestae* from any other work. Nearly one hundred years later, in the preface to *The Roman Empire of Ammianus*, John Matthews describes the altogether different attitudes of scholars concerning that ancient historian in the mid-twentieth century: "this was an author of eccentric taste, dubious style and outlandish appeal, about whom they had heard but whom they were not themselves expected to read" (ix). Ammianus' solid reputation as a faithful guide had waned; the impartial historian had become the obscure historian. Remarkably, it did not even take the whole half-century from the 1890s to the 1950s for this change to occur. J.W. Mackail, writing only thirty years after Yonge, begins his article with this complaint: "Ammianus Marcellinus has in this country long suffered undue and unfortunate neglect. No edition of him, so far as I know, as ever been produced in England...He was actually better known here in the seventeenth century than he is now" (103). And so it cannot be said that Gibbon's regard for Ammianus elevated him to the level of scholarly appreciation enjoyed by other Roman historians like Tacitus; according to Mackail, Ammianus was more popular the century *before* Gibbon than a century and a half after. Yet Gibbon's influence has been so strong that it is him, specifically, whom scholars from the turn of the twentieth century through the present day engage with most consistently when they are discussing our two ancient sources.

Averil Cameron's *Procopius and the Sixth Century* and J.A.S. Evans' *Procopius* both make a point of voicing their disagreement with some of Gibbon's opinions on Procopius.

Cameron noted how Gibbon “set the tone” for scholarly reaction to the *Secret History*, and she is clearly displeased with the fact that anyone would “call the work a satire, as many have done from Gibbon on” (60). For Cameron, “satire” is an unsatisfactory label: “But to explain the *Secret History* in such simple terms is to do less than justice to its complexity and its earnestness, and should not be allowed to obscure the substantial proportion of the work that is devoted to detailed political accusation” (60). Later in her work, when she is discussing the *Buildings*, Cameron also accuses “Gibbon’s view” of oversimplification: Procopius “was not just some embittered aide ready when cast off to turn his pen for gain to praise those he had just secretly vilified, but a recognizable member of the complex society of the mid-sixth century” (260). Cameron’s criticisms of Gibbon’s views allow her to present her own work as a more thoughtful analysis that takes the “complex” nature of Procopius’ texts and his times into account.

Evans’ *Procopius* engages with Gibbon more often, and he makes a point of discrediting Gibbon early on in his book. The first page of his preface begins with what seems like a friendly nod to the seventeenth-century historian: “Edward Gibbon’s reliance on [Procopius] must impress anyone who reads the relevant chapters in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*” (7). After quoting Gibbon’s now familiar passage about “the troubles of Africa,” Evans adds, “We may imagine that Gibbon admired Procopius in part because he had prejudices which had something in common with those of Procopius” (7). Evans does not state what those prejudices are, but it is immediately clear that “the first book written in English on Procopius” (7) will not be a homage to *Decline and Fall*. Just as he did with his preface, Evans begins his first chapter with a Gibbon reference, inserting a long passage from *Decline and Fall* about Procopius’ life. Evans notes that Gibbon’s “orotund prose is worth

quoting, although we may quibble at the details;” he then challenges Gibbon’s claim that Procopius was prefect of Constantinople (15). Evans has introduced some of Gibbon’s passages about Procopius only to problematize them; like Cameron, he is separating his work from Gibbon’s older way of thinking. In fact, Evans uses the same “from Gibbon on” phrasing to describe previous views about Procopius with which he disagrees. Evans is concerned with placing Procopius into his proper historical context: “The classical mask which Procopius assumed in his *Wars* has misled modern historians from Gibbon on into thinking that he was a product of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment who had somehow wandered into the Byzantine world. In fact, he was well-versed in theology” (109). Evans seems to contradict this statement when he continues to discuss Procopius’ religious views just a few pages later: “In general, however, the verdict of Procopian scholars has not been greatly different from Gibbon’s. It is that Procopius was a superficial Christian whose thought processes still worked within a pagan framework” (112). Both ideas—that Procopius was either an enlightened, almost modern individual, unburdened by the religious concerns of his contemporaries; or that he was something of a pagan relic, wrapped up in an older frame of thinking—are unfavorable to Evans, and he therefore attributes both, however contradictory it might seem, to the opinions and influence of Gibbon. Gibbon’s name has come to symbolize the old view of Procopius, to which Evans is opposed.⁴³ For Evans and Cameron, Gibbon is something of a foil, and the views in their books may be seen as

⁴³ When he is discussing Procopius’ depiction of Belisarius at a certain familiar moment in the *Secret History*, Evans does actually use Gibbon positively: “Gibbon’s comment on this passage is to caution his reader to close his ears to the ‘malevolent whisper of the *Anekdotia*,’ and his advice is sound” (59). But this comment is not as favorable to Gibbon as one might think. Evans goes on to explain his reason for disbelieving the passage: “the secret historian was addicted to the paranoid view of history, where everyone acts from selfish personal motives, and other historical causes have no place” (59). While Gibbon does not give us his reason for shutting his ears, we saw that it most probably had something to do with his esteem of Belisarius—perhaps one of the “prejudices” Evans hinted at. Interestingly, in Chapter 5, we will see that Evans’ conclusions about Procopius are generally not far from Gibbon’s.

revolutionary by contrast.

If anyone wishes to take a stand against Gibbon in order to further his own argument, however, it's Timothy Barnes. Barnes spends the entire first chapter of *Ammianus Marcellinus and the Representation of Historical Reality* discrediting Gibbon. Near the beginning of the chapter Barnes notes that "Ammianus has traditionally been regarded as belonging to the select canon of great historians who have penned reliable and impartial histories of their own times. Edward Gibbon included [him] in his 'vindication' of the last two chapters of the first volume of his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*" (2). Barnes then quotes a passage from this essay, in which Gibbon names Ammianus among three other great historians whom Gibbon considers "Independent and unconnected" (Barnes 3). Rather than turn his attention to Ammianus—the subject, after all, of his book—Barnes devotes multiple pages to criticizing the other three historians Gibbon likes, explaining why Jacques Auguste de Thou, David Hume, and Pietro Sarpi are not good examples of impartial historians and adding insult to injury by asserting that nobody reads them anymore (3-5).⁴⁴ Having thoroughly tarnished the reputations of three historians who have nothing to do with Late Antiquity, Barnes finally turns his attention to Ammianus, quoting a few passages from Gibbon about the ancient historian's impartiality (5). Barnes then makes the now familiar "from Gibbon on" type of observation, claiming to reveal "how little the prevailing estimate of Ammianus changed during the next two centuries" (5) and asserting that "Gibbon's high estimate of Ammianus as an impartial historian has continued to be shared and repeated by most who have written about both the historian and the Roman

⁴⁴ Barnes claims that "Hume's philosophical works are still read with profit, but not his history of England; de Thou is generally ignored, except by historians with a professional interest in the sixteenth century; and Sarpi's voluminous tomes remain unopened even by those who proclaim his supreme importance as an intellectual figure" (5).

Empire in the fourth century until very recently” (6). One very recent source still fits into the older tradition: “Gibbon’s favorable assessment of Ammianus has recently received a full and able restatement in John Matthews’ large book of 1989” (7).⁴⁵ Barnes makes it clear that he is disputing “The traditional estimate of Ammianus that has held sway from Gibbon to Matthews” (8). This is not merely a matter of opinion, as Barnes backs up his dissenting view with a more modern approach: “can the traditional estimate of Ammianus withstand scrutiny in the light of modern techniques of both historical research and literary criticism? It has in fact begun to crumble” (10). Again, we see a scholar casting himself as a rebel against tradition, symbolized by Edward Gibbon, whose outdated views have still somehow managed to persist; modern scholars have been “strangely reluctant to apply” criticism more recent than the 1700s, favoring Gibbon’s ideal of the “supposedly impartial and dispassionate historian” (10, 8).

Thus far our scholars, with the exception of the relatively archaic Yonge, have challenged Gibbon’s views on Ammianus or Procopius, leading us to wonder if Gibbon has as powerful an influence as they claim. Do any modern scholars portray Gibbon’s views without criticizing them? Mackail does so, stating very simply “But we must agree with the grave and considered praise of Gibbon” (106). In fact, M.L.W. Laistner, writing in 1947, and Ronald Mellor, 1999, go a step further.

Laistner and Mellor, despite the half-century difference, wrote rather similar books; Laistner’s *The Greater Roman Historians* and Mellor’s *Roman Historians* are both surveys of, as the titles suggest, popular Roman historians. They even selected the same historians: both have individual chapters on Sallust, Livy, Tacitus, and Ammianus, although Laistner

⁴⁵ Matthews, as I shall later note, barely engages with Gibbon at all; he only mentions him six times, and very briefly (see the index entry on “Gibbon, Edward,” page 586). Matthews does not ever make the claim that he is agreeing with Gibbon’s assessment of Ammianus, as we shall see other scholars do.

adds Caesar. And both engage thoroughly with Edward Gibbon in their chapters on Ammianus. Mellor begins his chapter with the obligatory *Decline and Fall* quote about Ammianus being an accurate and faithful guide, noting, as so many other sources do, that “though he was sometimes exasperated with his Ammianus’ post-classical style, [Gibbon] recognized the immeasurable value of the man and his work” (110). But Mellor does more than that—he actually draws a parallel between Gibbon and Ammianus. Mellor notes that although Gibbon dislikes his style, he still views the ancient historian as impartial: “Edward Gibbon repeatedly criticizes Ammianus’ writing...But Gibbon weighs the vices and virtues of the historian much as Ammianus himself judges the emperors in his obituaries” (127). Gibbon’s actions as a historian mirror those of Ammianus, recognizing the merits and defects of his subject. Laistner takes this parallel even further. Seemingly out of nowhere, after describing how Ammianus was a Greek who chose to write in Latin, Laistner says, “The greatest of English historians, it will be recalled, began his literary career with an essay, composed in French, on the study of literature” (143). Presumably his audience would know immediately that this was Gibbon, whom Laistner does not name until a few sentences later. Laistner then continues in a long tangent about Gibbon and includes a letter written to Gibbon by David Hume in which the philosopher urges Gibbon to write in English rather than French. Laistner muses that Lactantius or Jerome could have spoken similarly to Ammianus, but does not make it clear why he included this odd digression. There are certainly other examples of authors choosing to write in another language, even from antiquity.⁴⁶ Somehow, Laistner found the comparison to Gibbon irresistible, reminding his readers of the similarity several pages later when he writes that Ammianus “was as much at

⁴⁶ The poet Claudius Claudianus, a near contemporary of Ammianus, was also a Greek who wrote in Latin (Mehl 207).

home in Latin, when he began his *History*, as Gibbon was at home in French” (148).

Ultimately, Laistner begins his conclusion by noting that “Those historians, from Gibbon to the present, who have studied the Later Empire, are agreed in extolling the merits of Ammianus” (160). In the debate about Ammianus’ impartiality, scholars on both sides claim that Gibbon’s opinions have held sway relatively unchallenged.

Ammianus, and at times Procopius, were Gibbon’s guides. But for many modern scholars, Gibbon is himself a guide, providing useful praises and criticisms for the sources he employs in *Decline and Fall*. Almost all of our sources at least mention Gibbon, often in the beginning of their works, which confirms his lasting influence—despite the numerous things that have been said about Ammianus and Procopius over the centuries, scholars still largely turn to the same quotations in *Decline and Fall*.⁴⁷ But if many are happy to quote Gibbon, few now take him seriously. Scholars like Barnes, who attacked Gibbon so thoroughly, are in the minority. John Matthews, whom Barnes in fact criticized for restating Gibbon’s view, almost never references Gibbon in his “large book.” Two very prominent Late Antiquity scholars, Robert Browning and Peter Brown, barely mention Gibbon at all in *Justinian and Theodora* and *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity*. And while we have seen Gibbon’s name popping up in prefaces and introductions across almost all of our sources, he almost never makes it into selected bibliographies or suggested reading sections at the end.⁴⁸

At the beginning of this chapter, we saw Evans claim that Gibbon’s thesis of Decline

⁴⁷ It is not by accident that I began this thesis with the two quotations which seem to appear most frequently at the beginnings of works on Ammianus or Procopius.

⁴⁸ I could not find Gibbon in any of the suggested reading sections of our sources. Barnes includes an “Index of Modern Scholars” and describes how “This index registers modern scholars, critics, and historians who are named or quoted in the main text or in the text of the appendices or whose interpretations of Ammianus are discussed or evaluated” (287). Somehow, Gibbon does not even make it into *this* list. But a few pages back, Gibbon is listed with the likes of Gallus and Gratian in a “deliberately selective” “Index of Names and Places” that are *not* modern (282, 279). Although Barnes discusses and evaluates Gibbon’s interpretation of Ammianus, he does not list the eighteenth-century historian among his modern sources, instead tossing him in with the ancients.

and Fall was “farfetched.” Cameron agrees; in the introduction to *The Later Roman Empire*, she notes how Gibbon dated the fall of Rome to AD 1453 rather than the more common AD 476, commenting, “Few would agree with Gibbon now, but historians are still quarreling about when Rome ended and Byzantium began, and in their debate Gibbon’s highly-coloured perception of the moral decline which he thought had set in once the high point of Roman civilization under the Antonine emperors in the second century AD was passed remains highly influential” (2). Although they do not agree with him, scholars are still influenced by Gibbon’s perception of Rome’s Decline and Fall. Even if, as Burrow discouraged, scholars have begun to view *Decline and Fall* as more literature than history, that literature’s elegant prose, such as the more famous quotations about Ammianus and Procopius, has continued to influence the minds of scholars.

Gibbon’s true influence, however, cannot be fully assessed merely by searching for references to his name in our sources. Rather, as Cameron, Evans, and Barnes revealed, his perspective has been subsumed into the more broad “traditional view.” In Ammianus’ case, this traditional view has marked him as an impartial witness of the fourth century; for Procopius, it privileges the *History of the Wars* as an unbiased account, varies on the worth of the *Secret History*, and largely ignores the panegyric *Buildings*. Many scholars who agree with one of these assessments will cite Gibbon, as Laistner did, but others will not. E.D. Hunt, who never once mentions or references Gibbon in “Christians and Christianity in Ammianus Marcellinus,” nevertheless begins his article with the statement, “Ammianus Marcellinus, by common consent the last great historian of Rome...” (186). Hunt’s “common consent” is Barnes’ “traditional estimate,” of which Gibbon is the originator, and a leading quotation about Gibbon’s “accurate and faithful guide” would not have been out of

place at the beginning of Hunt's article; such a quotation would probably have given Hunt's statement about "the last great historian of Rome" more weight,⁴⁹ but for this article, published in the *Classical Quarterly*, it seems as though the reader is expected to be well aware of Gibbon's and others' esteem for Ammianus and should not need reminding.

A text like the *World of Late Antiquity* might refrain from mentioning Gibbon by name as it focuses on primary sources from the period rather than the opinions of individual scholars; a text about a specific topic, like Hunt's article about the depiction of Christianity in the *Res Gestae*, might assume the reader's foreknowledge about the traditional view of Ammianus and skip the obligatory *Decline and Fall* reference. This does not mean that Gibbon's influence has been lost on these two works; in fact, it is difficult to argue that any of our sources are free from his influence. What is far more interesting to argue is whether or not they accept or reject Gibbon's views, and in what ways the so-called "traditional" estimates of Ammianus and Procopius have come to be restated or challenged. As we examine the reception of Ammianus and Procopius in modern scholarship, we will see that much of the debate surrounding these historians amounts to an acceptance or rejection of the traditional view.

⁴⁹ As I said in Chapter 1, Gibbon never makes the claim that Ammianus is the "last great historian of Rome." But while Gibbon would disagree with some of our scholars who say that Ammianus was the last Roman historian—over a thousand more years of Roman history would produce plenty after him—the claim that he was the last *great* Roman historian seems to agree with Gibbon's esteem for him. Gibbon's memorable farewells to Ammianus, as well as the apparent lack of any subsequent candidates, would certainly seem to imply that Ammianus was indeed Rome's last great historian, unless the "vices of his style" disqualified him from that distinction in Gibbon's eyes.

CHAPTER IV

“This is the history of events from the reign of the emperor Nerva to the death of Valens, which I, a former soldier and a Greek, have composed to the best of my ability. It claims to be the truth, which I have never ventured to pervert either by silence or a lie.” (*Res Gestae* Book XXXI.16, page 443)⁵⁰

Ammianus Marcellinus claimed to have told the truth, and Edward Gibbon chose to trust him. As we have seen, Gibbon’s preference for Ammianus’ account was not always based on rigorous fact-checking but an estimation of the historian’s character: Gibbon was able to read through the “disorder and perplexity” of the *Res Gestae* and discover the sincerity of the historian. Any criticisms were those of style, as Gibbon found all of Ammianus’ facts to be consistent and logical. From Gibbon, Ammianus received the appellation of “impartial historian,” and many since the eighteenth century have allowed him to guide them through the great events of the late fourth century in the pages of his *Res Gestae*.

But more recent times have, unsurprisingly, produced skeptics. We saw Timothy Barnes assert that scholarship’s rock-solid belief in Ammianus’ impartiality “has in fact begun to crumble.” Barnes disagrees with Gibbon’s view of Ammianus, which despises his style but exalts his character. What was a sign of Gibbon’s own impartial approach for Mellor is a “contradiction” (8) for Barnes; what Gibbon saw as bad history writing, Barnes sees as something very different. We might have expected, when Barnes so loftily claimed to have the support of “modern techniques of both historical research and literary criticism,” that the 1990s had produced some historical knowledge which would finally refute facts in

⁵⁰ The Latin: *Haec ut miles quondam et Graecus, a principatu Caesaris Nervae exorsus ad usque Valentis interitum pro virium explicavi mensura: opus veritatem professum numquam, ut arbitror, sciens silentio ausus corrumpere vel mendacio.*

the *Res Gestae* and prove that it was not, at least in part, a truthful account. But Barnes refers not to its historical facts but its “method of expression” (8). Gibbon claimed this was Ammianus’ great weakness, but Barnes, as we shall see, finds intentionality in his rhetoric.

It is important, then, to keep both of Gibbon’s claims about Ammianus in mind as we move forward—that he was impartial, yes, but that also that “the vices of his style” could at times obscure his unbiased views. As scholars like Barnes fight the “traditional estimate” of Ammianus, they will challenge both of these arguments, and as other scholars fall in line with Gibbon’s general view they will give their own assessment of his skills, or lack thereof, as a writer.

The core debate about Ammianus’ impartiality, we will see, has not changed a great deal over time, as both sides continue to draw new adherents. Our two most recent sources, despite Barnes’ claims in 1998, will not acknowledge the crumbling of the traditional view of Ammianus, but other slightly earlier sources will. Regardless of their individual views, the specific focus of the debate among scholars has in fact shifted since Gibbon’s time. Gibbon assumed that Ammianus did not allow religious sensibilities to affect his judgment and does not discuss the ancient historian’s views with respect to his religion—he was, after all, impartial, unlike his less trustworthy contemporaries. But Ammianus’ specific religious beliefs have been an unavoidable topic since Gibbon’s time and in recent years they have become the center of most scholarly discussions about him. The part of the *Res Gestae* that interests scholars the most is its depiction of the controversial Emperor Julian, and Ammianus’ religious sensibilities could have had a profound impact on his perception and presentation of the last pagan emperor—or not, some scholars will argue. And the choice is

not a simple one between devout pagan or disinterested observer. R.L. Rike notes, in the introduction to *Apex Omnium: Religion in the Res Gestae of Ammianus*:

The spectrum of old and current opinions includes all of the following: Ammianus was a Christian, a monotheist inclined toward Christianity, a vague monotheist, a polytheist aspiring toward monotheism, a pagan hostile to any excess, a superstitious pagan, or a man unattached to any religion but still pious and highly receptive to superstition. At other places along this road of disengagement stand the philosopher Ammianus, intent upon reason and practical ethics, not gods; the tolerant, moderate, prudent empiricist; or descending, the intellectually confused and rhetorical writer apathetic to all religion (1).

We will see different scholars aligning themselves with many of these opinions, and these will usually inform their argument about Ammianus' impartiality as a whole.

As we examine the reception of Ammianus and the prevailing scholarly views about him, we will begin with those who approximate the traditional estimate founded by Gibbon before moving into the analyses of reactionaries like Barnes.

An Officer and a Gentleman

Just under a century after Gibbon, C.D. Yonge's preface to his translation of the *Res Gestae* fully restates Gibbon's views without much additional comment. For Yonge, Ammianus has a "clear-sighted independence of spirit" and is able to "rise superior to the prejudices of his day" (vi-vii). He certainly echoes Gibbon when he observes that "The vices of our author's style, and his ambitious affectation of ornament, are condemned by most critics," but ultimately defends him, stating, "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" (vii).

Both of Gibbon's claims about Ammianus, then, are upheld in very similar language. The only real difference between Yonge and Gibbon is that Yonge claims "it is even uncertain whether he was a Christian or a Pagan" (v). He does, however, go on to note "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" (v). Although some in Yonge's time apparently believed that Ammianus was a Christian, in general they accepted Gibbon's view—that he was a pagan, but one who had risen above any prejudices of belief and who could speak tolerantly about Christianity and Christian emperors.

Our next oldest source, Mackail's "Ammianus Marcellinus" from over half a century later, continues to repeat all of these sentiments. We already saw Mackail "agree with the grave and considered praise of Gibbon" as to the historian's impartiality. He also believes, along with Yonge and Gibbon, that Ammianus' style leaves something to be desired, complaining that "he belongs to the Middle Ages" for his poor use of Cicero and Vergil (105). But "These faults are in the main superficial" (105) and Ammianus is well deserving of Gibbon's praise for his impartiality. Mackail takes Ammianus' statement that he was "a former soldier and a Greek," which some might see as humbling, and turns it into something else: "His own words, 'miles et Graecus,' might be paraphrased without injustice by saying that he was an officer and a gentleman" (106). The description of Ammianus as "an officer and a gentleman" actually fits the now-traditional view of the ancient historian offered first by Gibbon; "His faults as a writer are such as might be expected in a retired officer," Mackail observes, and "His merits, which are fundamental, must be weighed apart from them" (105). Ammianus the officer did not necessarily write with the finesse of previous Greco-Roman historians, but his gentlemanly qualities gave him a fair approach to his subjects. In fact,

Mackail makes perhaps the most remarkable claim about Ammianus out of any of our sources: “he makes the figures of his history live, because he is himself a translucent medium” (110). In Mackail’s view, we certainly could not ask for a better guide to the people and events of his time. As for his religion, Mackail does not deviate from the prevailing view: “A word must be said here on his attitude towards Christianity [...] Himself a pagan, he speaks of the Christian faith, *religionem absolutam et simplicem*, with entire respect” (110). This kind of tolerance was “far in advance of his age” and is to be commended (111).

Fast-forward to 2007, and in John Burrow’s *History of Histories* we see the same “officer and a gentleman” trend, almost unchanged. He makes the same observation as Mackail about Ammianus’ “not always well-judged dippings into the brain tub of literary allusion, quotation and historical parallels” (162) and notes that his control of “the grand style” is “wobbly” (153). Nevertheless, Ammianus is remarkable for his fair portrayals of both loved and hated emperors: “Ammianus was essentially in sympathy, so his criticisms of Julian’s pagan zeal are striking” (155); and “In tacit contrast to Julian, he praises the toleration practiced by the otherwise deplorable (Christian) emperor Valentinian” (156). Burrow’s explanation for this is the fact that “Ammianus’ own paganism, though clearly devout, was of a more restrained and genial kind” (156). Ammianus manages to be both “devout” and “restrained,” a fitting combination for a historian who could be both highly perceptive about the merits or faults of individuals while remaining fair and unbiased.⁵¹

⁵¹ Burrow does observe that “Ammianus gives the impression that men could differ about religion without harming or impeding each other, though in estimating the extent of his tolerance it must be remembered that he was writing under a Christian emperor” (156-7). This might imply that Ammianus purposely obscured his own views to avoid outside criticism (as others will claim), but that does not agree with the rest of what Burrow says and he seems to have thrown in this argument as an afterthought without really considering it.

Not all of Ammianus' fans, however, fall into exactly the same category as Gibbon, Yonge, Mackail, and Burrow. M.L.W. Laistner's *The Greater Roman Historians*, as we saw, agrees with Gibbon as far as "extolling the merits of Ammianus" (160), and even claims that "his conspicuous fair-mindedness" surpasses that of Tacitus (158). But Laistner's following statement complicates the picture a bit: "Apart from his undisguised dislike of Germans, he displays an obvious bias in only two passages of his *History*" (158). Laistner acknowledges Ammianus' fairness—most of the time. Ammianus' "undisguised dislike of Germans" is certainly a bias which might rob him of the "impartial" designation given him by Gibbon, but Laistner still refers to "his impartiality, from which lapses are few" (152). The two passages which Laistner identifies as obviously unfair are "the description of Roman society," which Laistner labels satirical, and "a bitter outburst near the end of the work, against the whole tribe of lawyers" (158). Gibbon, obsessed as he was with proving Rome's moral decline, found ammunition in Ammianus' depiction of society in that city, but we saw how he seemed to shrug at the *Res Gestae*'s passionate tirade against lawyers. Laistner wonders if Ammianus' comments about lawyers may have actually reflected reality, and offers an amusing alternative: "Was this invective...inspired merely by certain general notions aroused by observing frequent malpractices in the administration of justice? It may be so, but it is tempting to imagine that behind this vitriolic bitterness lay some personal experience of having been bested by a smart attorney" (158). Still, despite these brief deviations,⁵² Laistner is clear that "For the rest, Ammianus' love of truth and fair judgment carry the day. He is judicial...in summing up the good and bad in his leading characters. Himself a pagan, he is free from animus against the Christians and even blames Julian for legislating against

⁵² Although Ammianus' "undisguised dislike of Germans" might have colored his perceptions of the Germanic peoples and their "rude illiteracy" (161), this is not enough to impact his "love of truth" in Laistner's mind.

them” (158). If Laistner seems to be implying the same viewpoint which Burrow held—that Ammianus practiced a devout, but conveniently tolerant, paganism—he clarifies that this was not the case. Laistner describes his complex view of Ammianus’ religion thusly:

Although his own religious beliefs were not inspired by implicit faith in any one cult or doctrine, but show some fluctuation, he was not an atheist, nor even an agnostic. He inclines to monotheism in the language that he uses most often...His conformity with the ritual requirements of the old pagan state religion seems to have been lukewarm...there was nothing of the mystic in Ammianus as there was in Julian, whose religious enthusiasm was the least Hellenic thing about him...The uncertainty of his convictions and a certain groping after truth stamp him as a normal representative of educated paganism in its decline” (159-60).

Ammianus’ “lukewarm” conformity and “uncertainty” are symptomatic of his age, and he should be placed firmly in that context; he did not necessarily, as Yonge put it, “adhere to the religion of the ancient Romans.” But despite his vague religious beliefs and occasional lapses from impartiality, Ammianus’ characterization in Laistner’s piece still seems an officer and a gentleman.

Averil Cameron,⁵³ in *The Later Roman Empire*, also acknowledges some flaws in Ammianus’ work, but arrives at a similar estimate of him as our previous sources. Of his religion, she seems to contradict herself when she writes,

Ammianus Marcellinus, a pagan...seems to have been relatively unconcerned about religious matters, capable of being equally scathing about pagans and Christians alike. His one criticism of the Emperor Julian is directed against the latter’s attempt to exclude Christians from teaching...Similarly the Christian emperor Valentinian I (d. 375), accused by Ammianus of every imaginable sort of greed, cruelty, and jealousy, is nevertheless praised for his religious tolerance (73-4)

If Ammianus criticized Julian for being intolerant and praised Valentinian for the opposite, he probably was concerned about this religious matter, but what Cameron appears to mean is

⁵³ Cameron also wrote *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, and will be one of our main sources for the next chapter on Procopius. Her views on Procopius are strikingly different from those on Ammianus.

the same claim we have seen from others—that Ammianus did not fully represent a pagan perspective. She does later make the point that “Though a pagan, Ammianus did not consider that religion should occupy the central role in his work, and put his priorities elsewhere” and he had a “more traditional focus on political and military events” (86). And while Ammianus could, in Cameron’s mind, manipulate his narrative to advance his own views—such as in the case of “The campaigns in Gaul,” which are “told by Ammianus in such a way as to enhance Julian’s military reputation” (134)—this does not detract from the fact that he “was fair-minded” (88). When Ammianus “totally obscures the violence of the Christian reaction against Julian,” it is not because, as a pagan, he wishes to silence the actions of Christians, but because of his “restraint where religious matters are concerned” (93). Ammianus adheres to a traditional formula of history writing, and in a statement reminiscent of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*, Cameron welcomes her guide with the claim that he belongs among antiquity’s greats: “It is with the following winter, AD 353-4, that the surviving portion of Ammianus’ *Res Gestae* begins. From now on until AD 378, the year of the Battle of Adrianople, we have a Latin narrative history of almost unmatched vigour, fullness and information, on the same level as the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides in Greek, or Tacitus for the earlier Roman empire” (85). And so while Cameron does not emphasize “the vices of his style” the way that many of our other sources have, she agrees with them about the *Res Gestae*’s nature as an account lifted by the fair-mindedness of its author.

Andreas Mehl dedicates a section of *Roman Historiography* to Ammianus entitled “Ammianus Marcellinus: Indifferent to Religion?” (207). Despite this title, Mehl barely discusses Ammianus’ religious beliefs at all. Instead, he focuses on the model Ammianus

used to write his history. Mehl makes an interesting observation about Ammianus' claim near the end of the *Res Gestae*, which we saw quoted above: "When the historian maintains that he has offered his account in accordance with the truth, he grounds his claim exclusively on not consciously omitting anything and on not lying. Truthful historical accounts are therefore... exclusively a matter of morality, not of knowledge or of the mastery or application of whatever techniques and skills any given tasks require" (211). If this view is true of Ammianus himself, it is certainly true of the scholars who hold Gibbon's estimate of him, believing as they do that Ammianus managed to produce a truthful account because of his honest character and in spite of his lack of mastery in elaborate historical writing. But Mehl takes a different tone from these scholars. Although he observes, as our previous scholars have, that "he finds fault with representatives of both sides" (215), he attributes this not so much to Ammianus' excellent character but more to the model he has adopted. Mehl writes that Ammianus could not possibly have understood "objectivity in a modern sense" and therefore has no problem casting Julian as "an illustrious hero" (212), but "The prohibition against omissions and lies, however, results in the introduction of some unfavorable aspects of Julian's conduct in Ammianus' final appraisal of him as well as, on the other hand, the concession of some very few positive traits to Julian's sometime adversary, the emperor Constantius II" (213). It is not so much that Ammianus himself was an unbiased judge, but that his historiographical model—in which he was not permitted to omit any information—compelled him to say negative things about Julian and a few positive things about Constantius. This certainly still implies that Ammianus had good sense, since he chose to write his history in this model rather than a polemical or panegyric one (so

popular among his contemporaries), but it recognizes that not everything in Ammianus' history necessarily reflected or revealed his personal opinions.

When Mehl finally reaches the topic of Ammianus' religion, he finds no definitive answers in the *Res Gestae*. He does not make the claim that, like in the title, Ammianus was "indifferent to religion," but simply admits that each of Ammianus' comments about religious matters could be seen in multiple ways. Ultimately, Mehl concludes with the unsatisfying statement that "He proves himself a firm adherent of traditional religion (as were some senators of his day in the city of Rome) just as little as he proves himself a convinced Christian" (216). Although Mehl distances himself from our other scholars by avoiding a conversation about Ammianus' impartial personality, he still grants that Ammianus followed the code which he chose to adopt. Since Mehl does not ultimately suggest that Ammianus was indifferent to religion—which would, like Cameron's confusing claim, be contradictory, since Mehl cites several examples where Ammianus comments about religious matters—it could be seen as a compliment that Mehl cannot determine Ammianus' beliefs. The ancient historian managed to follow his own moral code and write a history with views unbound by allegiance to a particular side.

E.D. Hunt, writing an article specifically about "Christians and Christianity in Ammianus Marcellinus," disagrees with Mehl's conclusion that Ammianus' religion cannot be determined.

Hunt gives a brief overview of the scholarly debate about the historian's religion, noting, "it used long ago to be asserted that Ammianus Marcellinus was in reality a Christian.

Nowadays it is not possible to doubt his paganism; only a pagan could have written a history so pervaded by the religiosity of omens and fate, and one in which the pagan emperor Julian

was the—albeit flawed—hero” (187).⁵⁴ Hunt is not writing in reaction to these “long ago” claims, but rather the attempt “in recent years” to find anti-Christian sentiment in the *Res Gestae* (187), which some of our sources in the next section will do. Although he is convinced that Ammianus is a pagan, Hunt’s interpretation of the *Res Gestae* follows Mehl in placing emphasis on the historical model in which Ammianus chose to write: “Self-consciously the classical Roman historian, Ammianus displayed a reticence in discussing contemporary Christian affairs because, whatever their importance for the history of the Roman empire in his day, they were no part of his literary heritage” (188). Hunt asserts that the absences of known historical episodes involving Christianity are merely “Ammianus’ faithfulness to the tradition of Roman historiography in ‘playing down’ intrusive Christian material” (193). But Hunt is not beyond speculation himself, as he asks, “Can the veil of literary restraint be lifted sufficiently to reveal anything of what the historian felt about the empire’s new faith?” (194). Using other contemporary sources, Hunt argues that Ammianus “misses opportunities to make remarks against Christianity” (197), and therefore cannot be proven an anti-Christian. Looking back on his compiled evidence, Hunt claims, “The fact is that, as often as not, Christianity *per se* was just not an issue for Ammianus” (199). Ultimately, “The actions of Constantius, and above all the failure of Julian, had demonstrated to him that the business of government and empire could not successfully be dictated by religious conviction...his protest was less against the imposition of a particular creed than against the inappropriateness of any imperial meddling in matters of religion” (200). Hunt writes a very specific analysis and does not engage with more general scholarly views of

⁵⁴ For his part, Mehl thinks that Ammianus’ fixation with omens is merely a historiographical technique that harkens back to the annalistic tradition adopted by Livy and Tacitus: “Only on a superficial level does it appear that Ammianus accords the same great significance to the omens, dreams, and prophecies he records in such abundance” (215).

Ammianus, avoiding any discussions of him that do not pertain to his stated topic of Christianity. But like our other sources, he finds that Ammianus did not color his account with biases based on his own beliefs about the different groups who are often opposed in his history.

The Subtly Militant Historian

In the previous section, we saw a group of scholars with one thing in common—they all regarded Ammianus as presenting an account that managed to rise above favor for sides or individuals. Some scholars, like Gibbon, attribute this to his fair-minded character and unbiased opinions, while others view him as conforming well with a classical style of writing that favored an impartial approach to figures and events. Either way, their argument is that the *Res Gestae*, to Ammianus' credit, presents a largely balanced account of the chaotic times it describes.

Another group of scholars, however, attack the idea of Ammianus' impartiality and in fact make the opposite claim about the *Res Gestae*—that it advances an agenda in line with Ammianus' personal views. For them, Ammianus is hardly an officer and a gentleman, but rather a militant adherent to a particular view.

E.A. Thompson's "Ammianus Marcellinus" does not, admittedly, make the exact claim I have just described. Thompson does not find that the *Res Gestae* argues for an agenda, but rather that it would have. Near the beginning of his piece he seems to make the opposite claim, however. Thompson disagrees with Gibbon's assertion that Ammianus was impartial: "This is to claim too much: the historian, like Gibbon himself, was not

superhuman, and his work in some places is not wholly dispassionate. Moreover, it has not been left unaffected by certain outside influences which tended to rob him of such impartiality as he possessed” (145). Thompson has implied—or, rather, stated outright—that outside influences interfered with Ammianus’ impartiality and impacted the *Res Gestae* in a negative way. But later he argues the opposite. Ammianus’ “partiality for his old chief Ursicinus” is “a comparatively small matter... More serious perhaps is his attitude towards the Emperor Julian” (145-6). Thompson claims that Julian was Ammianus’ hero, and then states, “the question may be asked whether the times in which Ammianus and Zosimus wrote made it possible for them to praise so militant a pagan Emperor as Julian” (147). Thompson asks the question again, then answers it: “The question arises, therefore, whether the far from liberal government of Theodosius I obliged Ammianus to distort any of his opinions or to omit any material from his history which he might well have wished to include. In my opinion, it did” (147). Thompson claims that passages from the *Res Gestae* which deal with Theodosius’ relatives were probably written with the emperor in mind, deliberately obscuring historical reality (148-9), then asserts that evidence of restraint can be found in the last six books of the *Res Gestae* specifically: “We may conclude, then, that in writing his last six books Ammianus had to be on his guard and make sure that no offence was given to the authorities” (150). Thompson believes that Ammianus’ fear of reprisal not only affected his narrative about people close to the emperor, but “It appears that somewhat similar considerations weighed with the historian when he had occasion to mention the Christians. (It will be remembered that he himself was a pagan.)... It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that all discussion of religious matters has disappeared from books XXVI-XXXI” (150-1).⁵⁵

⁵⁵ This bold claim may be “scarcely an exaggeration” for Thompson, but few other scholars identify the discrepancy between the last six books and the rest of the *Res Gestae*. Hunt, in fact, directly discredits this

In Thompson's view, Ammianus would likely have written a far more partial depiction of pagan figures, had he not feared the wrath of a Christian emperor. The absence of any discussion of religious matters in the later books is an expression of fear, not adherence to the classical historiographical tradition. The opposite of his original statement, then, seems to be the case—Ammianus was not himself impartial, and if his *Res Gestae* seems to imply an impartial attitude it is only because Ammianus did not wish to offend anyone.

Another scholar who thinks that Ammianus had a decidedly partial view is Peter Heather.⁵⁶ Heather's essay, "Ammianus on Jovian: History and Literature," selects a specific episode from the *Res Gestae*—the election and accession of Jovian—which Heather claims is "an excellent case study of Ammianus' authorial technique" (105). When discussing Jovian's election, Ammianus reports "dubious election circumstances" that Heather finds at odds with contemporary sources (106). From this discrepancy Heather makes the bold assertion that "it is apparent that Ammianus adopted a strategy of subterfuge and omission to influence the nature of his audience's thoughts about Jovian" (107). The purpose of this subterfuge is very clear to Heather, and is based on the assumption that Ammianus is willing to sacrifice "historical detail" for Julian: "The overriding need to explain why the reign of the hero Julian ended in defeat required the identification of a suitable villain. Jovian, especially given the brevity of his reign, could not but be cast in this role" (110). The idea that Ammianus' narrative would cast historical figures as heroes or villains seems to indicate a disregard for the truth—a favoring of "literary invention" to "historical reporting" (110). Heather takes the analysis a step further, however, musing that "The only real question here

view: "Pace E. A. Thompson, there is no perceptible difference in Ammianus' attitude in the later books" (199).

⁵⁶ Heather does not talk about Gibbon, but I did not include him in the previous chapter's Gibbon survey because his essay is part of *The Late Roman World and Its Historian*, which has an introduction that does mention Gibbon.

is whether, or to what extent, Ammianus actually believed his own account of events.

Ammianus, ideologically committed to the Julianic myth, would certainly have *wanted* to believe in his own reconstruction where the fault lay entirely with Jovian” (110). To answer this question, Heather juggles various possibilities, ultimately concluding the article thusly:

The fictive or exaggerated literary elements, together with the omissions, and, no less, the choice of which particular circumstantial details to include, all served to bring out the deeper ‘truth’ as Ammianus saw it. Jovian was not a properly legitimate emperor and from this sprang wrong choices of policy. It was Jovian’s wrong choices, and not any failing on the part of the emperor Julian, which caused the loss of Nisibis and Singara, five satrapies and fifteen forts (115).

Even though he surrounds it with quotation marks, he still chooses the word “truth”—significantly, “as Ammianus saw it”—to describe what the historian recorded. This allows Heather to accuse Ammianus of misleading his audience without directly branding him a liar. But since Ammianus claimed not to have perverted the truth by either silence or a lie, and Heather here accuses him of both “omissions” and “fictive” literary elements, it would seem that, in Heather’s view, Ammianus deserves a much more sinister appellation than “the impartial historian.”

Heather’s essay might seem extreme for its claim of “subterfuge,” but no one approaches the level of Timothy Barnes. *Ammianus Marcellinus and the Representation of Historical Reality* is, from cover to cover, a refutation of the traditional estimate of Ammianus. Barnes attacks scholars left and right for not only their opinions of Ammianus but also their supposed facts about him; we saw him earlier reject the common (one might say universal) assumption that Ammianus was born in Syria. If his arguments seem at times bizarrely trivial or personal—he expresses a great deal of annoyance over the fact that, for example, one of the chapters in John Matthews’ book “is entitled ‘The Roman and the

Greek,’ not ‘The Greek and the Roman’” (68)—he is still deserving of our attention for his very detailed rebuttal to everything Gibbon espoused about Ammianus. Specifically, Barnes, like Heather, reveals an agenda in the pages of the *Res Gestae*, with far greater implications than partiality for Julian. With the confidence of the most convinced conspiracy theorist, Barnes finds numerous examples of subtle, but militant, attacks on Christianity, including, but not limited to: Ammianus’ failure to mention a botched assassination attempt, in order to give off “the impression that there were no Christian martyrs” during Julian’s reign (55); his failure to include Jerusalem on a list of significant cities in Palestine, “a most remarkable and effective covert insult to Christianity” (93); and his criticism of the luxury of the Anicii family, which “makes it clear that he regarded Christians as thoroughly corrupt in every way” (180). Barnes even sees an agenda behind Ammianus’ seemingly innocuous “*miles quondam et Graecus*” line, in a passage which I must quote in full:

Ammianus’ eastern origin and his Greek cast of mind are very relevant to assessing his religious beliefs and his treatment of Christianity. When he wrote *Graecus*, what he heard inside his own mind was the Greek work *Hellen*, which has a very different semantic range from its Latin equivalent. For, although *Hellen* could indicate merely that someone was culturally Greek, by the late fourth century it often had the specific meaning of ‘pagan,’ especially when used by anyone at all hostile to Christianity... Hence, when Ammianus described himself as *miles quondam et Graecus*, he was declaring his religious allegiance in unambiguous terms (79-80).

Despite the claim that Ammianus “was declaring his religious allegiance in unambiguous terms,” Barnes never actually identifies Ammianus’ particular beliefs beyond the broad categories of militant paganism and anti-Christianity.

The inherent contradiction behind an agenda that manages to be both “covert” and “clear” does not seem to bother Barnes, who perhaps mistakenly assumes that all of his readers are able to follow his train of thought. The favorable passages about Christianity that

other scholars pointed to as evidence of Ammianus' impartiality are just part of the cover-up, and remind Barnes of a certain other historian: "Similar apparently balanced verdicts abound in Gibbon, who often employs formal balance to sharpen the rhetorical force of his denigration of Christianity. Ammianus, too, had mastered the art of 'grave and deliberate irony'" (87). Barnes is utterly convinced that the facts are on his side, and in his mind the time has come for scholars to reject Gibbon's outdated view and accept the fact that Ammianus hated and misrepresented Christians in the *Res Gestae*. It may not surprise the reader to observe that Mehl and Burrow, two of our scholars who wrote after Barnes' revolutionary book, did not follow in his example.

But Barnes' opinions are not, in fact, entirely unique. Another scholar, R. L. Rike, attempts to construct Ammianus' particular paganism, and in doing so he, like Barnes, discovers an agenda. In *Apex Omnium: Religion in the Res Gestae of Ammianus*, Rike attests to "the existence of an enthusiastic defense of paganism in his apologetic work" (31). Unlike Heather, Rike emphasizes that Ammianus avoided deliberately idolizing Julian in order to preserve the reputation of paganism: "to praise Julian without representing his restoration as somehow unrepresentative of paganism was ultimately to leave one's argument for the *cultus deorum* among the debris of Persia" (60). Importantly, Rike does not see the clear and obvious defamation of Christianity that Barnes identifies; rather, he observes that "the *Res gestae* yet retains its balanced character. Ammianus was deliberately attempting to lay a bridge between the *cultus deorum* and Theodosius I, who for a brief period between A.D. 388 and 391 opened himself to reconciliation with Rome's pagan senators" (7). Still, Rike does discover anti-Christian sentiment that seems somewhat contradictory with this statement. Rike explains how one can "clearly see why Ammianus, far from being neutral, held

Christianity to be an inferior religion” (87); in particular, “It had contributed no *doctrine* and was clearly *infelix* for the empire in its present state, hardly an imperial religion. It was attractive as a small-town phenomenon but incapable of living peacefully in the great cities” (106). When Rike refers to the *Res Gestae*’s “balanced character,” he is evidently only describing its surface appearance; it was, after all, important that Ammianus not reveal his biases against Christianity if he wanted to promote reconciliation. Rike concludes his book with what is now our third take on Ammianus’ self-description: “In *miles quondam et Graecus*, a phrase redolent of heroes—similarly ‘Greek warriors of old’—he is Jason on the Black Sea, envisioning himself at one with those specially bound by the gods to strenuous labor in a strange land” (137).

A Product of his Time

At the beginning of *Apex Omnium*, Rike makes an observation about scholarly discussion of Ammianus’ religion, which might well apply to every topic concerning him:

Such freedom to move in two directions at once, toward engagement and disengagement as one pleases, arises from the historian’s persisting reputation for neutrality. There is no better point than the center after all for moving in any direction, and that better power for omnidirectional movement inherent within this central position has become the primary shaping force of scholarly discussion: comments about Ammianus often go everywhere and nowhere at the same time as they turn about the *meta* of ideological equilibrium. Nothing appears fixed but the turning point which is itself simply a mark for zero. (2)

Our scholars who claim, as Gibbon did, that Ammianus was impartial, certainly have their share of “omnidirectional movement.” The heavy praise Ammianus lavishes upon Julian and the harsh criticisms he has for Constantius are not evenly balanced by a few comments of the opposite type, but nevertheless they prove Ammianus’ impartial nature; Ammianus is

unconcerned with religion, except when he makes a point out of his support for religious toleration, and when he explicitly criticizes Julian's religious practices, and when he either praises or criticizes Christianity; and Ammianus presents a fair portrait of historical events and characters, except for lawyers, and Germans, and possibly people who live in Rome, and possibly his former commander Ursicinus, and eunuchs.⁵⁷ In distinguishing Ammianus from his more obviously biased contemporaries, it is possible, as Rike certainly implies, that these scholars are blinded by a desire to see Ammianus as wholly impartial, or as wholly corresponding to a detached and observational kind of historiographical model employed by the respected Greco-Roman authors of a time before Rome's decline.

But if those scholars are too quick to find impartiality in Ammianus, the others may be too quick to find the opposite. Three of our scholars make the observation that arguments based upon omission are inherently weaker than arguments which are actually derived from the text, and then all three of them go against their own logic and proceed to make arguments about what Ammianus did *not* say.⁵⁸ Although one of them used this to defend Ammianus' fair-mindedness, arguing from omission is more commonly employed by those scholars who, like Barnes, wish to identify a hidden agenda in the *Res Gestae*; even worse than these three, Thompson bases an entire argument solely upon speculation of what Ammianus would have said under different circumstances. Our first category of sources were quick to assume that Ammianus was neutral, and largely ignored examples from the text which deviated from this

⁵⁷ Although I have not yet mentioned it since it never factors heavily into our scholars' analyses (which I find very unfortunate), many scholars do note that Ammianus "has a particular abhorrence" for eunuchs (151), as John Burrow describes it.

⁵⁸ These scholars are: Hunt, who writes "we are likely to be on firmer ground arguing from what Ammianus says than speculating from what he does not say" (188); Heather, who states "Arguments from omission are inherently weaker than those based on inclusion" (114); and Barnes, who observes "The detection of hidden polemic involves an obvious danger: the eager exegete is likely to find what he seeks whether it is really there or not" (90). Barnes' comment is more about reading between the lines of the existing text to find "hidden," rather than totally excluded, evidence, but the last part emphasizes the danger of basing an argument upon evidence that is not actually manifest in the text, which I believe expresses the same sentiment.

neutral view; those of the second category are quick to assume that, if Ammianus was a pagan, he must have had a pagan agenda, and largely invented examples that are not in the text in order to align with this sensibility. In both cases, there is too little focus on the text itself and too much emphasis on speculation, mostly surrounding Ammianus' own personality. When someone like Barnes reads other contemporary sources and finds episodes about Christians that are not mentioned in the *Res Gestae*, he decides that Ammianus must be a pagan who is trying to cover up Christian history; when Mehl does the same, he makes the equally drastic claim that Ammianus may as well be a Christian, since he does not fit the obvious pagan stereotypes. At times, there can be a remarkable amount of emotion invested in these views; Gibbon's sentimental farewells to his guide may be contrasted with Barnes' angry accusations,⁵⁹ and Mackail's admiration for the officer and the gentleman is similar to Rike's admiration for the aspiring Greek warrior of old.

There should be, in fact, a third category of scholars, or rather one scholar. John Matthews—whatever Barnes may say about him—does not restate Gibbon's traditional view of Ammianus. Near the beginning of his history, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus*, Matthews writes, "Of all ancient historians, Ammianus deserves to be treated, not as the unreflecting spokesman of set ideas, to be neatly encapsulated by bland statements about social class and upbringing, but as the living product of tensions of time, place and memory" (7). To define Ammianus as a pagan, and to explain even the minutest details from the *Res Gestae* according to that label is disingenuous.⁶⁰ To say that Ammianus was impartial—"far

⁵⁹ Barnes' literary criticism becomes a personal attack when out of nowhere he accuses Ammianus of being a sadist:

"Ammianus may have enjoyed inflicting pain on others. For much in his narrative has a palpably sadistic quality" (102). In my opinion, Barnes does not logically support this statement.

⁶⁰ In another excellent quote from *The Roman World of Ammianus*, Matthews roundly criticizes this method: "Whether his emphasis [on non-religious matters] conforms also to Ammianus' own personality is a subjective question, and unanswerable because it can only be posed in relation to a text that is itself the sole evidence for

in advance of his age”—and to perceive his various portraits as representative of this is equally problematic. And to claim that Ammianus was “self-consciously the classical Roman historian,” and view his historical narrative entirely in this light, is also to separate him from his context. Matthews, who acknowledges both partial and pragmatic opinions in the *Res Gestae*,⁶¹ approaches a much fuller appreciation of Ammianus than our other scholars. Perhaps his work has truly escaped Gibbon’s influence, which may be said to have compelled so many other scholars to see Ammianus in the extremes of impartial or militant.

And yet, when we reflect on Matthews’ quotation, we should not ignore the first part: “Of all ancient historians...” In the same way that Gibbon did over two hundred years before, Matthews distinguishes Ammianus from both his contemporaries and those whom he followed. Matthews pays tribute to Ammianus in what one might call a Gibbonesque passage:

It will be obvious that he is a wonderfully eloquent witness of almost every aspect of the life and society of his times. In breadth of interest, wealth of circumstantial detail and power of observation he rivals any other Greek or Roman historian known to us from any period, and outclasses most. As contemporary historians only Thucydides and possibly Polybius have any prior claim to our admiration, and Ammianus’ world is so much vaster, its political structures more forbidding, and its cultural complexity far greater than theirs; all seen with the observant eye of an individual fascinated by all forms of human conduct, a still living challenge to the modern historian of his age (228).

Matthews is not simply restating Gibbon, of course; for the eighteenth-century historian, the only “challenge” was getting through Ammianus’ awkward writing style, as more often than not “The impartial Ammianus deserves all our confidence.” But Matthews claims that

his personality; yet merely to pose the question may help to remind us that the late Roman empire was not merely a hot-house of religious piety but that it did contain its pragmatists, men more interested in the necessities of finance and administration and in the course of justice than in the self-indulgencies of religious introspection” (114).

⁶¹For example, one moment in which Matthews identifies explicit partiality is the murder of a bishop named George: “Ammianus has presented a partial, and in one significant respect an incorrect, picture of the circumstances” (443-4).

Ammianus and the “wonderfully eloquent” text he produced are as complex as the age in which he lived. Ammianus’ great strength does not lie in his natural ability to think like a modern historian, or his studious ability to think like a more ancient one, but in his incredible observational skills.

When he wanted to attack Gibbon’s praise of Ammianus, Timothy Barnes discredited all of the other historians Gibbon named as belonging in the same class. Gibbon did not write about these other historians, and Barnes may be right that their histories are no longer appreciated. Could Gibbon now be seen as lucky to have gotten 1/4 right when he chose the men who belonged to the “small, but *venerable* Synod” (3) of Common Era historians respected for their balanced views? Or has the fame of *Decline and Fall* managed to preserve the reputation of the *Res Gestae* for generations to come, while Gibbon’s other favorite historians gather dust?

Based upon what we have seen, the latter appears to be the case. Gibbon’s view of the impartial historian has become widespread as generations of scholars have brushed aside some of Ammianus’ more unsavory passages and favored him as a faithful and accurate guide for his most famous portraits. At the same time, another group of scholars has felt so compelled to identify a bias in the *Res Gestae* that they have founded their arguments upon the supposed evidence of missing facts, and manipulated Ammianus’ existing words so that even the phrase “*miles quondam et Graecus*” hides an agenda. Gibbon elevated Ammianus from his contemporaries, and while this has led some scholars to ground him forcibly into a factionalized context, it has caused others to label him as the last Roman historian—the inferior works that came after Ammianus, partial as they are, must represent something post-Roman. Gibbon would not likely approve of either line of thinking, but both are a result of

The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire's effect upon Ammianus scholarship.

CHAPTER V

It was my conviction that while cleverness is appropriate to rhetoric, and invectiveness to poetry, truth alone is appropriate to history. In accordance with this principle I have not concealed the failures of even my most intimate acquaintances, but have written down with complete accuracy everything which befell those concerned, whether it happened to be done well or ill by them. (*History of the Wars of Justinian* I.1.4-5)⁶²

In the case of many of the events which in my previous writings I did venture to relate, I dared not reveal the causes for what happened. So in this part of my work I feel it is my duty to reveal both the events hitherto passed over in silence and the causes for the events already described... When in the course of time the story seems to belong to a rather distant past, I am afraid that I shall be regarded as a mere teller of legends or listed among the tragic poets. (*Secret History* I.1.3-4)⁶³

Edward Gibbon's belief that Ammianus Marcellinus was impartial, and his persistent application of that belief in *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, has influenced scholars in two directions; some have upheld his view, while others have sought a bias that eluded him. But as we have seen, Gibbon's handling of Procopius is far less clear or consistent. By accepting Procopius' authorship for all three works, Gibbon was forced to explain the discrepancies between the *History of the Wars of Justinian*, the *Buildings*, and the *Secret History*, inventing a narrative that described Procopius' shifting attitudes as the result "of courage or servitude, of favour or disgrace." Even with this clever model, Gibbon had difficulty determining when to trust the facts from Procopius' texts. The *History of the Wars*

⁶² Translation from H.B. Dewing. I have supplied first person pronouns to replace the formalized third person used in Dewing's original translation. The original Greek: πρέπειν τε ἡγεῖτο ῥητορικῆ μὲν δεινότητι, ποιητικῆ δὲ μυθοποιίαν, συγγραφῆ δὲ ἀλήθειαν. ταῦτά τοι οὐδέ του τῶν οἱ ἐς ἄγαν ἐπιτηδείων τὰ μοχθηρὰ ἀπεκρύψατο, εἴτε εὖ εἴτε πῆ ἄλλῃ αὐτοῖς εἰργάσθαι ζυνέβη. All Greek quotations are from the Perseus Digital Library at www.perseus.tufts.edu.

⁶³ Translation by G.A. Williamson and Peter Sarris. The original Greek: ἀλλὰ καὶ πολλῶν τῶν ἐν τοῖς ἔμπροσθεν λόγοις εἰρημένων ἀποκρύψασθαι τὰς αἰτίας ἠναγκάσθη. τὰ τό τε δ' οὖν τέως ἄρρητα μείναντα καὶ τῶν ἔμπροσθεν δεδηλωμένων ἐνταῦθά μοι τοῦ λόγου τὰς αἰτίας σημῆναι δεήσει [...]. ἄλλως τε ὀπηνίκα ἐπὶ μέγα ῥεύσας ὁ χρόνος παλαιότεραν τὴν ἀκοὴν ἀπεργάζεται, δέδοικα μὴ καὶ μυθολογίας ἀποΐσομαι δόξαν κὰν τοῖς τραγωδοδιδασκάλοις τετάξομαι.

seemed like a sixth-century *Res Gestae*—secular, impartial, and the best possible guidebook—but the very existence of the *Secret History* called that into question, with its claim to be the uncensored account. Gibbon wrestled with Procopius’ great “satire,” sometimes maintaining the essential truth behind “even the most disgraceful facts,” elsewhere cautioning his readers to shut their ears against its malevolent whisper. Gibbon repeated some, but not all, of Procopius’ most scandalous anecdotes, and his choices seem suspiciously aligned with his personal preferences for the different characters involved. Ultimately, his own historical narrative draws most heavily upon the *History of the Wars*, with the *Secret History* largely used for biographical information, especially for the important female characters. The *Buildings*—written, as Gibbon claims, “for pardon and reward”—is mostly ignored.

By labeling Procopius’ works “the *history*, the *panegyric*, and the *satire* of his own times,” Gibbon made a bold claim about how the three texts should be received. The *History of the Wars* was the only actual history; the other two texts required more caution, and more selectivity of facts. How has this approach impacted modern scholarship? We will see that Gibbon’s method of understanding Procopius’ works, confusing as it is, has nonetheless become a traditional view, similar to his estimation of Ammianus and the *Res Gestae*. This view has been adopted, in whole or in part, by many scholars since him, and challenged by others.

The Byzantine Thucydides

Peter Brown, in *The World of Late Antiquity*, does not discuss at length the ancient historians he utilizes; his rather short book has more to do with the sweeping changes occurring in the Late Antique world than the lives of specific individuals of the times. Nevertheless, Procopius is mentioned several times, and almost always in conjunction with one of classical scholarship's favorite historians, Thucydides. Written during the fifth century BCE, Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* became the model for later Greek and Roman historians who favored accurate reporting over fanciful storytelling, especially those writing contemporary histories. Brown notes that Procopius, among a few other select historians, "continued from their master Thucydides a tradition of writing contemporary history" (139). He later describes Procopius specifically as "the Byzantine Thucydides" (145), connecting him directly to a literary figure who lived almost a millennium before. Brown's comparison is significant; he is attaching Procopius to a familiar, classical tradition—a tradition that has come to an end. Near the beginning of Chapter 14, ominously titled "The Death of the Classical World: Culture and Religion in the Early Middle Ages," Brown reveals the striking differences between Procopius and the historian who immediately followed him:

In the 550s Procopius still scanned the known civilized world; Agathias, his successor, writing in the 580s, is ignorant of the western Mediterranean, but minutely concerned with the history and religion of Sassanian Persia. In Agathias' work, also, the division between 'Roman' and 'barbarian' widened into the chasm separating the Christian from the infidel. Procopius viewed Persia with Herodotean detachment; but for Agathias, the Persian is the *pagan* (172-3).

Herodotus, an even older model than Thucydides, is described as closer to Procopius than his direct successor. Brown again compares Procopius to both of these more ancient historians when he writes specifically of Christianity: "In the works of Procopius, we see Christianity

only through the frosted glass of a classical history modeled on Herodotus and Thucydides” (180). Procopius does not seem to belong to the new, Christian-focused world. Although Brown does not say it outright, his text certainly implies that Procopius was the last historian of the classical world.

But there is something wrong with this picture. Brown claims that “In the works of Procopius” Christianity has been glazed over in order to service a classical model. While this is arguably true of the *History of the Wars*, with its focus on military events, Christianity certainly plays a key role in the demonic depiction of Justinian from the *Secret History* and the blessed depiction of him in the *Buildings*. Brown does not ever mention the *Buildings*, and the *Secret History* is for him “a notorious ‘Black Book’ of the reign of Justinian” that represented “tenacious conservatism” and political debate among the elite classes (139), rather than personal dislike and religious superstition. Brown certainly seems more concerned with what he describes as Procopius’ “deeply felt *History of the Wars* of his time” (139) than the other two texts. Although Gibbon viewed the *Secret History* as more of a personal attack than the critical expression of a threatened upper class, his denigration of the *Secret History* and the *Buildings* as something less than history, and less than the *History of the Wars* specifically, is consistent with the reputation Procopius has in Brown’s book. Procopius’ other two texts are so insignificant that when Brown refers to “the works of Procopius” he evidently means only the eight books of the *History of the Wars*.⁶⁴

Andreas Mehl presents a very similar view in *Roman Historiography*. He discusses Procopius’ classical influences for the *History of the Wars* near the beginning of his section

⁶⁴ This is actually consistent with the phrasing of his statement: “In the works of Procopius, we see Christianity only through the frosted glass of a *classical history* modeled on Herodotus and Thucydides” (emphasis added). I believe it is far more likely that Brown is ignoring the other two texts than claiming that Christianity is not a significant part of them.

on Procopius, identifying Thucydides, Herodotus, Xenophon, Diodorus, and Arrian, although Thucydides “is more important to him than any other” (239). Mehl notes Procopius’ “dependence on classically religious authors” and describes his “literary flirtation with traditional religion,” but has no doubts that Procopius himself was “a Christian within the framework that the customary faith of his day established, especially in regard to the unity of faith, emperor, and Christendom” (240). While Mehl would agree with Brown that the *History of the Wars* was written in a classical style that did not have a place for Christianity, Mehl does note the presence of religious themes in Procopius’ other two works, commenting on the “conception of Christian empire” in the *Buildings* and the demonization of Justinian in the *Secret History* (240-1). In the *Buildings*, he observes that “criticism of the religious politics of this headstrong and high-handed emperor [Justinian] is perceptible only subliminally” (240), a comment which is consistent with Gibbon’s claim that Procopius wrote the *Buildings* as an apology to Justinian and reserved his true criticisms for his next work. Mehl sees the *Secret History* as an expression of “the ‘senatorial’ point of view,” an “attitude that, while not in details, nonetheless in principle, is as ancient as the Roman empire itself” (241); like Brown, he describes Procopius’ opinions according to his class, and concludes that Procopius does indeed mark the end of an era: “At the end of the ancient world stands the malicious criticism of a ruler in the *Anecdota* of Procopius” (241). Unlike Brown, Mehl does not mention Procopius’ successor Agathias or explain why Procopius necessarily should be considered the last in a long line of Roman historiographers, but he has no doubt that Procopius belongs to the classical world.

Both Brown and Mehl are content to see Procopius’ attitudes as representative of his social class, and describe Procopius himself in classicizing terms that connect him more to

Thucydides than those who followed him. This view seems to ignore the distinct attitudes we see in Procopius' three works, and avoids the question of which represents Procopius' true feelings, given the contradictions between them. J.A.S. Evans, in *Procopius*, explains the *History of the Wars*, the *Buildings*, and the *Secret History* in a way that joins the classicizing view of Mehl and Brown with a personal narrative similar to what Gibbon wrote. Evans identifies Procopius as belonging to a particular category of historians: "As a writer, Procopius belongs to the great Byzantine school of 'secular historians'" (39). This school, according to Evans, includes such figures as Zosimus and Ammianus Marcellinus, and its historians "often seem more attractive than their counterparts of the other school" (39), the ecclesiastical writers. Evans notes that "The weapons of the secular historians were prose style and the traditions of classical historiography, which had been founded by Herodotus and Thucydides" (39). Procopius and other historians of the secular school wrote "in conscious imitation of their great predecessors a thousand years before them" (22). But this imitation does not define Procopius' own personal views. Evans is careful to point out that Procopius adopted "a literary mask" that caused him to write with "detachment" (40). Under these conditions he wrote the first seven books of the *History of the Wars of Justinian*. But, according to Evans, by the eighth book Procopius had become disillusioned with Justinian's politics and with his own hero Belisarius. Evans claims that in this book, "behind the Thucydidean mask which he assumes, Procopius is critical and indignant" (74). Evans discovers evidence for this in the way that Procopius characterizes the barbarian commanders in Book VIII of the *Wars*, especially the Gothic leader Totila: "Once it was Belisarius whom Procopius idealized as the embodiment of the virtues with which he here endows Totila, and they bring him the same success that they had brought Belisarius" (75).⁶⁵ Evans still

⁶⁵ Gibbon, for his part, did not think there was anything odd about Procopius' idealization of the barbarian

recognizes all of the classical influences that Mehl and Brown emphasized—Procopius, certainly, was aspiring to be a sort of Byzantine Thucydides in the way that he chose to write his history—but Evans identifies the personal feelings of the author behind the classical model he used.

As Evans describes Procopius' attitudes in his other two works, we see the same pattern Gibbon described in *Decline and Fall*. Evans writes of Procopius' panegyric work: "the *Buildings* is a cold eulogy, and we can catch the occasional ambiguity behind its formal praises which perhaps indicates what Procopius' true feelings were about Justinian" (39). Evans later emphasizes that this "ambiguity" cannot disguise Procopius' real feelings: "There can be little doubt that he wrote the *Buildings* with some bitterness in his heart" (46). Evans, indirectly invoking Gibbon, asks the question, "Was the *Buildings* Procopius' penance and the *Secret History* his revenge?" (86). He has, in fact, already answered this question in the previous chapter, describing Procopius' writing of his last two texts in much the same terms as Gibbon did: "With well-concealed bitterness, he composed what later, revised and expanded with the emperor's advice, became the first book of the *Buildings*. To this, five more books were added. Yet Procopius had his revenge. As he was working on the *Buildings*, he was quietly composing the *Secret History*, which amounted to a revision of the first seven books of the *History of the Wars*" (78-9). Evans has altered Gibbon's narrative slightly—he believes "it is likely that the *Secret History* and the *Buildings* were written at the same time" (99), rather than successively, and draws a sharp distinction between the first seven books of the *Wars* and the final book—but the general idea of the ancient author's psychological progression remains the same. Procopius began his career, "not yet

commanders. In fact, he saw this as part of the classical model which Procopius was using: "Procopius does ample and willing justice to the merit of Totila. The Roman historians, from Sallust and Tacitus, were happy to forget the vices of their countrymen in the contemplation of barbaric virtue" (I.611 fn.10).

embittered” (59), with a historical text modeled after the great works of far more ancient historians like Thucydides. The *Buildings* was produced reluctantly at the emperor’s behest, and is an insincere representation of Justinian’s reign that does not reveal Procopius’ true feelings and criticisms: “so little of Procopius’ personality intrudes into the *Buildings* that it is hard to believe he wrote it happily” (81). Procopius’ “revenge,” the *Secret History*, allowed him to vent his “hatred of Justinian” and reveal a belief that “He was the Antichrist” (99)—a belief which Evans takes seriously, claiming that “It required no great intellectual leap” for Procopius to imagine the emperor in this way given that the Byzantine world was “impregnated with theology” (99).

What we have seen described is, in its own way, a kind of decline and fall narrative taking place within the life of Procopius. His *History of the Wars* is comfortingly classical, written in the style of ancient greats like Thucydides—as Evans puts it, “as if [Procopius’] readers were living in Periclean Athens” (22). The *Buildings*, on the other hand, clearly belongs in an era of autocratic emperors who demand that panegyrics represent them as benevolent rulers acting out God’s will on Earth, although the skepticism of its author may be read in its “occasional ambiguity” and a strict formality that prevents his personality from intruding. The *Secret History*, finally, is the product of a superstitious age, interpreting every wrong as the fault of a few powerful individuals and associating these individuals with demons and witchcraft. Procopius began writing about the “more attractive” world of the secular history, with its great military figures like Belisarius, and concluded with the mystical world of the *Secret History*, with its religious influences and apocalyptic interpretations. It is perhaps no wonder that some scholars believe Procopius to be the last classical historian, as his own career might be said to reflect the decline and fall of Rome itself.

A Dubious Guide?

Constructing a psychological profile of Procopius based on his three works is one thing; utilizing his works in order to understand the past is quite another. Gibbon was very confident about his model which explained Procopius' texts as the result of "courage or servitude," and equally confident when he asserted that he needed no other guide for some of the material covered in Procopius' *History of the Wars*. But he was not so confident about when to trust the *Secret History*, and his treatment of that text was inconsistent and inconclusive. Gibbon did not make clear his reasons for believing certain anecdotes and ignoring others, and more recent scholarship reflects the legacy of the *Secret History* as a source of both trustworthy information and spurious claims. Unable to approach the secret historian as an impartial guide, scholars have made attempts to extract truth from his text nonetheless.

Robert Browning's *Justinian and Theodora* is not a book about Procopius, but it often discusses the ancient historian as it narrates the lives of two of his most prominent subjects. In particular, Browning questions many of the supposed facts from the *Secret History*, which is our best source on Theodora. When he describes Theodora's early life near the beginning of his book, Browning writes, "The circumstantial account given by Procopius, though inspired by bitter hostility and full of damaging imputations, is probably trustworthy in its main facts" (38). Browning includes a very long passage from the *Secret History* describing the details of Theodora's career as a prostitute, but he frames the citation with warnings to his readers, preceding the quote with "For what it is worth, this is what he says" and

following it with “We need not take Procopius too literally. His source was mainly malicious tittle-tattle, and the grave historian hated and feared Theodora” (38-9). Browning makes it clear that Procopius is a hostile witness, displaying an obvious bias against his subject and repeating cruel gossip. Nevertheless, he still believes that the “main facts” of Procopius’ account are true and uses them to construct a Theodora who basically did all of the same things Procopius accuses her of having done, though he views them through a less judgmental frame: “Her morals were no better than those of her colleagues” (39). It is Procopius’ tone, rather than his facts, which Browning takes issue with concerning the early life of the empress. Regarding Antonina, Browning has a similar reluctance to accept wholeheartedly Procopius’ version of events, writing, “Procopius, who knew Antonina well, hated and feared her, and in his *Secret History* he makes her out to be a magician, an adultress, and a murderess...It is hard to know what to make of Procopius’ lurid stories” (44). Browning uses the same phrase—“hated and feared”—to describe Procopius’ feelings for Belisarius’ wife, but he tries to come up with his own interpretation for how she “led Belisarius in something of a dance,” concluding that “Most probably he early fell into a relation of emotional dependence upon her—after all she was his senior in age and experience” (44). Browning does not doubt Procopius’ characterization of Antonina as a domineering woman who “evidently had few scruples about how she used her great power” (44), but he does doubt a different piece of evidence from the *Secret History*—that she was a “magician”—and comes up with an explanation for Antonina’s control of Belisarius that does not involve her casting a literal spell on him.

Even though he recognizes that the *Secret History* is a biased text, Browning, like Gibbon, assumes that many of the facts are true and uses Procopius' stories as a major source of information about the historical characters and events he describes. But while his general picture of Theodora and Antonina does not stray far from what Procopius wrote in the *Secret History*, Browning maintains a skepticism toward the text that invites his readers to question it; when he does make conclusions about Theodora or Antonina, it is often with the word "probably." When he describes the *Secret History* itself in his epilogue and appendix, Browning is very critical of the text as a whole, claiming that "its almost paranoiac tone scarcely justifies the confidence which some scholars have placed in it" (170), and noting that "It contains much which is known to be true from other sources, a great deal which cannot be verified and some statements which are known to be untrue" (178). In contrast with the *History of the Wars*, for which he writes "what [Procopius] says must always be taken seriously" (178), Browning urges a cautionary approach to the *Secret History*: "Used with care, it is a valuable supplement to the history of the wars. But its chronology is very sketchy; and the narrative and interpretation are so closely interwoven that they sometimes cannot be distinguished" (178). The *Secret History* is still valuable, but more as a "supplement" to the far more trustworthy *History of the Wars*. Still, when the *Secret History* is his best source for a particular topic, Browning uses its main facts to inform him about its principal characters, as long as the stories are not too farfetched.

A. Daniel Frankforter, in "Procopius, Amalsuntha, and a Woman's Place," chooses a particular event from both the *History of the Wars* and the *Secret History* and evaluates the believability of Procopius' narrative. Much like Peter Heather did with Ammianus' descriptions of Jovian, Frankforter finds biases in Procopius' texts that obscure the truth of

the past. Frankforter examines the story of Amalasantha, a Gothic Queen who, according to Procopius, attempted to give her land to Justinian in exchange for his protection, but was killed because of the jealousy of Theodora. Frankforter writes that “The temptation to swallow whole what Procopius said on these topics has been strong” (41), and indeed “historians have for the most part accepted Procopius’ claim that Amalasantha was the victim of a private vendetta” (42).⁶⁶ But Frankforter comes to the conclusion that what really happened is “not what Procopius reports” (53). Frankforter uses a feminist analysis of Procopius’ text and reveals its misogyny. He writes that “The naiveté, irrationality, and irresolution that Procopius assumes to be essential aspects of [Amalasantha’s] femininity cause her to make the foolish decisions that lead to her death...Procopius sees Amalasantha not as a protagonist in political maneuvers but as the loser in a private struggle between women for a personal prize, the love of a powerful man” (41-2). Frankforter is suggesting that Procopius has made assumptions about Amalasantha because of his biased view of women, and his narrative reflects those assumptions.⁶⁷ But Frankforter also claims that Procopius used these assumptions to Justinian’s benefit: “By depicting Amalasantha as a defenseless woman adrift in the sea of politics and in need of Justinian’s protection, Procopius was able to use common misogynistic assumptions about the limitations of women to provide Justinian with a noble motive for what was, in essence, a land grab” (42). Was Procopius unable to perceive Amalasantha as anything but a naïve victim because of his

⁶⁶ Robert Browning believes that Procopius’ story about Amalasantha should “be treated with some skepticism” (106), but not for the same reasons as Frankforter. Browning believes that “It is more than likely that Theodora acted on her own, out of spite,” when she ordered the death of Amalasantha, taking issue only with Procopius’ claim that Justinian was completely unaware of his wife’s actions (106).

⁶⁷ Later, Frankforter writes that “Amalasantha was, after all, only a woman, and, in Procopius’ opinion, women are by nature weak, naïve, and as trusting as children” (48). Given Procopius’ characterizations of Theodora and Antonina, he certainly did not see all women in this way, but Frankforter concerns himself only with Procopius’ depiction of Amalasantha and does not extend his feminist analysis to the other female characters in Procopius’ histories.

culture's misogyny? Or did he deliberately mischaracterize Amalasantha because he thought that his audience—and, as it turns out, future scholars—would buy it? When Heather argued that Ammianus misrepresented Jovian in order to glorify Justinian, he wrote that Ammianus “would certainly have *wanted* to believe in his own reconstruction where the fault lay entirely with Jovian,” and concludes that Ammianus only manipulated his stories about Jovian in order to “bring out the deeper ‘truth’ as Ammianus saw it.” Frankforter is not so clear; Procopius may have recognized Justinian's actions as a “land grab” and lied about events in order to make the emperor seem more noble, or he may have created a narrative that fit his own views but often “makes no sense” to someone like Frankforter (46). Either way, Procopius' histories—significantly, both the *Secret History* and the *History of the Wars*—are suspect. Fortunately, Frankforter is still able to use Procopius' narrative in order to come up with “a story that is more coherent than the one Procopius tells” (43). Like Browning, Gibbon, and the other scholars we have seen, Frankforter believes that he is in a position to evaluate Procopius' claims and, based on his understanding of the historian's own opinions, determine for himself which facts in his history can be built upon and which can be discarded.

Frankforter's feminist analysis is not a direct refutation of the traditional view of Procopius; even Gibbon acknowledged a misogynistic perspective coming from Procopius when he stated that “Those who believe that the female mind is totally depraved by the loss of chastity” would “eagerly listen” to Procopius' invectives about Theodora. But Frankforter's accusation of outright misrepresentation in the *History of the Wars* challenges the reputation of the Byzantine Thucydides' abilities as a guide in what is supposedly his most trustworthy work. A far easier target for the claim of misogyny would have been the

Secret History, but Frankforter's choice to question a story that "historians have for the most part accepted" represents a different way of thinking about Procopius. Frankforter does not distinguish between the "public" and the "secret" historian, judging his Amalasantha story from the *History of the Wars* and the *Secret History* on the same terms and assuming the same misogynistic opinions from their author. As far as Frankforter is concerned, a model for understanding Procopius' attitude changes over time is not relevant to his accounts of Amalasantha; the same author wrote both texts, and identifying his biases helps Frankforter better understand the truth about the past.

The "Real" Procopius

In the preface to her book *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, Averil Cameron criticizes her fellow scholars: "most previous readings of Procopius have been of the naïve kind that has as its main objective the digging out of nuggets of believable information" (xii). Like Timothy Barnes, Cameron is determined to set herself apart from the prevailing trends in previous scholarship about her subject.⁶⁸ She focuses on the "underlying likenesses" of Procopius' three texts, and one of her main goals is "to get away from the automatic privileging of the *Wars* on the grounds of classicism" (4). In order to best accomplish this, she chooses "what may seem a paradoxical arrangement" (4) for her book, discussing the *Secret History* first, then the *Buildings*, and then the *History of the Wars*. This forces the reader to think about Procopius' texts outside of the model of "courage or servitude" which Gibbon described and Evans mostly adopted. Cameron specifically criticizes this method of understanding the ancient historian: "a developmental view of Procopius' works was made

⁶⁸ Recall that in the previous chapter, by contrast, she had a rather conventional approach to Ammianus.

possible only by accepting datings which are at best far from well established, and then indulging in an unacceptable degree of speculation. A better way forward, and a way of avoiding these traps, is to look at the three works together as forming a whole, with less emphasis on their supposed differences” (15). But Cameron still indulges in some degree of speculation herself, as she explains: “Since we must of course discuss the evidence for the date and purpose of Procopius’ three works, it will not be possible to avoid altogether the question of his personal views and their development. Indeed it will occupy a major place, especially in the discussion of the *Wars*” (4). Cameron does not reject the idea that Procopius’ personal views may have changed over time; what she rejects is the way that scholars have used this idea to frame all of their discussions about Procopius’ texts. In shifting the focus to the texts’ similarities, Cameron claims, “In all three, beneath these superficial differences lie the same fundamental themes, the same thinking, the same preoccupations” (17).

Cameron is very clear that although Procopius wrote according to prescribed rhetorical models—classical history, panegyric, and invective—he thought and believed what he wrote. Of the *History of the Wars* specifically, she states, “We must instead acknowledge that there is no separation between the author’s thought and its expression. The one is formed by the other. Only in part does Procopius consciously choose to write in a classicizing style; much more, it is part of him and part of his conception of history” (34). For Procopius’ other two texts, she demands that they be taken seriously: “To dismiss the demonology of the *Secret History* as some kind of bad joke, and the Christian political theory of the *Buildings* as insincere flattery, is to miss the coherence and seriousness of Procopius’ vision” (57). Together, Cameron sees a single vision emerge from her interpretations of all

three texts: “The three works of Procopius, therefore, represent different sides of the reality of Justinian and of Procopius’ perception of it; in this regime freedom of speech was denied, and it was unlikely that a writer could express himself fully in any single type of work. Procopius had to write three apparently very different works to find his full expression” (11). It is not so strange, then, that Procopius wrote a history, a panegyric, and a satire; he “had to” resort to three different models in order to express a complex set of beliefs. Her argument that the three texts can be pieced together to form one whole is an interesting one, although when she explains the reason for Procopius writing them that way in the first place—the lack of freedom of speech—she does not seem to take into account the fact that Procopius wrote the *Secret History* in secret and should have had the freedom to express himself fully without fear of reprisal.

Cameron attempts to give the three texts equal weight, but she does not do this by claiming that the *Buildings* and the *Secret History* deserve to be lauded as great history along with the over-privileged *History of the Wars*. Instead, she looks at Procopius’ historiographical technique as a whole, and finds it seriously lacking. Her criticisms of the *Secret History* are severe; she claims “its level of analysis is not much higher than that of abuse” (64). In particular, she discredits Procopius’ narrative of Theodora’s private life and his opinions of the empress: “such criticism—which allowed a misogynist like Procopius to vent all his dislike and distrust of women on to this useful scapegoat—is neither serious criticism nor serious description” (75). Cameron’s negative opinion of the *Secret History* is not altogether surprising; we have seen plenty of scholars hesitate to trust its supposed facts. But rather than explain Procopius’ poor level of analysis as characteristic of the *Secret History* alone—as if, as Gibbon claimed, it were a malicious “revenge” text—Cameron

subjects the *History of the Wars* to the same criticism. She states that Procopius' personal opinions are fully present in the *Wars*, just as they are in the *Secret History*: "the *Wars* is pervaded by Procopius' personal views of people and events, and however he defined its real purpose to himself, it was from the beginning inspired by his own strongly held opinions and enthusiasms or dislikes" (137). She thinks it quite clear that "There is both bias and criticism in the *Wars*, and sometimes also what can only be deliberate distortion." (137). And she judges this criticism to be at a very low analytical level: "Nowhere does he attempt a real analysis of imperial policy or a balanced discussion of Justinian's own contribution. But this is only what we should expect if we consider the banality of his comments on other people. His terminology, both of praise and blame, is cliché-ridden and repetitive...In many cases the same phrases are applied indiscriminately, to different people" (143). Cameron later emphasizes her point that she does not see a great gap in analytical quality from the *History of the Wars* to the *Secret History*: "It needs to be firmly said, however, that this conservatism, and Procopius' criticism in general, is often based merely on prejudice, as much in the *Wars* as in the *Secret History*. The same man wrote the two works, and, in part at least, at much the same time. The same prejudices underly them both" (241). Far from describing him as the Byzantine Thucydides, Cameron writes, "In fact Procopius was an excellent reporter rather than a historian" (151)—hardly a compliment for a man attempting to imitate the classical greats.

Even though Cameron does not agree with Gibbon's "courage or servitude" model, both she and Gibbon are using Procopius' texts in order to reconstruct the mind of the historian himself. When Cameron describes the *History of the Wars*, as she forewarned, she does engage in a level of psychological reconstruction that is very similar to what previous

scholars have done, discussing Procopius' changing opinions as he neared the end of the text: "It is mainly in the latter parts, as we have seen, that Procopius' attitude to the emperor turns sour, simultaneously with his consciousness of the sadness and the waste of Belisarius' return...Neither the eulogizing of Belisarius nor the criticism of Justinian, then, are constant in the *Wars*. There is a constant shifting and development" (142). This "development" is, essentially, what Evans described; Cameron writes that Procopius "came to the *Wars* infused with patriotism and admiration...the work turned into a record of such deep disappointment that it provoked a parallel 'true' account setting the record straight on those early and optimistic years" (151). Gibbon believed that Justinian's reactions to Procopius' successive texts are what caused him to produce such distinct works, but Cameron thinks that Procopius' changing attitudes toward Justinian are responsible.

Ultimately, although Cameron distinguishes her work from other scholarship by treating Procopius' three texts with the same degree of seriousness, the goal of her book is not all that radical or different. *Procopius and the Sixth Century* is an attempt to understand Procopius' way of thinking, as much as Gibbon's "favour or disgrace" narrative in *Decline and Fall* or Evans' very similar "penance and revenge" model. Cameron recognizes that Procopius' works were written in different rhetorical styles, but she looks for the same man behind all three. Cameron closely analyzes challenging parts of Procopius' texts in order to determine Procopius' real feelings, although this makes her uncomfortable enough that she often separates the word "real" with quotations. She points out that the constraints under which Procopius wrote "make it a dangerous business to look for an author's 'real' views" (150), but she nonetheless attempts to do so. On numerous occasions she discusses the real, or rather "real," Procopius. For example, when she is criticizing other scholars, she writes

that “the ‘real’ Procopius is far from being the penetrating and critical thinker that he is usually supposed to be” (45); in the conclusion of her chapter on the *Buildings*, she claims that “the *Buildings*, more than the *Wars* or the *Secret History*, represents Procopius’ ‘real’ views about emperor and empire” (112). Cameron’s use of the word “real” in quotation marks might seem to indicate that she is mocking other scholars who use the word freely, and this is probably true; when she writes about the relationship between the *Buildings* and the *Secret History*, and notes scholarship’s traditional approach to the two texts, she writes, “This view, which emphasizes Procopius’ supposed ‘insincerity,’ as against his ‘real feelings’ expressed in the *Secret History*, totally fails to appreciate the importance of panegyric in late antique literature as a whole and the code in which it was written” (84). Nevertheless, Cameron is doing the same thing as those scholars, even if she has a different interpretation. For example, when she writes about Procopius’ religion, she states, “But if there is a ‘real’ Procopius he is to be found rather in the miracle stories and the touching acceptance of what God wills than in the elaborate but clumsy evocations of a classical Tyche, or the incongruous Herodotean tags” (119). Cameron only appears to acknowledge that there might not be a real Procopius; in fact, it is fundamental to her understanding of the texts that the author had real feelings which are sometimes disguised by the language he uses, but which a scholar like herself can extract. Her grammar may disguise this, but Cameron depends upon the concept of Procopius’ “real feelings” just as much as any other scholar. It could even be said that she depends upon it more; “the same fundamental themes, the same thinking, the same preoccupations” that Cameron claims to find in all three of Procopius’ texts can be understood as the real thoughts and feelings of their single author.

The Inconceivable Historian

In the introduction to *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, Cameron writes, “Procopius is the main (often the only) source for Justinian’s wars. He is the major writer of the period, and that on a voluminous scale. There is no way to understand Justinian’s reign, or Justinian himself, without understanding Procopius first” (ix). This sounds logical enough. But after reading about all of these ways of understanding Procopius, how has this really helped us understand Justinian’s reign? The first scholars that we looked at described Procopius’ psychological development in terms that evoked a sense of decline and fall. Brown’s image of the Byzantine Thucydides writing just before “the death of the classical world” is a poignant one, as much as Mehl’s claim that “At the end of the ancient world stands the malicious criticism of a ruler in the *Anecdota* of Procopius.” It is interesting to think about Procopius in terms of the changes that were taking place during the sixth century, and to see a classical historiographer, writing in the archaic style of his most ancient predecessors, descend into the religiously charged invective that were characteristic of a later, more troubled age. But it is much more difficult to think about the sixth century in terms of what we can gather from Procopius’ writings. Browning, like Gibbon, was forced to pick and choose from among Procopius’ anecdotes, subjectively determining what was “probably” true about the important figures he describes; Frankforter turned to modern feminist analytical methods in order to come up with a “more coherent” Amalasantha story. But both also relied upon some understanding of Procopius’ psychology, in particular his hatred and fear of the powerful women around him.

Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is not about the personalities of ancient writers; nevertheless he devoted several pages to understanding Procopius' psychological development. Since Gibbon, many other scholars have developed their own ways of understanding Procopius in relation to his world. But is Cameron right—do we need to understand Procopius before we can understand Justinian's reign?

Paolo Cesaretti's *Theodora: Empress of Byzantium* is not the kind of scholarly text that we have grown accustomed to in this thesis. Cesaretti's book is a biography, and he writes in his foreword that "I have tried to build a real narrative out of the facts of this great woman's life and give the story a certain rhythm" (9). Cesaretti is less tied to the *Secret History* than Browning was in *Justinian and Theodora*; his narrative style, in which he speculates about Theodora's inner feelings and occasionally imagines dramatic scenes, is more like Gibbon's. It is not a book in which we might expect to find a great deal of in-depth scholarly analysis, and indeed, Cesaretti does not dedicate chapters or sections to interpreting Procopius' three works. But he does refer to Procopius often, and directly analyzes relevant passages from his texts. He identifies "the author's eye" (68) in the *Secret History*, scrutinizing the passages in which Procopius depicts Theodora as a sexual object. Cesaretti characterizes Procopius in the terms of a modern pornographer: he "lingers over her with ever-increasing detail, even focusing on the different parts of her body, including the most hidden and private, not to celebrate them as sacred, but to scorn and debase them as 'unworthy.'...In modern terms, we might say that he 'zooms in' obsessively for close-up shots" (20). Cesaretti, like Frankforter and other scholars, identifies a sexist bias in Procopius' writings and uses it to understand the way that he depicts Theodora.

But Cesaretti also comments on each of Procopius' texts as a whole, and concludes something very different from our other scholars. He describes the *History of the Wars* in the classicizing terms we have seen before, writing, "In the *Wars*, Procopius tries to imitate the painstaking approach of ancient historiographers, drawing inspiration from their lofty impartiality" (18). For the *Secret History*, he claims that it is "too simple to identify the voice of the *Secret History* as the authentic voice of Procopius, in contrast to the 'rhetoric' or 'convention' that supposedly informs his other writings," and notes that "The rhetorical tradition is especially strong in the *Secret History*" (18). But rather than attempt to describe the man behind the rhetoric, Cesaretti states simply, "Therefore, no 'genuine' Procopius—devoid of rhetoric—exists: such a thing is not even conceivable" (18). Cesaretti is not suggesting that Procopius as a human being never existed; he idly speculates, very briefly, about Procopius' state of mind when he chose to write his works: "perhaps disappointed because he had been left on the sidelines of power, or suffering from the typical syndrome of the veteran (who prides himself on having seen life's true face in war, and thus devalues all other kinds of experience), Procopius chose to express himself not only in celebrations of the imperial couple but also through the rhetoric of vilification" (18). Cesaretti's explanations—that Procopius was a haughty war veteran, or that he desired power—are not particularly convincing, and they do not have to be. Procopius, the person, existed once in the sixth century AD, but he does not continue to exist in his texts. All that we have is the rhetoric; the mind of the real historian is inconceivable.

This does not perturb Cesaretti in the slightest. He even claims that the *Secret History* was written as part of "an ancient tradition that considered historiography part of the fiction writer's trade. [Procopius] uses anecdotes from many sources, and some that he

clearly invented” (131). Cesaretti is focused on the “literary effects” that Procopius deploys (131), and uses those to understand his highly rhetorical representation of Theodora; he does not speculate about Procopius’ personal feelings toward the empress, or explain why he might have chosen to lie. Viewing the *Secret History* as a kind of fiction, Cesaretti is nevertheless perfectly comfortable extracting facts about Theodora’s life from it.

Cameron claimed that scholars need to understand Procopius before they can understand Justinian’s era—a claim that Gibbon would applaud, since he chose to explain Procopius’ attitudes to his readers in the main body of his *Decline and Fall* narrative, before he introduced them to the characters and events of Justinian’s reign. In the introduction to *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, Cameron makes the same claim: “Procopius is our main guide. If we get him wrong, we have not much chance of going any further” (x). But her discomfort with the concept of a real Procopius, capable of being understood, is evident from her consistent use of the word “real” in quotation marks when she discusses his opinions. The rhetorical masks which Procopius assumed, and the autocratic regime under which he wrote, make it difficult—perhaps impossible—to find Procopius’ real feelings. And yet numerous scholars from Gibbon on have created complicated models as they have searched for Procopius’ elusive intentions; we dare not, as Cameron says, “get him wrong.” The fact that so many different interpretations of Procopius have been proposed suggests that most scholars, at least, have yet to get him right.

Searching the *History of the Wars of Justinian*, the *Buildings*, and the *Secret History* for Procopius’ real voice is no easy task. We can, like Cesaretti, accept that what we think of as Procopius is merely a literary construct. But many scholars continue to think of him as a “guide,” leading us, as he led Gibbon, through the triumphs and troubles of Justinian’s reign.

CONCLUSION

“Diverse, changing, innovative, contradictory—all these epithets can be fairly applied to the tumultuous world of Ammianus Marcellinus. In some ways it is a world like our own, with its rapid change and accompanying sense of dislocation. It is not the familiar classical world, but then that is its very attraction.” Averil Cameron, in *The Later Roman Empire* (193-4)

“The *Wars*, then, has many built-in failings, by modern requirements. It was an odd type of history to write in the sixth century, and indeed Procopius was almost the last to try to do so. Yet Justinian’s wars cried out for some such work; they were odd too in their chronological context.” Averil Cameron, in *Procopius and the Sixth Century* (151)

We have seen how Gibbon used Ammianus and Procopius in his narrative of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. We have examined how other scholars engaged with Gibbon’s thoughts about these ancient historians, directly or indirectly, and we have discovered some of the major threads in the scholarly debate about them. Gibbon’s influence is undeniable. Centuries later, the *Decline and Fall* continues to be quoted in major scholarly works about Ammianus or Procopius, and Gibbon’s understanding of the historians is identifiable in the patterns of analysis that have emerged in modern scholarship. Not all scholars agree with Gibbon; not all of them disagree; but his presence, or his legacy, can be felt in the English scholarship that has been produced about Late Antiquity.

Gibbon’s most important contribution to scholarship about these two ancient historians is the way that he lifted them above their contemporaries. Gibbon did not treat all of his sources equally; he specifically chose Ammianus and Procopius to be his guides for the periods that their histories cover. He paraphrased many of their stories and adopted their depictions of some of Late Antiquity’s more controversial figures. He found the *Res Gestae*

so convincing that he considered Ammianus one of the most impartial historians of all time; he was so impressed by the *History of the Wars* that he declared Procopius his most valuable guide for Justinian's campaigns, forcing him to invent a narrative about Procopius' life that would justify the trust that he was placing in a historian who also produced a panegyric and a satire. Gibbon was awed by his sources, and the eloquent tributes that he wrote to his guides have graced the opening pages of many academic works about Ammianus and Procopius, including this one.

Ways of thinking about the later Roman Empire have changed since Gibbon's time. Most scholars do not want to see the end of Rome as a thousand-year process of ponderous decline, but a definitive date has not been decided upon. Among the scholarly works that we have examined, there is little agreement about when the Roman Empire ended, and the fluid distinction between Roman and Byzantine complicates the problem further. But most scholars are not concerned about the end of the Roman Empire. What they see when they look at Late Antiquity is something even more epic—the death of the classical world. This is the world not just of Augustus and Marcus Aurelius, but of Cicero and Polybius, Herodotus and Thucydides. A thousand years produced hundreds of great thinkers, but they were all part of one, classical continuity. The ecclesiastical historians who were contemporaries of Ammianus and Procopius belonged to a different world.

The *Res Gestae* and the *History of the Wars* are classical in style. They describe emperors who wanted to restore something of the old world that had been lost. The doctrinal disputes and complicated religious politics that would come to define the Early Middle Ages were very much a part of the fourth and sixth centuries, but Ammianus and Procopius obscure this, presenting the events of their times in a more traditional way that consciously

imitates the ancients. As Peter Brown identified, we are not “untouched” by our ideas of classical Greece and Rome; we are drawn to the *Res Gestae* and the *History of the Wars*, whose worlds we openly compare with the more familiar classical one. John Matthews said that Ammianus deserves perhaps more admiration than Thucydides, because Ammianus’ “world is so much vaster, its political structures more forbidding, and its cultural complexity far greater.” Gibbon believed that Belisarius was an even greater general than the Roman Republic’s Pompey Magnus, because Belisarius lived in a more depraved time. When we read scholarly works about Procopius, we feel sorry for him; he “came to the *Wars* infused with patriotism and admiration,” as Cameron put it, and produced a history of Justinian’s reconquest in the grand classical style of Thucydides, but the realities of his far-from-classical world eventually caught up with him, giving us the *Buildings* and the *Secret History*.

This way of thinking is, at least, what modern scholarship has constructed. If the principal accounts of the reigns of Julian and Justinian had been ecclesiastical in nature, we would likely have a vastly different view of the fourth and sixth centuries. Gibbon is thankful to Ammianus and Procopius for writing histories that value “the profane virtues of sincerity and moderation,” unlike their zealous Christian contemporaries. These two ancient men are, for Gibbon and so many after him, valuable guides to their times.

Gibbon firmly believed this, but we should not assume that it is true. Timothy Barnes was right to criticize scholars for restating Gibbon’s views without question, although his own conclusions were themselves questionable. The trends that we have identified in modern English scholarship about Ammianus and Procopius suggest that Gibbon’s ideas have driven, or at least “set the tone” of, the discourse. If Gibbon was right about his guides,

then scholars of Late Antiquity should devote more time to studying his methods and conclusions. If Gibbon was wrong, then studying his ideas is even more urgent so that his negative influences may be identified. Either way, we should recognize that if Ammianus Marcellinus and Procopius of Caesarea have been our guides to the fourth and sixth centuries, then so has Edward Gibbon. His importance cannot be doubted, and his trustworthiness and usefulness deserve to be scrutinized just as much.

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