Spring 1-1-2014

Humble in Adversity and Overbearing in Success: Dramatic Reversals and the Problem of Inconsistent Alamanni in Ammianus

Avedan Raggio

University of Colorado Boulder, avedan.raggio@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.colorado.edu/clas_gradetds

Part of the Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons, and the Military History Commons

Recommended Citation

https://scholar.colorado.edu/clas_gradetds/8

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Classics at CU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Classics Graduate Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of CU Scholar. For more information, please contact cuscholaradmin@colorado.edu.
Humble in Adversity and Overbearing in Success: Dramatic Reversals and the Problem of Inconsistent Alamanni in Ammianus

by

Avedan Raggio
B.A., University of Colorado, 2009

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Colorado in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts, Department of Classics 2014
This thesis entitled:
Humble in Adversity and Overbearing in Success:
Dramatic Reversals and the Problem of Inconsistent Alamanni in Ammianus
written by Avedan Raggio
has been approved for the Department of Classics

Dr. Noel Lenski

Dr. Andy Cain

Date __________

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
In his *Res gestae*, Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus relates Roman battles and interactions with several non-Roman peoples including a Germanic tribe called the Alamanni. Ammianus usually describes the Alamanni as barbaric, cowardly savages far removed from civilization. He often describes engagements where the Alamanni begin the battle proud and haughty, but end it cowed and submissive to Rome’s inevitable superiority. However, Ammianus also includes remarkably sympathetic and respectful descriptions of the Alamanni, even examples of the Alamanni acting more bravely and admirably than their Roman counterparts, in stark contrast to his usual narrative and general Roman opinion. I conclude that the inconsistencies in Ammianus’ descriptions of the Alamanni reflect inconsistencies in Roman experiences with the Alamanni, and in Ammianus’ mission to write unbiased history he reports the inconsistencies but does not feel compelled to resolve them.
CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION................................................................. 1

CHAPTER I: Savageness vs civilization: how Ammianus Reduces the Alamanni to
 Enemies while Keeping them Elevated enough to be Worthy Enemies............. 4

CHAPTER II: Virtus et Disciplina, Ammianus’ Examples of Barbarians being Wild
 and Undisciplined versus the Romans being Controlled and Contained........... 24

CHAPTER III: The Romans lead the Alamanni from Unwarranted Pride to
 Submission and Humility.................................................. 30

CHAPTER IV: Where Ammianus’ Duality Breaks Down: Civilized Barbarians,
 Savage Romans, and Unexpected Sympathy..................................... 43

CONCLUSION................................................................. 56

BIBLIOGRAPHY............................................................. 59
Roman exceptionalism is a consistent theme in Roman literature and histories. That is to be expected—any culture that believed that their progenitors were semi-divine and that the site of their eternal city was chosen by the gods would, naturally, think of themselves as superior to other peoples. Even cultures politically and technologically matched with the Romans were inevitably lesser—the Persians, for all that they were Rome’s constant and unconquered enemy and the only great power that merited diplomatic dealings, were strange, effeminate and superstitious. Making comparisons that favor the Romans was even easier with peoples who had no great cities or monuments such as the homogenously dismissed “barbarians” that lived on Rome’s northern frontiers. Unlike the Persians, who undisputedly had culture (for all that is was not as great or deserved as the Romans), the inferiority of the barbarians required no great justification: it simply was.

Ammianus Marcellinus is a Roman historian’s greatest primary source for the fourth century. Although only eighteen of the books in his Res Gestae survive, the books that remain chronicle the period between 353 and 378 CE, including detailed first-hand accounts of Emperor Julian’s campaigns in Persia and several engagements with the various Germanic tribes in Gaul, as well as entertaining panegyrics and editorials on prominent Romans and the peoples they encountered. In Ammianus’ work, we have a Roman’s view of Germans and other barbarians, but there remains no German literature with which to compare the events in Strasburg or Adrianople. While there are two other extant Roman writers who wrote on these times (Eunapius and Zosimus), neither do so with Ammianus’ level of detail, and the latter largely copied the former. This inescapable reality—that Ammianus’ is the only work we have detailing the events of those times—is problematic, especially for the historian hoping to learn more about the peoples with whom Rome interacted. In this study I examine specifically Ammianus’ treatment
of the Alamanni. He consistently writes conflicting descriptions: the Alamanni are, of necessity, barbarians and act in savage, un-Roman ways, but there are sufficient examples of Ammianus describing them differently, or describing Romans barbarically, that we must investigate how and why.

Several times in Ammianus’ work he assures his reader that he is being an unbiased historian seeking to convey the truth. “No wordy deceit adorns my tale, but untrammelled faithfulness to fact, based upon clear proofs, composes it.”¹ However, one cannot read Ammianus’ work without seeing bias.² I conclude that the inconsistencies in Ammianus’ descriptions of the Alamanni reflect inconsistencies in Roman experiences with the Alamanni, and in Ammianus’ mission to write unbiased history he reports the inconsistencies but does not resolve the inconsistencies in Roman attitudes and his report (if he even sees the need for resolution at all). What results is an anticipated narrative: the Alamanni are savage, arrogant cowards who fight the Romans and are vanquished. Ammianus is comfortable describing and thinking of the Roman army as competent, well-trained, and disciplined, and the Romans fight against the barbarians because the barbarians embody everything that the Romans are not (Chapter 1). The numerous examples of what the barbarians lack leads to Ammianus’ pride in what the Romans have, the balance of virtus and disciplina that, in part, separates them from the barbarians (Chapter 2). The undeserved pride of the barbarians constantly allows the superior Romans to defeat and humble them (Chapter 3). However, alongside this patriotic narrative are

---

² “If any one element deserves to be singled out as fundamental to Ammianus’ perception of men and events, it is perhaps the antithesis between civilization and barbarism…Ammianus saw barbarism in all of its manifestations, both internal and external, as the ultimate threat to the Roman way of life.” (Seager 1986, p 131)
examples to the contrary: Alamanni acting with Roman virtue and Romans acting with barbarian savagery and madness (Chapter 4), and Ammianus’ inconsistencies deserve attention.
Chapter One: Savageness vs civilization: how Ammianus Reduces the Alamanni to Enemies while Keeping them Elevated enough to be Worthy Enemies

Ammianus must write two contradictory Alamanni (and, arguably, must do so for all barbarians): they must be both good (a worthy adversary, worth the time and expense of fighting, be a foe whose defeat would bring glory to the people of Rome) and bad (a people that have to be defeated, worse than the Romans, lesser and other).³ To begin, I will provide examples of Ammianus bringing the Alamanni down by providing examples of their untrustworthiness, lack of culture and civility, cruelty, madness, cowardice, incompetence. I will also explore Ammianus’ habitual use of animal imagery to de-humanize the Alamanni. I will then show and discuss how Ammianus described the Alamanni as enemies that are, for all their numerous faults, worthy enemies for the mighty Roman army, an enemy from whom they can gain honor and glory.

1. Untrustworthy: If the Alamanni had been trustworthy, then the Romans could have made treaties with them, and that would have been the end of it. It is implied that the Roman can be trusted to keep his word, but the barbarians cannot. The Alamanni as described by Ammianus will not keep faith with even their own people, much less with the Romans.⁴ Ammianus puts it plainly: the “savages are of unstable loyalty”⁵—not that in a certain situation these particular barbarians proved to be disloyal, but that all savages are, on account of their savageness, of

---

³ I count Ammianus among the historians who, according to Whittaker 1994: 130, “were obsessed, as are many modern historians, with the stereotypes of the moral divide between the way of life of Romans against that of immanitas barbariae.”

⁴ Hunt 1999:57, elaborates on an exception to this rule, but admits that “it is more usual to find [Ammianus] hinting at the taint of treachery.”

⁵ 18.2.18 “ut sunt fluxoris fidei barbari”
unstable or unreliable loyalty. The Roman must be ever watchful, lest the barbarians take advantage of Roman civility and trust.\(^6\)

Even when some Alamannic kings are trustworthy, their kin sabotage them:

…there they were two brothers of royal blood, who, **bound by the obligation of the peace which they had obtained from Constantius the year before, dared neither to raise a disturbance nor to make any move;**\(^7\) but a little later, when one of them, Gundomadus, who was the stronger of the two and truer to his promise, had been **treacherously murdered,** all his tribe made common cause with our enemies, and at once the subjects of Vadomarius (against his will, as he insisted) united with the armies of the savages who were clamouring for war.\(^8\)

---

\(^6\) The following are examples of Ammianus relating Alamannic untrustworthiness, both to the Romans and to their fellow Alamanni: 14.10.7 “But lo! a guide acquainted with the region unexpectedly appeared, and, in return for money, pointed out by night a place abounding in shallows, where the river could be crossed.” This passage tells us that the barbarians would sell out their own people on exchange for money. This happens again in 17.10.5: “Quickly a young Alamann was seized and led in, and on condition of having his life spared he promised to show the way.” It is unclear whether betraying your people for your life was better or worse than betraying them for money, just as it is unclear whether the Romans honored their agreement in any case, but we can be reasonably sure that to the Roman audience, the crime of treason would have stood out as unforgiveable; 16.12.19 “But one [Alamannic] infantryman, who could not keep up with them, was caught through the quickness of our men, and reported that the Germans had been crossing the river for three days and three nights.” This is another example of a barbarian being caught and giving up information, as well as Roman “quickness” and virtue preventing disaster. However, since Ammianus also reports Roman soldiers deserting and giving up information, this may be simply Ammianus reporting fact and not a specific criticism of the Alamanni; 17.1.3 “the savages…under **pretense** of a prayer for peace, with the purpose of avoiding the brunt of the first onslaught, they sent envoys with set speeches, to declare the harmonious validity of the treaties with them; but for some unknown design that they suddenly formed they changed their minds, and by other messengers whom they forced to come post haste, they threatened our men with most bitter warfare, unless they should withdraw from their territory.” The Alamanni in this description both act duplicitously and cannot seem to make up their mind, one minute planning deception and the next planning threats. They show themselves to be untrustworthy, fickle and driven only by fear; 17.1.13, three of the Alamannic kings meet with Julian after completion of the fort. They agree not to attack the fort and to bring in grain to the soldiers at the fort “both of which things they did, **since fear curbed their treacherous disposition** [Quod utrumque metu perfidiam frenante fecerunt].” Not only are the Alamanni by nature treacherous, but they are afraid, and it is only their fear of the Romans that keeps their dishonesty in check. One vice obstructs another, in Rome’s favor; 17.10.7 the Alamannic king Hortarius agrees to return Roman prisoners but “he did not keep faith but held back a large number and gave up only a few.”

\(^7\) I have set passages in bold-faced for emphasis.

\(^8\) 16.12.17 *Regii duo fratres vinculo pacis adstricti, quam anno praetorio impetraverant a Constantio, nec tumultuare nec commoveri sunt ausi. Sed paulo postea uno ex his Gundomado, qui potior erat fideique firmioris, per insidias interempto omnis eius populus cum nostris hostibus conspiravit et confestim Vadomarii plebs (ipso invito, ut assererat) agminibus bella cipientium barbarorum sese coniunxit.*
Two royal barbarians made peace with Constantius and, as far as Ammianus tells us, were content to live with their treaty, but the best of them was “treacherously” murdered and the other overruled by their bloodthirsty followers. Another quote is worth discussing:

After this, with especially diligent care and with troops of various kinds, a more serious campaign than common was prepared against the Alamanni, since the public safety imperiously demanded it; for from a race that so easily recovered its strength treacherous attacks were to be feared; and the soldiers were equally incensed against them, since the untrustworthy nature of an enemy who was at one time abject and suppliant and soon afterwards threatening the worst, allowed them no rest or cessation from warfare.9

Alamannic treachery and untrustworthiness are, according to Ammianus, ethnic traits.10 If they are inculcated traits, then it follows that the traits cannot be “trained” out of the Alamanni, even if they act loyally (as do the Alamanni who die fighting on behalf of Rome; see chapter 4). Does this mean that the Romans always mistrusted their non-Roman allies, even after generations of good service? Did the Romans always doubt their foederati, always wait for their true, savage nature to re-assert itself over common sense and Roman virtues like loyalty?

The expression “old habits die hard” comes to mind. The Romans had always been convinced of their exceptionalism. Rome itself was foretold and established by the gods, and the gods had a vested interest in preserving Rome and seeing to Rome’s success, as long as the Roman people did their part. The venerable mythological history of Rome came down from the very gods, and who else could legitimately make this claim. If anyone tried, they were not as old, as legitimate, as worthy as the Romans. How else would one account for Rome’s success over

---

9 27.10.5, “Parabatur post haec lentioribus curis et per copias multiformes in Alamannos expeditio solitis gravior, destinatus id publica tutela poscente, quoniam reparabilis gentis motus timebantur infidi: milite nihil minus accenso, cui ob suspescos eorum mores nunc infimorum et supplicum, paulo post ultima minitantium, nullae quiescendi dabantur indutiae.” See also Seager 1999: 595.
10 Whittaker 1994:200, memorably and frankly states that while “the treachery of barbarians who served in the army is taken for granted by almost every cotemporary source…the savagery and deceit of the Franks or Alamans, which our sources recount, was easily matched by the Romans.” Naturally the Romans did not see it that way.
the centuries, Rome’s endurance? Rome’s complicated relationship with the Greeks is the closest that the Romans come to acknowledging another people as near-equals to themselves, and yet the Greeks are forever admired somewhat, but disdained far more. If the Greeks could not rise to match the Romans, what hope could beer-swilling, butter-eating, pants-wearing barbarians from lands far from Rome’s sacred hills have?

Hence Rome’s dismissal of all non-Romans. Try as they might, as the Romans expanded their borders, they had to find a way to incorporate their neighbors into the Empire and army. Lines between Roman and Barbarian were sometimes blurred. Historians as far back as Edward Gibbon blamed “barbarization” in part for the fall of Rome. Scholarship has grown to refine this limited view over the years, but I think that Ammianus would have agreed with Gibbon, if only because that theory is (1) comfortable and self-reassuring to the Romans (and their intellectual descendants, the writers in the Age of Reason) and (2) provides a scapegoat—non-Romanized barbarians—that cannot speak for itself.

2. Uncivilized or Ignorant of Civilized Customs: One could frame the crux of the conflict between the Romans and everyone they fought in the Western Empire as a conflict between civilization and lack of civilization.11 Not only does it turn the so-called “uncivilized” into the “other,” who is easier to dehumanize, dismiss and kill, but it makes the Romans into the heroes—the good, civilized Romans trying to give the savages the benefit of their civilized magnanimity and trouncing them when the barbarians have not the wit to do what is in their best interests (a narrative unfortunately familiar to anyone who has read about Europe’s colonial practices). One cannot dispute that Roman achievements in engineering, law, infrastructure and

11 Blockley 1977:231; “To Ammianus the German tribes outside the Empire, and especially the Alamanni and the Goths (the greatest threats at the time), are qualitatively different from the Romans, insofar as their general behaviour and way of life are not what a Roman would consider to be civilized.” Sogno 2011: 133: “For citizens of the empire ‘barbarian’ was synonymous with ‘non-Roman’ and, therefore, ‘uncivilized’…”
culture were unique in and for their time, and the Romans were proud of it. However, their pride made the Romans prone to dismissing everyone else casually as irredeemably savage with no inclination to look for other indicators of worthiness or non-Roman civilization. Ammianus provides many examples which describe both how the Romans saw the barbarians and what counted as civilization to the Romans.

In one, the Alamanni had been harassing Julian’s army before the completion of a fort in Gaul. Because the attacks cease as soon as the fort is complete, we may conclude that the barbarians’ change of heart was on account of the completed fort, a mark of civilization,

---

12 Ironically (or inevitably), the barbarians learned from the Romans: as Whittaker 1994: 46, points out, Roman attitude towards frontiers and *limes* was essentially that the Romans could claim whatever land they wanted and cross it at will. Eventually the barbarians began to adopt that viewpoint from their side of the “border” (242).

13 Further examples of Ammianus describing the Alamanni as uncivilized: 15.4.1 “war was declared on the . . . and Lentienses, tribes of the Alamanni, who often made extensive inroads through the Roman frontier defences.” The Alamanni do not respect lawful and civilized borders like the Romans do; 16.2.12 “Hearing therefore that Strasburg, Brumath, Saverne, Seltz, Speyer, Worms, and Mayence were held by the savages, who were living on their lands (for the towns themselves they avoid as if they were tombs surrounded by nets), he first of all seized Brumath, but while he was still approaching it a band of Germans met him and offered battle.” The Alamanni, like all barbarians, avoid towns except when they want to loot them; even when they “hold” Roman towns, they stay on the countryside around the towns instead of occupying the cities. This is an indication of how uncivilized they are. Perhaps Ammianus means to hint that the barbarians are so uncivilized that they do not even know what to do with a city. Their unsophisticated minds cannot comprehend the advantage they could gain with cities and a wall, so they mill around the outside until the Roman can come and re-take the town; 16.4.2 “Finally, after a month the savages withdrew crestfallen, muttering that they had been silly and foolish to have contemplated the blockade of the city.” Clearly the barbarians do not know what to do when confronted with a city. This also shows stupidity (subsection 6); 16.11.8 “the savages who had established their homes on our side of the Rhine [barbari, qui domicilia fixere cis Rhenum].” Ammianus does not use the possessive pronoun here, but frankly, he does not have to. Of course everything on “this side” of the Rhine was Roman. “Cis Rhenum” implies possession that the barbarians do not respect. It is another example of the uncivilized barbarians ignoring Roman law and boundaries; 16.11.10 “And the rest of the Germans, on learning of this, abandoned the islands as an unsafe refuge and carried off into the interior their families, their grain, and their rude treasures. [Hocque comperto residui Germani, ut infido praevidos insularum relictum, ad ulteriora necessitudines et fruges opesque barbaricas contulerunt].” After the Romans slaughter a number of barbarians, those remaining on these islands take everything they have, and Ammianus described their most valuable belongings (one assumes that one would flee ravaging Romans with naught but one’s most valuable possessions) as “barbaricas”—outlandish, strange, and of uncivilized people; 16.12.23 Alamanni described as “these warlike and savage tribes [autem populos omnes pugnaces et saevos]”; 18.2.15 Ammianus describes the Alamannic dwellings as “fragile huts”; 27.1.1 Alamannic host ranges “without restraint”; 27.10.10 “the Alamanni were yelling dreadfully”; 30.3.5 “Finally, the savages ceased their immoderate gesticulation and barbaric tumult…”

14 17.1.12 After the repair of a fortress in Alamannic territory: “When the enemy saw these preparations rapidly made for their destruction, they quickly assembled, dreading the completion of the work, and with prayers and extreme abasement sent envoys and sued for peace [Quae illi maturata ad suam perriciem contemplantes metuque rei peractae volucrier congregati precibus et humilitate suprema petiere missis oratoribus pacem]”
specifically Roman civilization. The barbarians did not have fortified towns or forts at all, and according to Ammianus and other contemporary historians were very averse to them. With the display of some civilization, Julian gets the peace he wants without a fight.

In addition to being averse to the clearest marker of civility—permanent cities—the Alamanni also act uncivilized towards the Romans, for if to create civilization is essentially civilized, then to destroy civilization is essentially uncivilized, and that is what Ammianus shows the Alamanni doing: “But the Alamanni, who enter eagerly into wars, made all the greater effort, as if to destroy utterly everything in their way by a kind of fit of rage.” This quote also supports Ammianus’ characterization of the Alamanni as “mad”, but the phrase “who enter eagerly into wars” invites a comparison with Emperor Julian, who does not eagerly enter into battle. No one in Rome would question that Roman military prowess is unmatched, and a lot of Ammianus’ text is devoted to proving that through many examples; however, the most praised emperors do not enter wars unless they have no other options. They seek more civilized methods to get what is best for the Roman people. When they must fight, they fight and lead well, but only when they have exhausted other options. These barbarians, on the other hand, not only enter into war but do so eagerly, their rage driving them to “destroy utterly everything in their way.”

---

15 Drinkwater 1999:129, makes an interesting point about Alamannic proximity to Roman frontiers and forts as being indicative of their “positive desire to be neighbors of the Empire, and their belief that they would not regularly be subject to Roman harassment” (See also Drinkwater 2007: 218). Matthews 2007:308, offers that Ammianus might be using a rhetorical convention (especially when describing the Alamanni avoiding cities ‘like tombs encircled by nets’), “but it is not impossible that the Alamanni did actually regard towns with apprehension,” the buildings being so much bigger and more permanent than anything they had prior experience with.

16 16.12.46, “Verum Alamanni bella alacriter ineuntes altius anhelabant velut quodam furoris affectu opposita omnia deleturi.”

17 See Julian’s reluctance to fight in his speech in 14.10.14. Additionally, Smith 1999:93, elaborates on Ammianus’ implicit comparison of the barbarians to Julian when he observes that “the absence in Julian’s case of a metaphorical motif often used by Ammianus in other settings, the likening of men to animals. Elsewhere in the Res gestae one meets men as snarling dogs, serpents, beasts in the amphitheater, often with a moral judgment of actions or emotions implicitly conveyed. Nowhere in our narrative are Julian’s actions or moods ever so presented.”
3. **Cruelty**—The following quote stood out in my reading because it is the only time when Ammianus describes the Alamanni as cruel: “For the enemy sprang unexpectedly out of their lurking places and **without sparing** pierced with many kinds of weapons everything within reach.”\(^{18}\) I expected to find Ammianus catalog more instances of Alamannic cruelty because, to my modern mind, the descriptor went along with the other categories that he regularly catalogued. However, as this is the only example I found, I began to wonder why there was only one. Apparently barbarian cruelty was not part of the Roman caricature of the Alamanni. This discovery led to more questions: in the Late Antique mind, should an attacking army spare any of their foes? Is Ammianus adding to the Alamanni’s barbarity, that they spare no one (implying they should have)? Or rather, is Ammianus saying this to make the Alamanni seem like more worthy adversaries—they spare no one, so the Roman soldiers should spare none of them? Would sparing the life of an enemy be seen as an act of weakness instead of mercy?

Perhaps mercy as a virtue is not a particularly Roman way to see the world—a foe ‘spared’ in battle would have been sold into slavery by the Romans or dehumanized as spoils of war in a triumph. Frankly, a Roman not killing an enemy in battle was only mercy if the vanquished valued his or her life over quality of life. However, Blockley characterizes Caesar Julian’s treatment of defeated Alamannic king Chonodomarius (16.12.65-6) as “properly merciful,”\(^{19}\) which suggests that mercy was an admirable quality in a Roman emperor. Sogno provides another way to interpret this when she says that “clemency is presented as an act of conquest in disguise, because conquest was the traditional way which which Romans dealt with

---

\(^{18}\) 15.4.8, “Namque improvisi e latebris hostes exiliunt et **sine parsimonia** quicquid offendi poterat, telorum genere multipli ci configebant.”

\(^{19}\) Blockley 1977: 223.
unruly neighbors." Sogno cites Symmachus’ panegyric to Valentinian and says that Symmachus’ words implied that “the exercise of clementia had a civilizing effect on the barbarians, and, by sparing them, Valentinian changed their customs.” According to a historian who wanted to praise a particular emperor (Symmachus to Valentinian, Ammianus to Julian), the emperor could show mercy to barbarians and give them one last chance to redeem themselves of their savagery and become acceptably Roman. This being the case, the Alamanni here do not show any mercy and that deficiency contributes to their negative character.

4. Madness: Barbarian madness is the obvious corollary to Roman reason, a virtue the Romans assigned to themselves and identified with the Empire as far back as Octavian claiming the god Apollo as his own, in contrast to the eastern/debauched/uncivilized/mad/other Bacchus, with whom Mark Antony associated himself. Ammianus seems to enjoy pointing out examples of Roman reason versus barbarian madness. The madness of the Alamanni can be interpreted several ways: their madness can be a contrast to Roman martial restraint and discipline (when battle is joined, the Romans are silent and stay in ranks, as opposed to the hollering barbarians running at them in no formation), or simply a difference between the Romans and the Alamanni: reason/Romans/us=good, whereas madness/Alamanni/them=bad. Madness, by definition, cannot be reasoned with, making the mad Alamanni a more frightening enemy and thereby justifying the presence of the army fighting them. Also, if the barbarians had been sane or rational, they would not be fighting the Romans but instead would have surrendered and waited for terms.

Ammianus uses the words saevos, furor and ira most often when referring to the Alamanni as mad. He casually implies that the Alamanni were customarily rage-ful, but in some

---

21 Seager 1999: 57, noted that furor applies far more to barbarians than to Romans in Ammianus.
instances they raged even beyond what was customary for them (and unacceptable and
distasteful to the Romans). Ammianus writes Alamannic madness into Julian’s speeches:
“These are the savages whom **madness and excessive folly have driven on to the ruin of their fortunes**,
doomed as they are to be overwhelmed by our might.” Ammianus implies here that if
the Alamanni had stopped to think, they would have behaved differently. However, their
“madness” and “excessive folly” have driven them to their own doom. The description almost
makes the reader pity the poor, hapless barbarians, who apparently cannot help themselves, and
one wonders if Ammianus was intentionally trying to evoke sympathy for the doomed barbarians
in his Roman readers. This quote also serves to elevate the Romans, who, despite being generally
outnumbered and facing insane foes, will undoubtedly crush them.

5. **Cowardice**: The Roman soldiers in the army had to be brave. According to Vegetius Roman
soldiers were trained with heavier burdens, worse equipment and in more challenging physical
conditions so that when faced with real battle they would meet the “easier” conditions confident
of their abilities and success. Cowardice in battle would not have been tolerated, and it stands to
reason that Roman soldiers would have felt contempt for anyone whom they perceived as weaker
or more cowardly. Fortunately for the collective self-esteem of all Roman soldiers, Ammianus

---

22 16.11.3 “…the Alamanni, who were **raging beyond their customary manner**…[…ut saevientes ultra solitum
Alamanni…]”
23 16.12.31, “**Hi sunt barbari, quos rabies et inmodicus furor ad perniciem rerum suarum coegit**
occurrere nostris viribus opprimendos.”
24 More examples of Ammianus referring to the Alamanni as mad: 16.12.49, the Romans “with drawn swords
pierced the enemy's sides, left bare by their **frenzied rage** [hostium latera, quae nudabat ira flagrantiior, districtis
gladiis perforabat].” Here the barbarians’ instinct for self-preservation is overcome by their battle-madness; 17.8.1,
Julian plans to forestall “the Alamanni, who were not yet assembled in one body, but were all venturesome and cruel
to the point of madness after the battle of Strasburg [Alamannos... nondum in unum coactos sed in insaniam post
Argentoratum audaces omnes et saevos].” This sentence tells us that, again, the Alamanni were quite easily driven
to madness, but also implies that they were vengeful, because this bout of special insanity occurred after the battle of
Strasburg, which (we are given to assume) these unassembled Alamanni survived.
25 Vegetius was a fifth-century Roman who wrote *De re militarii*, a treatise summarizing for the emperor the most
important military training and tactical manuals from the ancient world. Vegetius claimed no military experience for
himself, but instead took the best advice from earlier manuals on warfare and assembled them in one book for the
emperor’s convenience. Although the text is surrounded with plenty of controversy, for the purposes of my
argument I have no reason to doubt the veracity of the material I reference.
happily provides examples of the Alamanni being cowards. For example, after Emperor Julian is attacked by Alamanni near Troyes the barbarians are too frightened of Julian and his soldiers to finish the attack that they themselves initiated! They fear fighting (and dying) more than they fear the shame of capture. Another interesting note here is that Julian, as we have seen, does not act aggressively towards the barbarians unless he feels he must. However, when he does engage them, he overcomes them “easily [facili].” When they face Julian, he either tramples them “easily” underfoot, they surrender in terror, or they flee. This could also be seen as reversal—the barbarians attack Julian and almost immediately those who survive the initial trampling physically turn around and run.

Additionally, after a fight with the Romans led by Barbatio, the Alamanni “for fear of danger had taken to flight, barely escaped and returned to their homes, not without tears and lamentations.” Earlier in the sentence Ammianus described Barbatio as a coward. We cannot trust this characterization, because according to Ammianus’ account, Barbatio often conspired against Julian, of whom he was jealous; however, the characterization in Ammianus’ narrative need not be true to fulfill its rhetorical purpose. Furthermore one cannot escape the double insult of the barbarians being cowardly and running away, but also being afraid of a commander who himself is a coward. The reader also senses that this group of barbarians was not especially formidable; a Roman commander who was a coward would surely have had other faults, so these barbarians were overwhelmed and put to flight by the least of Rome’s military commanders. Ammianus includes the additional details of “barely escaped” and “not without tears and

---

26 16.2.6 “…troops of savages kept making attacks on him, he sometimes, fearing that they might be in greater force, strengthened his flanks and reconnoitered; sometimes he took advantage of suitable ground, easily ran them down and trampled them under foot, capturing some who in terror gave themselves up, while the remainder exerted all their powers of speed in an effort to escape. […]barbaros in se catervatim ruentes partim, cum timeret ut ampliores, confertis lateribus observabat, alios occupatis habilibus locis decursu facili proterens, non nullos pavore traditos cepit, residuos in curam celeritatis omne quod poterant conferentes.]

27 17.6.2 “…quae periculi metu se dedit in fugam, aegre dilapsa lares suos non sine lacrimis reviseret et lamentis.”
lamentations” to make this instance stand out among all the other instances of the Alamanni running when the tide of battle turns against them.  

6. Undisciplined, Stupid or Incompetent: For the late Roman audience, it seems that it was not enough to have the Alamanni be uncivilized cowards, because Ammianus also provides numerous examples of the Alamanni being stupid or incompetent. This characterization serves two main purposes: Alamannic incompetence makes Roman discipline and competence seem better and more efficacious; Alamannic stupidity makes it seem like they deserve their fates and maybe are not so scary after all. The examples are almost comical: “And they [the Alamanni] would nearly have annihilated them [the Romans], had not the shouts that they suddenly raised brought up the reinforcements of our allies.” In other words, the barbarians are too stupid or undisciplined to keep quiet. If they had kept quiet (in other words, if they had acted more Roman), they could have overcome the Romans, but they could not contain their childish enthusiasm. This also provides an example of the Alamannic lack of discipline and order—a proper Roman general can keep his soldiers in line, can compel them to obey orders, but the barbarians, through foolishness, sabotage their own attacks.

---

28 Further examples of the cowardly Alamanni: 16.12.50-1, “But as they fell in uninterrupted succession, and the Romans now laid them low with greater confidence, fresh savages took the places of the slain; but when they heard the frequent groans of the dying, they were overcome with panic and lost their courage. [51] Worn out at last by so many calamities, and now being eager for flight alone, over various paths they made haste with all speed to get away.” As soon as the barbarians realize that their success will not be as quick and easy as they planned, they begin to balk, but what drives them to flight is the groans of their dying comrades. Their courage, based only in haughty pride, is quickly overcome by their fear and panic; 18.2.14 “the panic-stricken kings and their peoples… shuddering with fear, took to their heels in all directions; and their unbridled anger now laid aside, they hastened to transport their kindred and their possessions to a greater distance.” Their cowardice overwhelms their anger; 27.2.6 “the Germans stood amazed, terrified by the fearful sight of the gleaming standards.” The battle has not yet begun, but the Alamanni are terrified merely at the Roman standards; 27.10.10 “…need for quick action made this plan advisable: that Sebastianus with his men should seize the northern part of the mountains, which (as we have said) had a gentle slope, in order that, if fortune should so decree, they might with little trouble strike down the Germans as they fled.” One might suggest that the Alamanni were so well-known for fleeing from battle with Romans that the Romans considered and counted on their flight in their battle plans.

29 16.2.10 “…adorti paene delesent, ni subito concitus clamor sociorum auxilia coegisset.”
Above I discussed barbarian aversion to cities and permanent dwellings and how Ammianus uses that characteristic as a mark of Alamannic uncivility. Here also the Alamanni try to besiege a city and fail: “Finally, after a month the savages withdrew crestfallen, muttering that they had been silly and foolish to have contemplated the blockade of the city.” Ammianus chooses very interesting words here, *stulte* being something I associate with naïve childhood. Ammianus also gives the barbarians some interesting self-awareness: they are telling themselves that they had been silly and foolish, as though the barbarian’s defeat (by a wall!) had been a foregone conclusion, not just to the Romans who know better, but to the barbarians themselves, who were aware of their “foolishness” (a dismissive word in English and the Latin) but still stubbornly kept at it for a whole month.

What effect does this description have on the reader? I imagine burly, bearded men slowly walking away from the walls, ruefully shaking their shaggy heads, a stark contrast to clean-shaven and uniformly armored Romans steadfastly manning the walls. Ammianus gives me the impression of competent, adult Romans who have merely to stack bricks together to stymie the slow-witted barbarians. In the whole month that the Alamanni idled outside of the walls, did it never occur to them to hurl a big rock at the walls? To dig underneath it? To do anything but wait for it magically to crumble? Apparently not. Even if they had thought of any of the siege technology available at this time, Ammianus’ Romans surely would have prevented them from making any headway, because the lasting impression this line has on the reader is not that the Alamanni could not break down Roman walls. The lasting impression is that the Alamanni are too stupid to do anything to their advantage, and the highest achievement of their

---

30 16.4.2 "Post tricesimum denique diem abiere barbari tristes inaniter stulteque cogitasse civitatis obsidium mussitantes."
31 Elton 1996: 82, took Ammianus’ characterization to heart when he said that “if confronted with walls, barbarians would often sit around outside for a few days, then give up in disgust.”
wits is when they realize that their venture was doomed from the start. Ammianus seems almost to delight in pointing out anecdotes where the Alamanni acted foolishly because he includes so many of them in his history. \(^{32}\)

7. Animal imagery: Another striking feature of Ammianus’ treatment of the barbarians is his consistent use of animal terms and imagery to describe these subalitems. \(^{33}\) He literally dehumanizes them. \(^{34}\) The Roman reading this would not see the Alamanni as people but as a wild nuisance, \(^{35}\) one which might be tamable and could be useful to Rome \(^{36}\) or one which is just dangerous and needs to be eradicated. \(^{37}\) If the people that the Romans are fighting are not

\(^{32}\) 16.12.1 “…the kings of the Alamanni…approached the city of Strasburg, thinking that Caesar had retired through fear of the worst, whereas he was even then busily employed in his project of completing the fort.” The Alamannic kings must have been pretty stupid not to notice that Julian was fortifying the very fort they were preparing to attack. The Alamanni had made use of scouts in Ammianus’ reports before, so why are they absent here? Their absence makes the Alamanni seem very foolish; 18.2.1 “some districts of the Alamanni were hostile and would venture on outrages unless they also were overthrown after the example of the rest.” This statement implies that past experience with the Romans would be insufficient to prevent the Alamanni from attacking, and that Julian would have to make examples of some; 27.1.6 Upon taking a Roman standard, “the barbarians with insulting cries and dancing with joy frequently raised on high and displayed.” There is no moderation in their celebration, and they do not keep the standard for long. 16.12.26, when Roman soldiers surprise Alamannic warriors bathing, combing their hair and drinking, cf. Matthews 2007: 313.

\(^{33}\) 14.10.14 “he who…of his own accord passes under the yoke”; 15.4.9 referring to the Alamanni, “gnashing their teeth [frendendo]”; 16.11.9 “[The Romans] came to a neighbouring island and landing there they butchered everyone they found, men and women alike, without distinction of age, like so many sheep”; 16.12.6 Julian “was forced with only a few (though brave) troops to meet swarming tribes [populositibus occurrere cogebatur]”; 16.12.11 Julian’s speech: “If anyone should grant us the ability to pass through all this comfortably, what are we to do when the enemy’s swarms [rauentibus hostium] rush upon us, refreshed as they will be with rest and food and drink?”; 27.2.1 “maiorem barbarorum plebem”

\(^{34}\) Barnes 1998: 258, “Ammianus’ animal comparisons usually have a highly negative connotation” (109) and also notes that “although the historian tends to regard barbarians as at least half bestial by nature, he does not apply animal similes indiscriminately to all non-Romans” (110), as he never refers to the Persians, for example, as bestiae. Blockley says the same: such imagery “is almost entirely absent when dealings with the Persians are narrated” (231). Matthews goes further and says that Ammianus’ use of animal imagery to describe hostile forces is connected to the Classical view of man’s rationality as that which separates him from animals. This allows Ammianus to compare the Roman intellectual tradition to the “un-human, the excessive or irrational.”

\(^{35}\) Blockley 1997, observes that the difference between Roman and barbarian is “fixed by the use of wild animal imagery…such imagery pervades the history when it deals with relations between the Romans on the one hand, and the Alamanni and Goths on the other.”

\(^{36}\) 17.10.10 “So these kings, who in times past were inordinately puffed up with pride, and accustomed to enrich themselves with the spoils of our subjects, put their necks, now bowed down, under the yoke of Roman dominion, and ungrudgingly obeyed our commander, as if born and brought up among our tributaries.” “Ita reges illi tumentes quondam inmaniter rapinisque ditescre endi adsueti nostrorum Romanae potentiae iugo subdidere colla iam domita et velut inter tributarios nati et educati obsecundabant imperiis ingravate.”

\(^{37}\) 16.5.17 “And as wild beasts accustomed to live by plundering when their guards are slack do not cease even when these guards are removed and stronger ones put in their place, but ravening with hunger rush upon flocks or herds
actually people, then they do not have to be accorded any rights or civility and it makes the two options—to tame them or kill them—seem reasonable.

In order to justify the Roman loss of life and expenditure of resources (not to mention Ammianus’ time devoted to the subject), the Alamanni have to be foes worthy of Rome’s military attention. If the barbarians were complete pushovers (or no more than the stupid and cowardly yet mad and duplicitous animals he has created above), the Romans would acquire little honor in defeating them and significant Roman loss of life against them would be unacceptably embarrassing. Additionally, Ammianus’ favorite emperor Julian would surely not have wasted his time indulging the petty squabbles of an inferior and unprofitable foe, and yet here he is, and in great detail. The building up of the Alamanni also makes their inevitable reversal of fortune that much more impressive.

Ammianus sometimes describes the Alamanni as terrifying or dreadful; however, the subject of the fear seems to be unspecified civilians in Gaul rather than Roman soldiers. This makes sense—if the Roman soldiers were afraid of the Alamanni, that would reflect poorly on them, whereas if civilians are afraid, that is both understandable and supplies a reason for the Roman army to be present and fighting the Alamanni. The fear of the Alamanni felt by Roman civilians builds up the ferocity of the Alamanni without detracting from the courage of the Roman army, an important distinction that Ammianus takes care to make. I provide two examples:

-16.2.7, “the fear of the widespread bands of savages [diffusae multitudinis barbarae metu] was such, that entrance to the city was vouchsafed only after anxious debate.” The barbarians are

without regard for their own lives: /Utque bestiae custodum negligentia raptu vivere solitae ne his quidem remotis adpositisque fortioribus absesserunt, sed tumescentes inedia sine respectu salutis armenta vel greges incursant;/ cf. Whittaker 1994: 159.
so frightening that an entire walled city in Gaul will not admit Emperor Julian without scrupulous verification. Ironically, this statement comes only one sentence after Ammianus severely diminishes the Alamanni by describing them fleeing from their own engagement as fast as they can, or surrendering in terror.

-27.1.1 “the Alamanni, after the sad losses and wounds which they had suffered from their frequent battles with Julianus Caesar, having at last renewed their strength (which yet did not equal its old vigour), and being an object of dread for the reasons which we have mentioned above, were already overleaping the frontiers of Gaul.”

Here the Alamanni are both people that were soundly defeated by Julian (so soundly that they have yet to regain their former numbers), and also an object of dread—Ammianus implies that the barbarians do not need to be at full strength to be dreadful, and they are already inspiring terror by roaming through Gaul. To someone under Roman protection in the provinces, just the thought of a people so war-like and aggressive enough to transgress the boundaries enforced by the legions would have been terrifying, and here the Alamanni are actually doing it, have actually crossed the borders, making unsafe what was secure. The lasting impression is mixed, however, because Ammianus takes care to mention that the Alamanni are not at their full strength, which implies that it would be easier for the Romans to defeat them this time around than it was at the previous Roman victory.

If Ammianus needed only to provide a convincing excuse for the Roman army to continue engaging the Alamanni, their terrorizing of a Roman province would surely suffice. However, Ammianus spends a considerable amount of ink convincing his reader that the Alamanni are not just barbarian enemies, but also adversaries worthy of the Empire’s prolonged

38 “...Alamanni post aerumnosas iacturas et vulnera, quae congressi saepe Iuliano Caesari pertulerunt, viribus tandem resumptis licet inparibus pristinis, ob causam expositam supra Gallicanos limites formidati iam persultabant.”
attention (and his own verbal prolixity). For a Roman historian to refer to a barbarian leader as “equal” to a Roman seems uncommonly high praise.

At 16.12.5, Ammianus describes King Chonodomarius of the Alamanni as a worthy foe who has defeated “on equal terms” Decentius Caesar, a named Roman military commander (because not all barbarian victories are given over named Roman commanders, I am inclined to give greater weight to this example). Chonodomarius has destroyed many cities and is, therefore, a competent commander himself. He “overran Gaul without opposition” from either Romans or other barbarians, suggesting that he was both first among barbarian chieftains and able to exert authority over his people for long enough to sack “many” cities and “overrun” an entire province. Later in the same book, Ammianus lavishly describes Chonodomarius:

And Chonodomarius, who was in fact the infamous instigator of the whole disturbance, rode before the left wing with a flame-coloured plume on his helmet, a bold man, who relied upon his mighty muscular strength, a huge figure on his foaming steed, he towered with a lance of formidable size; made conspicuous above others by the gleam of his armour, he was both a doughty soldier and a skilful general beyond all the rest.  

Ammianus describes Chonodomarius as a formidable foe, one worthy of Julian’s attention. Scholars have remarked on the arrogance Ammianus attributes to Chonodomarius here.  

39 “For he both met Decentius Caesar on equal terms and defeated him, and had destroyed and sacked many wealthy cities, and for a long time freely overran Gaul without opposition. To strengthen his confidence, there was added besides the recent rout of a general superior in numbers and strength.” *Nam et Decentium Caesarem superavit aequo Marte congressus et civitates erutas multas vastavit et opulentas licentiusque diu nullo refragante Gallias persultavit. Ad cuius roborandam fiduciam recens quoque fuga ducis accessit numero praestantis et viribus.*

40 16.12.24 “Et Chonodomarius quidem nefarius belli totius incensor, cuius vertici flammus torulus aptabatur, anteibat cornu sinistrum audax et fidens ingenti robore lacertorum, ubi arbor proelii sperabatur inmanis, equo spumante sublimior, erectus in iaculum formidandae vastitatis armorumque nitore conspicuus, antea strenuus et miles et utilis praeter ceteros ducor.”

41 Blockley 1977: 222.
Julian defeats so great a commander, Julian’s own status is improved—the better Ammianus makes the Alamannic king look, the better he looks to history as a triumphant leader.\textsuperscript{42}

In another battle, Ammianus implies parity between the Romans and Alamanni: “…the Romans, on seeing the savages at a distance, assailed them with arrows and other light missiles, \textit{which the enemy vigorously returned throw for throw.}”\textsuperscript{43} In the same battle: “But when the forces came to close quarters and fought with drawn swords, our men's lines were broken by the foe's fiercer onset, and found no means either of resisting or of acting bravely” (line 4). For a time, the barbarians outclass the Romans. Ammianus might have been relating historical truth, that at some points during the battle the Alamanni had the Romans ‘on the ropes’, but writing the tipping of the scales against the Romans (temporarily) rhetorically heightens tension in the narrative. The reader wonders if the Romans will prevail and is driven to continue reading in order to find out. Even if they know that the “good guys” will inevitably triumph,\textsuperscript{44} the inclusion of a point at which they \textit{might not} is exciting, and Ammianus certainly was not so dry an author as to censor drama where he found it.

For example, in 27.10.13-4: “Then with bitterness of spirit on both sides the conflict was essayed with levelled lances; \textbf{on one side soldiers more skilled in the art of war, on the other...}

\textsuperscript{42} Other examples of Ammianus building up the Alamanni or specific Alamannic commanders: 29.4.2 “But among many other cares, [Valentinian’s] first and principal aim was to capture alive by violence or by craft King Macrianus, just as, long before, Julian took Vadomarius; for Macrianus, amid the frequent changes in the policy followed towards him, had increased in power, and now was rising against our countrymen with full-grown strength.” Even though Macrianus has a treaty with Rome, Rome’s distraction has allowed this Alamannic king to become strong enough to threaten Rome’s interests, and become a more dangerous and worthy foe; 30.3.3 “…they set before him the alleged savagery of the kings bordering on Gaul, and most of all of Macrianus, who was formidable, and (as was well known) had been left unsubdued, and would actually attack even fortified cities.” Macrianus grows as a threat (although Seager 1999:597, says Ammianus’ portrait of Macrianus “verges on caricature”); 18.2.10 The Alamanni are described as “keeping guard with watchful diligence,” praise that one would expect to go to the Romans. The Romans do get past the Alamannic guards, and are more impressive because they did not just evade barbarian guards, but guards who were diligently watching—the Romans are just that good.

\textsuperscript{43} 27.1.3 “…\textit{quae illi reciprocis iactibus valide contorquebant.}”

\textsuperscript{44} One assumes that the literate Roman who could afford to obtain a copy of Ammianus’ \textit{Res gestae} would have sufficient knowledge of current events to know the results of the battles.
the savages, fierce but reckless, joined in hand-to-hand conflict...the foe took courage and resisted, and the contest continued with mighty struggles, the fortune of battle being for a long time undecided, while dire death and mutual destruction accompanied the fighting.” Ammianus implies that barbarian ferocity was equal to Roman skill in this battle, equal enough that the outcome was undecided for a long time. The question of who will defeat whom is both narratively exciting and makes it even more impressive when the Romans finally defeat the Alamanni—as usual in Ammianus’ reports, they “were thrown into confusion by the impetuosity of the Romans, and, disordered from fear, the foremost were mingled with the hindermost, and as they turned and fled they were pierced through by our javelins and pikes. At last, in panting and exhausted flight they exposed to their pursuers their hams, calves and backs.”

Ammianus provides a side-by-side comparison of Alamannic vs Roman soldiers at Strasburg:

[47] For in a way the combatants were evenly matched; the Alamanni were stronger and taller, our soldiers disciplined by long practice; they were savage and uncontrollable, our men quiet and wary, these relying on their courage, while the Germans presumed upon their huge size. [48] Yet frequently the Roman, driven from his post by the weight of armed men, rose up again; and the savage, with his legs giving way from fatigue, would drop on his bended left knee and even thus attack his foe, a proof of extreme resolution.


46 27.10.15, “Disiecti denique Romanorum ardore metuque turbati, miscentur ultimos priim, dumque in pedes versi discendent, verrutis hostilibus forabatur et pilis. Postremo dum anheli currunt et fessi, pandebant sequentibus poplites et suras et dorsa.”

It is noteworthy that Ammianus describes the Romans and Alamanni as “evenly matched.” It
seems an un-patriotic assessment. If the Roman audience thought of it as such, it could be
explained by Ammianus’ responsibility to be an impartial historian (if the Romans were better
than their foes every single time, an astute reader might become suspicious). Narratively, to
begin a comparison in this way heightens tension, because if both sides are evenly matched the
outcome is not certain. Apparently this rhetorical device is effective even when the reader knows
the final outcome of the battle. Additionally, one wonders why Ammianus would bless the
Alamanni with equal comparison to the Romans unless either it was the historical truth or unless
it served a narrative purpose. One would expect a Roman writer to praise his side at the
conditional expense of the foes. I would argue that, as we have seen before, praising the
Alamanni does praise the Romans, because the Romans achieve victory over this formidable
adversary. The implication is that anyone could defeat a mediocre foe; defeating a foe with
whom you are “evenly matched” on the field is a victory much grander and worthy of praise.

The specific details that Ammianus notes in his comparison are revealing. The Alamanni
are stronger, taller, savage, uncontrollable and huge, all physical descriptions over which an
individual has only limited control. The Romans are “disciplined by long practice”, quiet, wary,
and rely on their courage. All these qualities have to be taught, drilled and practiced. The
barbarian strengths are not earned (except perhaps strength), they are inborn, a physical quality
that works to their advantage in battle. The Roman strengths are laboriously and painstakingly
earned and fought for, the weak and unworthy cast aside until only the best are left, their
discipline hard-won, their will as much as their swords defeating their foes. Ammianus implies

\[\text{tamen aliquotiens armorum pondere pulsus loco Romanus lassatisque impressus genibus laevum reflectens poplitem}
\text{barbarus subsidebat hostem ultro lacesens, quod indicium est obstinationis extremae.} \]

22
that the size and strength of the Alamanni are less significant than Roman discipline and willpower.

Line 48 is both interesting and ambiguous, describing the actions of each side when they fall. The Roman rises up again when pushed down by the weight of his foes. The barbarian drops to the ground with fatigue, but attacks on his knees, “a proof of extreme resolution.” I am unsure how to interpret this sentence. It suggests that the only thing that would drive a Roman soldier down would be the weight of many enemies pushing him and that he would resume his position when he could, praising and highlighting a Roman soldier’s discipline and resolve to continue fighting. The barbarian, even having fallen exhausted to one knee, fights on. One might expect a writer antagonistic to the barbarians to describe this as mad tenacity and foolish stubbornness. Ammianus, however, describes it almost heroically and leaves little doubt about his personal admiration for this quality. He explicitly calls it “proof of extreme resolution,” a feature more usually associated with the Romans.
Chapter Two: *Virtus et Disciplina*, Ammianus’ Examples of Barbarians being Wild and Undisciplined versus the Romans being Controlled and Contained

Above all else, the Romans were proud of their lawfulness and order. Everything that separated them from the other, the lesser, from Roman interactions with the divine to the way they expanded their empire, led back to lawful order. The law restrained Roman expansion and Roman aggression, tempered their righteous rage. After centuries of Roman restraint had resulted in (relative) peace and prosperity, a Roman historian like Ammianus would naturally have been proud of that quality in himself and his countrymen. Emphasizing Roman restraint or *disciplina* served two purposes: it stressed the feature that had made Rome great and continued to do so, and it accentuated the most fundamental difference between the Romans and everyone else, especially the Germanic barbarians. Where the barbarians were wild and undisciplined (enumerated and discussed in chapter 1), the Romans consistently triumphed by being the opposite.

J. E. Lendon describes a fascinating conflict in the Roman military mind. On one hand he identifies *virtus*, martial courage, as an age-old, competitive root value of the Romans.[^48] *Virtus* made epic heroes in Homer and early Republican history, it made careers in the Middle Republic. On the other hand was *disciplina*, “a brake to overly aggressive behavior.”[^49] Roman history abounds with examples of the glory *virtus* can win, but also what happens when *virtus* goes unchecked by *disciplina*.[^50] “The Romans had two contradictory sets of imperatives, both the heroic ethos of the single combatant and the stern code of *disciplina*. This latter did not just

[^50]: Lendon 2005: 177, relates the story of Titus Manlius Torquatus who executes his victorious son “not for cowardice, but for misplaced courage.”
coexist with the ethos of single combat but was exactly set against it.” Lendon argues that the combination and conflict between *virtus* and *disciplina*—when the mix was right—was what made the Roman army so reliably successful. As the empire grew and the army changed to reflect evolving needs, aristocratic Roman involvement in the army shifted from finding glory in *virtus* to finding glory and acclaim in commending and successful exertion of *disciplina*. As the Romans continued to outsource more and more of their army to non-Roman auxiliaries, they were seemingly content to let the Roman legionaries compete for *disciplina* and let the auxiliaries fight and compete for *virtus* partially because *disciplina* was easier to teach and condition than *virtus*.

Ammianus often praises Roman leaders for their discipline and consideration and he credits their victories with their measured forethought. Often the most praised are also the most disciplined, as we see with Emperor Julian. Ammianus’ treatment of Julian is very positive, and paints the emperor in a flattering and sympathetic light. For example, in Book 14 when Julian is explaining to his soldiers why they should not attack the Alamanni just yet, Ammianus reports him saying:

‘This I, being cautious, prudent, and an advisor of what is expedient, think ought to be granted to them (if I have your consent), for many reasons. First, to avoid the doubtful issue of war; then, that we may gain friends in place of enemies, as they promise; again, that without bloodshed we may tame their haughty fierceness, which is often destructive to the provinces; finally, bearing in mind this thought, that not only is the enemy vanquished who falls in battle, borne down by weight of arms and strength, but much more safely he who, while the trumpet is silent, of his own accord passes under the yoke and learns by

---

52 Lendon 2005: 312.
54 Lendon 2005: 252.
55 Lendon 2005: 257.
experience that Romans lack neither courage against rebels nor mildness towards suppliants.’

This passage tells us many things: first, Julian is the sort of emperor who would rather not fight, rather not risk Roman lives, without utmost need—an impressive display of disciplina, holding back his own ambition and manly aggression because he is charged with protecting the Roman soldiers not just from unnecessary battle, but also from their own zeal. Second, Julian is the sort who would rather make ‘friends’ of the barbarians than slaughter them, not only to safeguard his soldiers but because “he who…of his own accord passes under the yoke” is “vanquished” just as surely as one killed with swords, and with better results for everyone. If the Romans can convince the barbarians to submit, then the Romans will not have to lose any soldiers in a battle, they will have more living barbarians to be their allies, and the prestige of the Romans will be increased because they will have subdued mighty enemies without spilling a drop of blood. Third, Julian tells his army that they can “tame their haughty fierceness/ ut incruenti mittemus ferociae flatus,” a phrase which shows that he believes the barbarians to be haughty (implying both that the Romans are not, and that the barbarians’ pride is misplaced) and that the Romans have the power/authority/disciplina to turn them from their natural insubordination and “tame” them, like oxen at the plow.

In another speech to his army before engaging the Alamanni at Strasburg, Julian reminds them that “while it is proper that young men should be energetic and daring, they should also

56 14.10.14 “Quam ut cunctator et cautos utiliumque monitor, si vestra voluntas adest, tribui debere censeo multa contemplans. Primo ut Martis ambigua declinentur, dein ut auxiliatores pro adversariis adsciscamus — quod pollicentur — tum autem ut incruenti mitigemus ferociae flatus perniciosos saepe provinciis, postremo id reputantes quod non ille hostis vincitur solus, qui cedit in acie pondere armorum oppressus et virium, sed multo tuti etiam tuba tacente sub iugum mitititur voluntarius qui sentit expertus nec fortitudinem in rebellis nec lenitatem in supplices animos abesse Romanis.”
(when occasion requires) be docile and circumspect.” Here Julian describes Lendon’s conflict between *virtus* and *disciplina*. It is proper for the young men in the army to show their *virtus* and be aggressive, but they should listen to Julian, their agent and enforcer of *disciplina*, when occasion requires (whenever Julian tells them to).

Another example of Ammianus inviting a comparison between Julian and the Alamannic leaders: “…suddenly there was heard the outcry of the German infantry, mingled with indignation, as they shouted with one accord that their princes ought to leave their horses and keep company with them, for fear that they, if anything adverse should occur, abandoning the wretched herd, would easily make shift to escape.” Julian is at the front of his army, holding his soldiers back through example and willpower, whereas the Germans have to pressure their leaders to fight with them and not cower at the back of the line, where they could cut and run if the battle started to go against them. The barbarian soldiers do not trust their leaders not to abandon them, whereas the Roman soldiers respect and trust their leader Julian so much that they wait for his permission to engage. The conclusion of this interaction is that the Romans are good and trustworthy, and the barbarians are self-serving and treacherous even to their own people.

---

57 16.12.10 “*Ut enim in periculis iuventutem inspignam esse convenit et audacem, ita cum res postulat, regibilem et consultam.*”

58 16.12.34 “*subito Alamannorum peditum fremitus indignationi mixtus auditus est unanimi conspiracyone vociferantium relictis equis secum oportere versari regales; ne, siquid contigisset adversum, deserta miserabili plebe facilem discedendi copiam reperirent.*”

59 A fear that is justified in 16.12.58, where Chonodomarius had boats stashed to take him to safety: “While this was going on, King Chonodomarius found means to get away by slipping through the heaps of corpses with a few of his attendants, and hastened at top speed towards the camp which he had boldly pitched near the Roman fortifications of Tribunci and Concordia, his purpose being to embark in some boats which he had sometime before got ready for any emergency, and hide himself away in some secret retreat. *[Dum haec aguntur, rex Chonodomarius reperta copia discedendi lapsus per funerum struæ cum satellitibus paucis celeritate rapida properabat ad castra, quae prope Tribuncos et Concordiam munimenta Romana fixit intrepidus, ut escensis navigiis dudum paratis ad casus ancipites in secretis se secessibus amendaret.]***
Additionally, where the savages are motivated primarily by fear, the Romans are motivated by love. In the Roman world, everything could be rationally explained and dealt with. Someone who acted through fear was showing themselves to be irrational, uncivilized and superstitious—in fact, this same split is seen in Roman religion, where religio was right and correct cultivation of the divine, a lawful relationship with the gods, whereas superstition was ill-controlled fear of the gods, something that disrupted the balance between men and gods and impeded the maintenance of society. The fear that motivates the barbarians to follow their leaders is fickle and, more often than not in Ammianus’ report, compels the barbarians to run away rather than fight.

Continuing to show that the Romans are superior to the barbarians that they are fighting, Ammianus says that the Romans were “inferior in number (though equal in strength)” and through “skillful art” look like they are as numerous as their enemy. The “equal in strength” implies that Roman training and discipline can overcome superior barbarian numbers. Ammianus takes advantage of every opportunity to mention the discipline of the Roman leaders and soldiers: before an engagement with the Alamanni, “at the command of the emperor and his generals, the well-disciplined soldiers stood fast, waiting for the raising of the banner, which was the signal that it was the fit time to begin the battle.” Ammianus repeats this specific praise so often that it almost becomes a trope: the brave, controlled Romans mastering their manly aggression for the good of the Empire and for love and obedience to their Emperor. By repeating this, Ammianus compels the reader to equate these qualities with the Roman soldiers, which was

---

60 18.2.5 “It is evident from clear indications that the savages through fear, and the Romans through love for their commander, at that time served the public welfare. [idque claris indiciis apparet ea tempestate utilitati publicae metu barbaros oboedisse, rectoris amore Romanos.]

61 27.2.5

62 27.10.9, “Signis ilico fixis ex more, cum undique ad arma conclamaretur, imperio principis et ductorum stetit regibilis miles, vexillum opperiens extollendum: quod erat oportune subeundae indicium pugnae.”
probably intentional. Roman military training stressed order and discipline, so both the soldiers themselves and the Roman civilians would have thought of the two—Roman soldiers and disciplined men—as one and the same. But if they were equal, why is Ammianus so reliably redundant? To further emphasize both the goodness and rightness of the Roman, and the wrongness and essentially un-Roman-ness of the enemy.

There is always the threat of the Romans devolving into the barbarian, should they lose their *disciplina*. Ammianus includes examples of the consequences of Roman commanders being unable to exert their will and *disciplina* over their troops. Ammianus describes how Valentinian was “robbed of his glory” when he could not compel his soldiers to be silent and not cause mayhem. Ammianus stresses that the loss was not Valentinian’s fault or the fault of his officials, but solely the fault of the undisciplined soldiers, and Ammianus further laments the sad frequency of such disobedience.\(^6\) The lesson here is brutally simple: the Roman commander who does not control his men fails in his objective and wins no glory.

---

\(^6\) 29.4.5-6 “…a large force of cavalry was ordered to precede them under command of Theodosius, that nothing might be unobserved… but he was prevented by the continuous noise made by his men; for although he constantly commanded them to abstain from plundering and setting fires, he could not make them obey. For the crackling flames and the dissonant shouts awakened the [barbarian]king's attendants, and suspecting what had happened, they placed him in a swift wagon and hid him in a narrow pass of the precipitous hills. Valentinian was robbed of this glory, not by his own fault or that of his generals, but by the indiscipline of the soldiers, which has often caused the Roman state heavy losses; so, after reducing the enemy's territory to ashes for fifty miles, he returned sadly to Treves. [*extento strepitu suorum est inpeditus quibus adsidue mandans, ut rapinis et incendiis abstinerent, ipsetrare non potuit. Ignium enim crepitu dissonisique clamoribus satellites excit, idque, quod acciderat, suspicati, carpento veloci inpositum regem angusto aditu circumfactis collibus abdiderunt. 6 Hac Valentinianus gloria defraudatus nec sua culpa nec ducum sed intemperantia militis, quae dispendiis gravibus saepe rem Romanam adflxit, ad usque quinquagesimum lapidem terris hostilibus inflammatis, redit Treveros maestus.*]
Chapter Three: The Romans lead the Alamanni from Unwarranted Pride to Submission and Humility

Ammianus often employs narrative reversal in his conversations about the barbarians, especially when it comes to the barbarian’s pride leading to their downfall at the hands of the superior Romans. At every engagement, the barbarians go in convinced of their victory, and, to paraphrase the idiom, the bigger they are, the harder they fall to their adversaries. The journey from haughty pride to submission happens in one of two ways: either the barbarians speak proudly and strut around but are reminded without battle that they are better off submitting to the Romans, or they engage the Romans in battle, armed with hubris and taunts, and are mightily defeated.

In several instances, Ammianus described barbarian “dread” of the Romans. This implies both that the Romans were a force to be feared (which any military would want) and that the barbarians were, in fact, scared of them. Because we have nothing from an Alamannic perspective, we cannot know to what extent the Alamanni or other barbarian communities lived in fear of Roman attack. It could be that Ammianus’ narrative is only an invented, self-congratulatory narrative, and that Ammianus includes several mentions of the fear of Rome’s enemies to make his Roman readers feel superior to their foes and feel proud of their army, in which they may have served or their sons might be serving. It is more likely to be a combination of the two: those unfortunate enough to meet Rome on the battlefield were afraid, and victorious Roman reports of conflict exaggerated the fear of the enemy.

---

64 Blockley 1977: 224, proposes that Ammianus is the only late antique historian who built his narrative around this pattern. In the same article Blockley suggests that Ammianus was trying to make a comparison between Chonodomarius’ hubristic behavior at Strasburg and Emperor Valens’ behavior at Adrianople twenty-one years later (224-8).
Ammianus habitually puts speeches in the mouths of the emperors, even when he was not present actually to record them. Often when the emperor speaks to his army about the barbarians, he reminds them that the barbarians are—and should remain—afraid of the Romans. When Julian speaks to his men, he says, “The kings and peoples of the Alamanni, in dread of the rising progress of your glory, which fame, growing greatly, has spread abroad even among the dwellers in far off lands, through the envoys whom you see with bowed heads ask for peace and indulgence for past offences.” Julian’s words say plainly that the barbarians are afraid of the Romans, but they further imply that the Alamanni sense that the Romans will only become greater through victory. The “rising progress of your glory” must come at the defeat of the Alamanni and other barbarians. In the midst of battle, even when both sides are otherwise evenly matched, Ammianus reports that the barbarians are “terrified …by the din, by the neighing of horses, and by the blare of trumpets.” Every time the Alamanni retreat or flee from battle with the Romans, they are described as terrified.

One imagines that occasionally the barbarians would remember their history and try to engage with the Romans off the battlefield. When they do this, Ammianus often describes them as being uncharacteristically compliant. In one instance, the Alamanni recognize when they are getting “above themselves” and meekly seek out the Roman emperor to apologize. Julian reminds his army that “the envoys whom you see with bowed heads ask for peace and indulgence for past offences.” Ammianus’ Julian does not just tell his soldiers that the Alamanni come in peace, but he describes them physically, with bowed heads. The gesture of

---

65 14.10.14, see also footnote 56.
66 27.10.13, “per fremitus territos et equorum hinnitus et tubas.”
67 14.10.14, see also footnote 56.
submission could be assumed from their stated mission (asking for peace and indulgence) but Ammianus makes sure that the reader can visualize the Alamanni physically submitting.

When Julian reconstructed a fortress built initially by Trajan Ammianus reports that, “When the enemy saw these preparations rapidly made for their destruction, they quickly assembled, **dreading** the completion of the work, and **with prayers and extreme abasement** sent envoys and **sued for peace**.” The barbarians had been harassing Julian and his army for the preceding months and, after Julian completes repairs on a fort in Alamannic territory, which they interpret as “made for their destruction,” they sue for peace. They ask for mercy not just with the normal effacement one would expect from people pleading for their lives, but with “extreme” abasement and prayers, as though they knew that they, themselves, could do nothing to fight the Romans and their fortress, and that only divine intervention or Julian’s intervention could help them. To Ammianus’ Alamanni, the fortress is purpose-built to destroy them—they do not seem to think that the fortress could be used to protect the people inside. All that they see in the building is their own defeat and destruction.

Later Ammianus describes King Hortarius holding captive Romans, and after being overwhelmed by Julian’s army and their ferocity, agreeing to submit. Hortarius’ reversal is extreme, and Ammianus writes him as though he thought his world was ending, begging and making oaths, utterly overcome. Hortarius is far from the only king to be so astounded.

---

68 17.1.12, see also footnote 14.
69 17.10.7 “The king Hortarius was overwhelmed by these calamities, and when he saw the numerous legions and the ruins of his villages which they had burned down, now fully convinced that the final wreck of his fortunes was at hand, he too begged for pardon and under the solemn sanction of an oath promised that he would do what might be ordered. [His malis perculsus rex cum multiplices legiones, vicorumque reliquias cerneret exstorurum, ultimas fortunarum facturas adesse iam contemplatus oravit ipse quoque ventam, facturum se imperanda iurandi exsecratione restitutere universos promisit.]”
70 18.2.15 “Macrianus and Hariobaudus, kings and own brothers… perceiving the ruin that threatened them, had come with anxious minds to sue for peace [venerant pacem anxiis animis]”; 18.2.17 Macrianus was “amazed at the
When the barbarians do not have the wisdom or presence of mind to remember their past defeats at the hands of the Romans, Ammianus reports that they are consistently proud, haughty and boastful and describe themselves in this way. In Ammianus’ report, the Alamanni are either cowed and afraid, or haughty and destined to be taught the error of their ways.

Just as Ammianus is delighted to see the barbarians put in their place, so too, he writes, the Roman soldiers are eager to repay Alamannic pride with humility enforced at the tip of a sword. The Alamanni begin their battle with the Romans proud, bold and elated, after having ambushed some Romans just before. However, right after Ammianus described their “boastful threats” (15.4.9), suddenly the course of battle shifts, “the Roman targeteers suddenly sallied forth.” Even though Ammianus describes some hesitation in the Roman lines (line 10), the Romans triumph and scatter the Alamanni “with broken ranks” (line 11), to be slain at leisure.

variety and splendour of the arms and the forces, things which he saw then for the first time, and pleaded for his subjects.”

They “tossed their heads proudly” (16.12.2); King Chonodomarius “lifting up his brows in pride” (16.12.4); “not one of them doubted that their side would be victorious” (16.12.35); Valentinian “considered by what devices he might break the arrogance of the Alamanni and their king Macrianus [Alamannorum et Macriani regis frangeret fastus], who without limit or measure was confusing the Roman state by his reckless disturbances” (28.5.8). Of course we must keep in mind that we do not and cannot know what the Alamanni really thought of themselves—we see only Ammianus’ reports, and what to him seemed like pride could have been an expression of something else to the Alamanni.

15.4 [9]“As a result the Alamanni, elated in spirit, came on more boldly the following day against the Roman works; and while the morning mist obscured the light they rushed about with drawn swords, gnashing their teeth and giving vent to boastful threats. But the Roman targeteers suddenly sallied forth, and when they were driven back by the opposition of the enemy’s battalions, and were at a standstill, with one mind they [the barbarians] called out all their comrades to the fight. [10] But when the majority of Romans were terrified by the evidence of the recent disaster, and Arbetio hesitated, believing that the sequel would be dangerous, three tribunes sallied forth together: Arintheus, lieutenant-commander of the heavy-armed bodyguard, Seniauchus, leader of a squadron of the household cavalry, and Bappo, an officer of the veterans. [11] They with the soldiers under their command, devoting themselves on behalf of the common cause, like the Decii of old, poured like a torrent upon the enemy, and not in a pitched battle, but in a series of swift skirmishes, put them all to most shameful flight. And as they scattered with broken ranks and encumbered by their haste to escape, they exposed themselves unprotected, and by many a thrust of swords and spears were cut to pieces. [(9)Ob quae Alamanni sublatis animis ferocius incedente die prope munimenta Romana adimente matutina nebula lucem strictis mucronibus discurrebant frendendo minas tumidas intentantes. Egressique repente Scutarii cum obiectu turmarum hostium repercussi stetissent, omnes suos consipiratis mentibus ciebant ad pugnam. (10) Verum cum plerosque recentis aerumnae documenta terrerent et intuta fore residua credens haeret Arbetio, tres simul exsiluere tribuni, Arintheus agens vicem armaturam rectoris et Seniachus qui equestrem turmam comitum tuebatur et Bappo ducens Promotos. (11) Qui cum comissis sibi militesibus pro causa communi velit propria Deciorum veterum exemplo instarque fluminis hostibus superfusi non iusto proelio sed discursionibus rapidis universos in fugam coegere foedissimam. Qui dispersi laxatis ordinibus dumque elabi properant impediti corpora nudantes intacta gladiatorum hastarumque densis icibus trancabantur.]
The Battle of Strasburg occupies most of Book 16, chapter 12 and shows in great detail the elements I briefly outlined above: Ammianus’ habitual disdain for the proud barbarians, the admirable qualities of Julian and the Romans, and most perfectly how the Alamanni begin the day proud and anticipating an easy victory and end it defeated and humbled. Blockley observes that Ammianus stresses the importance of this battle rhetorically in several ways, such as “portentously” naming the seven Alamannic kings who attack Julian, assonance and alliteration, vivid language, elaborate topoi and even a comparison of Julian to Sulla. Ammianus clearly spends considerable time crafting the battle, so we should pay special attention to how he described Julian’s adversaries. Ammianus builds up the Alamanni and describes how highly they think of themselves (which, itself, serves “to increase their savagery, their barbar feritas”), a skeptical contrast to Julian’s demonstrated moderation and discipline. The Alamanni at the end of the book—and battle—bear no resemblance to those in the beginning.

Before the battle Ammianus casts the Alamanni as proud, “tossing their heads” (line 2), and so full of themselves that “they sent delegates to Caesar and imperiously enough commanded [pro imperio] him to depart from the lands which they had won by valour and the sword” (line 3), rejecting Julian’s authority and casting him forth from (in the Roman point of view) his own land. The first reversal is Julian’s immediate and care-free laughter: “But he, a stranger to fear, neither lost his temper nor felt aggrieved, but laughing at the presumption [fastus] of the savages, he detained the envoys until the work of fortification was ended and remained steadfast in the same attitude of resolution” (line 3). The barbarians’ taunts and threats

---

73 Seager 1999: 589; Drinkwater 2007: 239. “According to Ammianus, Strasburg was a triumph of Roman discipline and Julian’s inspired leadership over Germanic fury.”
72 Blockley 1977: 221.
75 Blockley1977: 222.
do not offend or threaten Julian, but amuse him. Ammianus, through Julian, dismisses the threats of the “presumptuous” barbarians and carries on. Julian knows, seemingly from the beginning, that he will vanquish the Alamanni, and treats them no differently—precisely the opposite effect that the Alamannic kings were hoping for with their head-tossing demands.

Line 4 describes Julian’s correspondent, the leader of the Alamanni: “Now King Chonodomarius was raising general disturbance and confusion, making his presence felt everywhere, without limit, a leader in dangerous enterprise, lifting up his brows in pride, being as he was conceited over frequent successes [ardua subrigens supercilia ut saepe secundis rebus elatus].” The “disturbance and confusion” that Chonodomarius raises invites the reader to compare him with Julian, who always remains in control of his army and allows for no confusion (an example of barbarian wildness versus Roman order and disciplina). The attention Ammianus gives to Chonodomarius’ pride and how he expresses it (physically with the uplifted eyebrows here and verbally in line 3) is notable, and the repetition indicates that Ammianus wants his reader really to acknowledge the barbarian king’s arrogance.

Although the arrogance is not entirely unwarranted, the way in which Ammianus rhetorically emphasizes Chonodomarius’ pride suggests to the astute reader that it is disproportionate to his achievements. Further, the sequence ‘pride, pride, successes of which to be proud, pride’ invites the reader to anticipate an epic reversal in fortune: Chonodomarius and the Alamanni may have won some recent victories over the Romans, but their mean successes have given them inflated egos and Julian (Ammianus’ hero) lies in wait to bring them down.

---

76 Seager 1999: 33, describes this reaction as “entirely admirable.”
77 16.12.5, see also footnote 39.
Ammianus tells us that the Alamanni here had engaged with some of Julian’s soldiers before. The inclusion of this detail serves a dual purpose: it provides an excuse for the Alamanni to be more confident and therefore rise higher before Julian throws them to the ground; it also narratively leads to Julian’s “worry and anxiety” which increases tension in the reader and makes Julian seem more impressive when he defeats the Alamanni.

Ammianus reports that, immediately before the battle, “not one of [the Alamannic leaders] doubted that their side would be victorious” and the following sentence encapsulates the differences between the two sides:

So, when the call to battle had been regularly given on both sides by the notes of the trumpeters, they began the fight with might and main; for a time missiles were hurled, and then the Germans, running forward with more haste than discretion, and wielding their weapons in their right hands, flew upon our cavalry squadrons; and as they gnashed their teeth hideously and raged beyond their usual manner, their flowing hair made a terrible sight, and a kind of madness shone from their eyes. Against them our soldiers resolutely protected their heads with the barriers of their shields, and with sword thrusts or by hurling darts threatened them with death and greatly terrified them.

Ammianus uses an old, familiar phrase to describe the barbarian charge: “more haste than discretion/properantes cito quam considerate cursu”—discretion is a power that only the Romans possess, and their use of it makes them victorious. Ammianus uses animalistic imagery with the barbarians “gnashing” their teeth and appearing “hideous”, and again not only do they “rage” but they rage in excess of “their usual manner” of raging, so much that Ammianus is

78 16.12.6 “For the Alamanni, on seeing the devices of their shields, realised that these soldiers, who had given ground before a few of their brigands, were the men in fear of whom they had at times in the past scattered and fled with heavy losses, before coming to close quarters. [Alamanni enim scutorum insignia contuentes norant eos milites permisse saepe suorum latronibus terram, quorum metu aliquotiens, cum gradum conferrent, amissis pluribus abiere dispersi.]”

79 16.12.36 “Dato igitur aenatorum accentu sollemniter signo ad pugnandum utrimque magnis concursum est viribus. Propilabantur missilia et properantes cito quam considerato cursu Germani telaque dextris explicantes involvere nostrorum equitum turmas frem dentes innania eorumque ultra solitum saevientium comae fluentes horrebat et eluebat quidam ex oculis furor, quos contra pertinax miles scutorum obicibus vertices tegens ejectansque gladios vel tela conscipians mortem minitantia perterrebat.”
compelled to add that “madness shone from their eyes.” However, despite all this savagery and insane ferocity, the Romans are “resolute.” The Romans have surprised their adversaries by not reacting in the expected way to the Alamannic ferocity. The result for this engagement is that the Romans continue to threaten the Alamanni with death but they also remain “resolute” and un-intimidated, and the Romans’ lack of fear “greatly terrified” the Alamanni.

The reader cannot help but compare the two sides and acknowledge that the Romans are superior, noble in their restraint, civilized and measured against wild hoards of savages, and no amount of flying spittle or raging taunts will make the Romans break formation. How admirable these Romans, and how pitiable and distasteful the doomed barbarians! The themes of “Aleman arrogance and confidence and Roman caution, prudence, and trust in the gods” dominate Ammianus’ account of this battle.  

The Alamanni continue to suffer in Ammianus’ description of the battle until “they were overcome with panic and lost their courage… Worn out at last by so many calamities, and now being eager for flight alone, over various paths they made haste with all speed to get away… and anyone there present will admit that it was a means of escape more prayed for than expected.” Gone now are their taunts and tossed heads, their raging savagery, left in the bloody dust beneath the broken bodies of their kin. The Alamanni are so overwhelmed that Ammianus tells us that successful escape was more a matter of divine intervention than an

---

80 Blockley 1977: 223.
81 16.12.50-1 “…auditoque occumbentium gemitu crebro, pavore perfusi torpebant. (51) Fessi denique tot aerumnis et ad solam deinceps strenui fugam per diversos tramites tota celeritate egredie firmabat… quod voti magis quam spat fuisse fatebitur quilibet tunc praesens.”
expected result. Now it is time for the Romans to instill even more fear into the hearts of their foes, driving them to flight and sparing no one in their unappeasable blood lust.\textsuperscript{82}

The foreshadowed and expected reversal in this section is the pride of the Alamanni prefacing their inevitable and embarrassing defeat. The once-haughty barbarians, “thinking that by their skill in swimming they could save themselves from the dangers, committed their lives to the waves,”\textsuperscript{83} prefer to drown than to be cut down by the Romans.

King Chonodomarius, having failed in his cowardly escape, “was driven to the utmost fear and surrendered of his own accord”\textsuperscript{84} with 200 of his men, a far cry from the proud, strutting and head-tossing proven leader of before. Ammianus says as much:

And as the savages are by nature humble in adversity and overbearing in success, subservient as he now was to another’s will he was dragged along pale and abashed, tongue-tied by the consciousness of his crimes — how vastly different from the man who, after savage and woeful outrages, trampled upon the ashes of Gaul and threatened many dire deeds.\textsuperscript{85}

Chonodomarius represents here all of the barbarians in conflict with Rome: he had some successes which both made him over-bearing and also got the attention of the Romans. Once he got their attention, the Romans dragged him down to where he belonged, he who threatened and destroyed so much. The symbolic value of Chonodomarous and his humiliation should not be underestimated. Ammianus even suggests that Chonodomarius felt shame at his actions—“abashed” and conscious of his crime. One thinks of a rebellious child having been caught in some small crime about to endure a thoroughly-earned lecture and punishment. There are no

\textsuperscript{82} 16.12.52
\textsuperscript{83} 16.12.55 “quidam nandi peritia eximi se posse discriminibus arbitrati animas fluctibus commiserunt.”
\textsuperscript{84} 16.12.60 “Quibus visis compulsus ad ultimos metus ultro se dedit solus egressus...”
\textsuperscript{85} 16.12.61 “Utque nativo more sunt barbari humiles in adversis disparesque in secundis, servus alienae voluntatis trahebatur pallore confusus claudente noxarum conscientia linguam, inmensum quantum ab eo differens qui post feros lugubresque terrores cineribus Galliarum insultans multa minabatur et saeva.”
more traces in Ammianus’ narrative of Chonodomarius’ pride or even self-worth. In front of Julian he “first bowed down and then humbly prostrated himself on the ground...he begged for forgiveness in his native tongue.”\textsuperscript{86} The last that Ammianus says of the once-great and fear-inspiring King of the Alamanni is that he “died from senile decay,”\textsuperscript{87} surely the most ignoble and un-heroic of deaths. The reversal for Chonodomarius cannot be any greater, and Ammianus deliberately reduces him to the lowest end he could give to a barbarian king, under house-arrest and evoking pity more than fear.

In addition to the Battle of Strasburg, Ammianus includes several more examples of the Alamanni and reversals in fortune from pride to humility. In the case of Suomarius, his reversal from overwhelming pride to begging submission happens in a mere sentence.\textsuperscript{88} Converse to the expected barbarian haughtiness Ammianus described him meeting with Julian (1) on his own initiative, (2) with the attitude of a suppliant and (3) eventually submitting completely and begging for peace.

King Hortarius, defeated by Julian, “under the solemn sanction of an oath promised that he would do what might be ordered. Being bidden to restore all prisoners — for that was insisted on with special earnestness — he did not keep faith but held back a large number and gave up only a few.” Hortarius feigned his meekness and lied under oath. He proudly thought that he

\textsuperscript{86} 16.12.65 “Qui primo curvatus, deinde humi suppliciter fusus gentilique prece veniam poscens”
\textsuperscript{87} 16.12.66 “morbo veterni consumptus est.”
\textsuperscript{88} 17.10.3 “Now in the midst of these delays Suomarius, king of the Alamanni, of his own initiative met the Romans unexpectedly with his troops, and although he had previously been haughty and cruelly bent upon harming the Romans, at that time on the contrary he thought it an unlooked-for gain if he were allowed to keep what belonged to him. And inasmuch as his looks and his gait showed him to be a suppliant, he was received and told to be of good cheer and set his mind at rest; whereupon he completely abandoned his own independence and begged for peace on bended knee. [Inter has tamen moras Alamannorum rex Suomarius ultro cum suis improviso occurrit, ferox ante saeviensque in damna Romana sed tum lucrum existimans insperatum, si propria retinere permetteretur. Et quia vultus incessusque supplicem indicabat, susceptus bonoque animo esse iussus et placido, nihil arbitrio suo relinquens pacem genibus curvatis oravit.]”

39
could get away with it, but Julian, “roused to righteous indignation,”
encourages Hortarius to relent, and “Finally the king was summoned by Caesar to an interview and reverenced him with trembling eyes [trementibus oculis]: and overcome at the sight of the conqueror, he was forced to accept these hard terms…” Hortarius was proud when he first took up arms against the Romans, he pretended to acquiesce after Julian had killed many of his men but arrogantly thinks he can deceive Julian, and finally is humbled to the greatest extent, forced to agree to rebuild all the buildings his tribe destroyed and forfeit his own life if he tried to renege again.

Ammianus ends this episode by summarizing:

So these kings, who in times past were inordinately puffed up with pride, and accustomed to enrich themselves with the spoils of our subjects, put their necks, now bowed down, under the yoke of Roman dominion, and ungrudgingly obeyed our commander, as if born and brought up among our tributaries. And after this conclusion of events the soldiers were distributed among their usual posts and Caesar returned to winter quarters.

Judicious application of Roman discipline here tames the savage beast, and the reversal from pride to ungrudging obedience seems a necessary part of that process.

---

89 17.10.8, “ad indignationem iustam Iulianus erectus.” The word “righteous” here reinforces the narrative that Julian is always right and that the barbarians have done him a grievous wrong, as though the audience would doubt that.

90 17.10.7-9

91 17.10.10 “Ita reges illi tumentes quondam inmaniter rapinisque ditescere adsueti nostrorum Romanae potentiae iugo subdidere colla iam domita et velut inter tributarios nati et educati obsecundabant imperiis ingravate. Quibus hoc modo peractis disperso per stationes milite consuetas ad hiberna regressus est Caesar.”

92 Further examples: 27.1.3 “The Germans, merely uttering boastfully vain threats and shouts, were pressed so hard by the victor that they could not gather up their arms, which were lying about here and there, nor form in line, nor rally for a stout resistance. Therefore most of them fell, run through by pikes and swords, except such as took to their heels and found shelter on the winding and narrow paths.” The Romans ambush the Alamanni, who are caught even without weapons and put to flight. This reversal is so complete (beginning not just from pride, but from unprepared barbarians who are armed only with vain threats) that it is almost humorous; 30.3.4 “And he [Macrianus] arrived enormously puffed up in every way, as if he expected to be the supreme arbiter of peace, and on the day set for the conference, with head high uplifted, he stood at the very edge of the Rhine while the clashing shields of his countrymen thundered all about him.” This display lasts until Valentinian takes the field “amid the brilliance of flashing standards” (line 5) and Macrianus agrees to negotiate.
I observed that there are only four outcomes when the barbarians are losing a battle: capture, surrender, death or flight. Perhaps those are the only four outcomes for anyone, but rarely does Ammianus mention the Romans surrendering or being captured, whereas he often describes these outcomes for the Alamanni. Are these outcomes mentioned again and again because the content and repetition made the barbarians seem worse, seem cowardly, inept, and deserving of their ignoble fates? Or is that the nature of military history? It may be a combination of both—in battle there are only so many ways for the fighting to end, and the repetition of barbarian flight, surrender or death both makes them inferior to the Romans and sets them up as incompetent and cowardly. Throughout it all, the Romans look better and better.

In addition to describing the epic and moralistic reversals with the Alamanni, Ammianus also writes reversal into his narrative at times. For example, in 16.2.6 the Alamanni attack, but soon after are fleeing, dead, or surrendering in “terror.” The next sentence shows a completely different and un-humbled barbarian: Julian “proceeded among many dangers to Troyes, reaching there so unlooked for, that when he was almost knocking at the gates, the fear of the widespread bands of savages was such that entrance to the city was vouchsafed only after anxious debate.” Immediately after the Romans show the Alamanni to be cowards, they are suddenly a force that inspires so much terror that the city of Troyes will not admit Emperor Julian. The narrative reversal here is confusing and, to some extent, undermines Ammianus’ narrative authority.

93 16.2.6, “sometimes [Julian] took advantage of suitable ground, easily ran [the barbarians] down and trampled them under foot, capturing some who in terror gave themselves up, while the remainder exerted all their powers of speed in an effort to escape [alios occupatis habilibus locis decursu facili proterens, non nullos pavore traditos cepit, residuos in curam celeritatis omne quod poterant conferentes]”; 16.2.13, “some were captured, others were slain in the very heat of the battle, and rest got away, saved by recourse to speed.[captis non nullis, aliis in ipso proelii fervore truncatis residui discessere celeritatis praesidio tecti].”
94 See footnote 25.
95 16.2.7 “Proinde certiore iam spe ad resistendum inguenitibus confirmatus per multa discrimina venit Tricasas adeo inperatus ut eo portas paene pulsante diffusae multitudinis barbarae metu aditus urbis non sine anxia panderetur ambage.”
It is with this ambiguity in mind that we continue to the next chapter discussing where the habitual duality that Ammianus has so emphatically created breaks down in specific instances and what it means for our interpretation of Ammianus’ work.
Chapter Four: Where Ammianus’ Duality Breaks Down: Civilized Barbarians, Savage Romans, and Unexpected Sympathy

In addition to the above, Ammianus includes several examples that contradict what he has worked so hard to establish, namely that the Alamanni are unreservedly bad and the Romans are consistently superior. He occasionally praises the Alamanni and provides examples of civilized barbarians (specifically those fighting for the Romans). He also describes Roman soldiers acting savagely, sometimes directly because of the actions of the Alamanni, and only held in check by the dominance and skill of their commanders. I will relate examples of this and discuss the conflict between these often poignant and emphatic stories and Ammianus’ main narrative.

I. Alamanni acting civilized or being described positively

Ammianus at one point describes the Alamanni as “a most warlike people,” a surprisingly neutral statement from a Roman perspective. It was Alamannic bellicosity that attracted the Romans to them and compelled them to make some tribes of the Alamanni foederati and auxiliaries in their army. When Ammianus describes the Cornuti and Bracchiati, Alamanni who fight on behalf of the Romans, he is very complimentary. Ammianus describes them heroically, and lavishly elaborates on their intimidating battle-cry. The only difference between

---

96 18.2.9 “pugnacissima plebe”
97 16.12.43 “But as soon as they came to close quarters, the contest continued a long time on equal terms. For the Cornuti and the Bracchiati, toughened by long experience in fighting, at once intimidated them by their gestures, and raised their mighty battle-cry. This shout in the very heat of combat rises from a low murmur and gradually grows louder, like waves dashing against the cliffs. Then a cloud of hissing javelins flew hither and thither, the dust arose with steady motion on both sides and hid the view, so that weapon struck blindly on weapon and body against body. [Sed postquam comminus ventum est, pugnabatur paribus diu momentis. Cornuti enim et Bracchiati usu proeliorum diuturno firmati eos iam gestu terrentes barritum ciere vel maximum: qui clamor ipso fervore certaminum a tenui susurro exoriens paulatinque adulescens ritu extollitur fluctuum cautibus inlosorur: iaculorum deinde stridentium cerebritate hinc indeque convolante pulvis aequali motu adsurgens et prospectum eripiens arma armis corporaque corporibus obrudebat.]”
the un-heroic, savage Alamanni and these Alamanni is that these ones are fighting on the correct side. They have overcome some of their savage nature to fight with the civilized Romans, and that being the case, Ammianus can describe their barbarian traits as positive and heroic. In the next sentence Ammianus returns his scorn to the enemy barbarians, “thrown into disorder by their violence and anger, flamed up like fire.” Ammianus does not have to specify that these are the enemy Alamanni; his mention of their angry violence marks them as the inferior barbarians. Just as the negative description identifies foes, so a positive description marks Rome’s barbarian allies. Again, the allied Alamanni are described positively and heroically, helping their beleaguered friends with all of their speed and power—just like a Roman would do. Ammianus provides a back-and-forth comparison of good versus bad barbarians, making it clear that the good ones are on the Roman side and proving that some Alamanni can, apparently, overcome their barbarous natures, submit to Rome’s authority, and do some good. Ammianus does the same thing with Burgundians allied with Rome. The common thread seems to be that if the barbarian tribe is allied with Rome and doing what the Romans tell it to do, they are good

---

98 16.12.44 “violentia iraque inconpositi barbari in modum exarsere flammarum.”
99 16.12.45 “On learning this, the Batavians, with the "Kings" (a formidable band) came at the double quick to aid their comrades and (if fate would assist) to rescue them, girt about as they were, from the instant of dire need; and as their trumpets pealed savagely, they fought with all their powers. [Quo cognito opitulatum conturalibus suis celeri cursu Batavi venere cum regibus, formidabilis manus, extremae necessitatis articulo circumventos, (si iuvisset for) e reuptura, torvumque canentibus classicis adulis viribus certabatur.]”
100 Valentinian rewards someone with the rank of tribune and command of “a troop of the Alamanni which at that time was distinguished for its numbers and its strength” 29.4.7 Ammianus explicitly compliments these Alamanni for being numerous and strong, and implicitly compliments them by saying they were being given as a reward for good service—a reward was ineffective if it were not something good.
101 28.5.9 ”And the emperor finally decided, after favouring first one plan and then another, to bring about their destruction through the Burgundians, a warlike people, rich in the strength of countless young warriors, and therefore a cause of terror to all their neighbours. [Seditque consilio alia post alia imperatori probanti, Burgundios in eorum excitari perniciem, bellicosos et pubis immensae viribus adfluentes, ideoque metuendos finitimis universis.]” See also Elton 1996: 188.
and praiseworthy. Ammianus credits the salvageable state of the Burgundians with much-diluted Roman blood, but the Alamanni have no such boon.

Even when history gives Ammianus an opportunity to prove again that the Alamanni are untrustworthy, he does not necessarily take it. For example: “While this was being done with all haste, Hortarius, a king previously allied with us, not intending any disloyalty but being a friend also to his neighbours, invited all the kings, princes, and kinglets to a banquet and detained them until the third watch, prolonging the feasting after the native fashion.” Ammianus might be praising the Alamannic king Hortarius here—perhaps Hortarius extended the banquet intentionally to give the Romans more time to plan their ambush. He also stresses that Hortarius intended no disloyalty (implying that Hortarius’ actions here were treacherous) which suggests that Ammianus is generally praising the barbarian king in this sentence. Here Ammianus could either have focused on the disloyalty perpetrated by Hortarius, reusing the well-worn “treacherous barbarian” trope, but instead reassures his readers that this particular barbarian was honest in his allegiance with Rome (though previously, he had tried to be dishonest).

---

102 25.9.11 “…the Burgundians know that they are descendants of the Romans from ancient times; and…they frequently quarrelled with the Alamanni about salt-pits and boundaries. [prima quod iam inde a temporibus priscis subolem se esse Romanam Burgundii sciunt, dein quod salinarum finiumque causa Alamannis saepe iurgabant.]"

103 18.2.13 “Dum haec celerantur, Hortarius, rex nobis antea foederatus, non novaturus quaedam, sed amicus finitimis quoque suis, reges omnes et regales et regulos ad convivium conrogatos retinuit epulis ad usque vigiliam tertiam gentili more extentis.”

104 Kagan 2001: 172, extends Hortarius the benefit of the doubt: “Little did Hortarius realize…that Julian had sent a force of 300 scouts across the river. When these encountered the departing guests, a skirmish erupted in which some of the servants were killed. Hortarius, therefore, was trying to preserve a middle position between the Romans and the Alamanni.”

105 Additionally: “For since King Vithicabius, son of Vadomarius, who was somewhat weak and sickly in appearance, but valiant and vigorous, again and again kindled the flames of war against us, no efforts were spared to dispose of him by any possible manner of death” (27.10.3). This barbarian king is described very positively, despite his outward appearance, and he must be so, otherwise the Romans would not go to such urgent trouble to kill him. A weak and pitiable foe is not exciting or honorable to conquer and the Romans do not waste their time (nor does Ammianus waste his ink) on unworthy foes.
W. R. Jones wrote that “although Romanitas was a cultural rather than a racial phenomenon, to which provincial peoples could convert by adopting Latin language, the toga, Roman law and religion, and submitting to the Pax Romana, the possibility of acculturation did not diminish the presumed opposition of civilization to barbarism.”¹⁰⁶ When the Romans allowed some barbarian groups to settle on Roman lands and when the Romans enjoyed the benefits of Germanic peoples conforming to Roman values and working and fighting for the Romans, they did not extend the possibility of civilization to the other trans-limes barbarians. Only the barbarians who had submitted to the superiority of the Roman way of life would ever be acceptable, and the real presence of Romanized barbarians did not soften Roman attitudes towards the non-Roman people who had not ‘come around.’ The difference between Romans and barbarians was a “moral barrier”¹⁰⁷ that individual barbarians had to choose to cross in order to be accepted. Some barbarians did this, but most did not.

2. Romans acting Savagely

When discussing the later Roman army, Guy Halsall says that “the impression is given of an army adopting what it thought were barbarian styles and customs, but ones which are very likely to have been inspired by classical ethnic stereotypes rather than actually being imported by the barbarians employed in the army.”¹⁰⁸ While this may be true in reference to the war-cry and the adoption of animal standards and names for units, in Ammianus’ narrative we see no such glorification or Roman adoption of barbarian habits; in fact, when Roman soldiers begin to behave like barbarians, forgetting their years of training and inherent Roman order, disasters

¹⁰⁸ Halsall 2007: 105
occur. At the beginning of the Battle of Strasburg, both the Roman and Alamannic sides of the fight are in a “frenzy” of “savage ferocity.” It is unclear whether both sides are increasing the others’ battle-lust, but Ammianus again had a chance to contrast the usually disciplined and self-possessed Romans with the savage wildness of the barbarians, and he does not. A few sentences later, Ammianus describes Roman soldiers interrupting their leader, gnashing and grinding their teeth. Here Ammianus explains the animalistic behavior shown by the Romans as “eagerness for battle,” but the admiring explanation does not change the fact that Ammianus uses bestial words to describe the otherwise civil Romans. The contrast is especially sharp, as three sentences earlier Julian urged them to restrain their aggression for their own good. It seems that in the heat of anticipated battle, the only thing that separates the savage barbarians from equally savage Romans is the discipline and skill of their commander.

In the following sentence, praetorian prefect Florentius advises that they engage the Alamanni and,

...fight with hope of success while the savages were standing massed together; but if they [the barbarians] scattered, the resentment of our soldiers, who, he said, are inclined by their native hotness of temper towards insubordination, would be impossible to withstand; for that victory (as they thought) should be

---

109 Seager 1999: 68, “Moderation should be inculcated by a civilized upbringing and education; it can hardly be expected in men deprived of such advantages... arrogance, savagery and madness are exactly what one would think to find in barbarians—barbara feritas, barbarica rabies are virtual tautologies—but not in Romans.” The Romans could only emulate the warrior aspects of the barbarians, and then only to a point—if they went beyond the “construct” (Halsall 2007, p. 109) of the acceptable barbarian, they had gone too far.

110 16.12.2 “savage ferocity was arousing the frenzy of battle on every side [barbara feritate certaminum rabiem undique concitante].”

111 16.12.13 “The soldiers did not allow him to finish what he was saying, but gnashed and ground their teeth[dentium infrendentes] and showed their eagerness for battle by striking their spears and shields together...”; similar behavior is seen at 27.10.7: “…the soldiers, more and more eager for battle, ground their teeth in a threatening way, as if they had already come upon the savages.”

112 16.12.10 “Ut enim in periculis iuventem inpugram esse convenit et audacem, ita cum res postulat, regibilem et consultam. Quid igitur censeo, si arbitrium adfuerit vestrum, iustaque sustinet indignatio, paucis absolvam.”
wrested from their hands they would hardly endure without recourse to the last extremity.\textsuperscript{113}

There is a threat implicit in this description: if the soldiers are not allowed to act on their “native hotness of temper” and aforementioned “eagerness for battle,” they will turn on their commanders in resentment, making the commander’s position very precarious. The soldiers in this frame of mind see only one outcome: their victory. In this way, their attitude is very similar to that of the Alamanni at the beginning of this battle—proud and convinced of their inevitable and inescapable triumph. They feel they are owed this achievement (they would not endure that victory being wrested from their hands, to re-phrase Ammianus), and the only factor which differentiates their attitude from the hubristic and incorrect attitude of the Alamanni is their Roman-ness.\textsuperscript{114}

At the end of the Battle of Strasburg, Ammianus describes the blood-lust of the Romans:

Moreover, the gracious will of an appeased deity was on our side, and our soldiers slashed the backs of the fugitives; when sometimes their swords were bent, and no weapons were at hand for dealing blows, they seized their javelins from the savages themselves and sank them into their vitals; and not one of those who dealt these wounds could with their blood glut his rage or satiate his right hand by continual slaughter, or take pity on a suppliant and leave him.\textsuperscript{115}

The Romans described here hack and slash at the fleeing Alamanni, and when their swords are of no more use they take their enemies’ weapons from their dying hands and throw them at those

\textsuperscript{113} 16.12.14 “\textit{pugnandum esse censentis dum instarent barbari conglobati, qui si diffluxissent, motum militis in seditiones nativo calore propensioris ferri non posse aiebat, extortam sibi victoriam, ut putavit, non sine ultimorum conatu graviter toleraturi.”

\textsuperscript{114} 16.12.33, Julian addresses soldiers clamoring for battle, foreseeing that they might “by their riotous actions break discipline.” Here the disciplina of Julian is overcoming the frenzied virtus of his soldiers, keeping them from ruin. Sometimes when there is no commander, or if the road to the battle is tormented with obstacles, the Roman soldiers simply become savage: “…when they finally, by long and circuitous detours, reached the spot, every man in the army, wild with anger, joined in setting the fields on fire and raiding flocks and men; and if they resisted, they butchered them, without compunction” 17.10.6.

\textsuperscript{115} 16.12.52 “\textit{Aderatque propitiati numinis arbitrium clemens et secans terga cedentium miles cum interdum flexis ensibus feriendi non suppeterent instrumenta, ipsis barbaris tela eorum vitalibus inmergebat, nec quisquam vulnerantium sanguine iram explevit nec satiavit caede multiplici dexteram vel miseratus supplicantem abscessit.”
who flee. Furthermore, none of the Roman soldiers could sate their blood lust, no matter how many barbarians they killed or whether their foes were fighting, fleeing, or begging for mercy. Modern sensibilities demand that we condemn this sort of behavior, but we cannot assume that Ammianus wrote this intending that effect. We do not know if Ammianus intended to praise the soldiers, or if this sort of boundless violence was expected of every Roman soldier after engagement with the enemy. Does the strength of the bloody ferocity displayed by the Roman soldiers explain why Julian exerts so much of his will in restraining it until the time is right?

Perhaps the reader is not meant to praise or condemn the behavior of the soldiers; perhaps they and we are meant to accept it and remember: do not goad the Romans to war, for their mercilessness is both voracious and unswayable. Fortunately Julian was apparently able to rein in his soldiers’ ferocious *virtus* before it led them all to ruin, as his men were fully prepared to follow with their swords aloft the fleeing barbarians into the swollen river. Ammianus implies that were it not for the moderating effect of Julian and the “tribunes and higher officers” making their “restraining shouts” the Romans might have acted with more haste than discretion, like mad barbarians. As it is, Ammianus describes the soldiers as “over-eager in pursuit of the enemy,” and the inclusion of the overstatement prevents me from interpreting this as praise for the soldiers: eagerness is acceptable and to be encouraged in a soldier fighting a foe. But to pursue the enemy to one’s own destruction, while also defying orders, goes too far, and with this prose Ammianus seems gently to chastise the soldiers and again raise up Julian in the reader’s mind.

Not all Roman military commanders are as good as Julian. After a Roman tribune kills a captured Alamannic king, Jovinus “angered at this...decided to punish the tribune who had

---

116 16.12.55 “Et quia cursu sub armis concito fugientes miles indefessus urgebat, quidam nandi peritia eximi se posse discriminibus arbitrati animas fluctibus commiserunt. Qua causa celeri corde futura praevieus Caesar cum tribunis et ducibus clamore obiurgatorio prohibebat, ne hostem avidius sequens nostrorum quisquam se gurgitibus committeret verticosis.”

49
ventured to take this action without consulting higher authority; and he would have condemned him to death, if it had not been clear from convincing evidence that the cruel deed had been committed through passion to which soldiers are prone.” The commanding tribune was going to be punished for not waiting for orders (and must be punished, lest his example cause disorder and mutiny), but the anticipated execution was cancelled because the tribune was caught up in soldierly “passion.” This puzzles me, because in other instances we see the iron will and discipline of the army commanders holding in check their soldiers’ aggression, but here the commander Jovinus is essentially giving clemency to everyone involved. Statements like this also reinforce the thesis that the Roman soldiers really are not very different than their barbarian counterparts, and what really separates them is the quality and training of their leaders—when the Romans have a bad leader, they do not wait for or follow orders and a better Roman commander has to take over.

Why would Ammianus share instances when the Roman soldiers were straying perilously close to savagery, or succumbing to it, usually to their ruin? In such a time of uncertainty as the late fourth century, Ammianus’ audience surely would not have been comforted by the idea of the soldiers protecting them not only failing in their duty but also becoming that against which they fought. Ammianus must include the failures of the Roman soldiers because these things happened, and he has promised to write the truth.

3. Barbarian behavior making the Romans act un-Roman

I just discussed how Ammianus does not refrain from sharing examples of the Romans acting savagely, but I distinguish that from Romans acting un-Roman, which I will discuss here.

117 27.2.9 “Ideoque iratus in tribunum animadvertere statuit ausum hoc inconsidera potestate superiore fecisse, eumque damnasset, ni militari impetu commissum facinus atrox documentis evidentibus constitisset.”
In the following examples Ammianus shows the Roman soldiers rejecting what makes them Roman. In one example the Alamanni ambush the Romans and “not one of our men could resist, nor could they hope for any other means of saving their lives than swift flight... [they] straggled here and there in disorderly march, exposing their backs to blows.” The Alamannic attack turns the Roman soldiers into cowards, running for their lives. Not only do they retreat, but they do so in a “disorderly” fashion, thoroughly un-Roman behavior. As we have seen, Roman order and discipline were sometimes the only things that separated Roman from barbarian, and in this case, the Alamanni have erased that distinction and brought the Romans down to their own level. Interestingly, Ammianus does not write the Roman soldiers here as being dishonorable; he even seems to excuse their behavior by calling their route a “mischance, so heavy and unexpected.” Because the attack was so great and so unexpected, the Romans who run are not shamed, and any shame they incur is absolved when, the next day, they “recovered their strength and rejoined each his own company.” Ammianus does not shame the Roman soldiers who run; if anything, the shame falls on the Alamanni, who with their cruelty and merciless ambush un-make Roman discipline.

When fighting the Alamanni at Strasburg, one of the tribunes who is running from the barbarians, upon seeing Emperor Julian coming his way, “stopped, and pale and struck with fear rode back to renew the battle.” This is important because Ammianus shows the barbarians making a Roman tribune and the soldiers who follow him act un-Roman, namely, they make the

---

118 15.4.8 “For the enemy sprang unexpectedly out of their lurking places and without sparing pierced with many kinds of weapons everything within reach; and in fact not one of our men could resist, nor could they hope for any other means of saving their lives than swift flight. Therefore the soldiers, bent on avoiding wounds, straggled here and there in disorderly march, exposing their backs to blows. Very many however, scattering by narrow by-paths and saved from danger by the protecting darkness of the night, when daylight returned recovered their strength and rejoined each his own company. In this mischance, so heavy and so unexpected, an excessive number of soldiers and ten tribunes were lost.”
119 “ita tristi et inopino”
120 16.12.39 “pallore timoreque perculsus ad aciem integrandam recurrît.”
Romans flee from battle like cowards. It is also important to note that the tribune’s fear of Julian is stronger than his fear of barbarians, because as soon as he sees Julian’s standard advancing towards him, he is stricken with “fear” of Julian—either fear of punishment or perhaps fear of the shame at having been caught in cowardly flight—and re-engages the battle that he is supposed to be fighting. Julian’s discipline and the fear he inspires in his own men is stronger than their fear of dying at the hands of the Alamanni.

When the Romans are overcome by the Alamanni, they seem to forget all of their training, and find “no means either of resisting or of acting bravely.” When the Roman commander is killed, they simply flee, as we have seen barbarian soldiers do. In fact a cowardly flight after a confident beginning was so characteristic of the Alamanni that it became a topos, but now the Roman soldiers are shown engaging in the same behavior, going against their training and shame and running in the shameful footsteps their foe. Later in the same book, Ammianus provides an example that tells us that the Romans were superior to the barbarians in this battle and would have escaped without losses had it not been for one cowardly tribune named Balchobaudes. However, if the name Balchobaudes is as Germanic as it sounds, then this passage tells us that a German barbarian leading Roman troops, a man who was both

---

121 27.1.4 “But when the forces came to close quarters and fought with drawn swords, our men's lines were broken by the foe's fiercer onset, and found no means either of resisting or of acting bravely. And when they saw Severianus, who had been thrown from his horse and pierced through by a missile, they were all terrified and put to flight.]

122 27.2.6 “For a while their ardour was blunted, but they quickly recovered and prolonged the fighting to the end of the day; and our vigorously attacking soldiers would have gained the fruit of victory without loss, had not Balchobaudes, tribune of the heavy-armed guard, a man by nature both boastful and cowardly, withdrawn in disorder at the approach of evening. And if the rest of the cohorts had followed his example and left the field, the affair would have come to such a sad ending that not one of our number could have survived to tell what had happened [Quibus hebetatis parumper reparatisque confestim, ad usque diei extimum concertatione protenta validius inminens miles fructum rei bene gestae sine dispensio quaesisset, ni Balchobaudes armaturarum tribunus magniloquentia socordi coalitus, propinquante iam vespera cessisset incondite. Quem si securae residuae cohortes abissent, ad tristes exitus eo usque negotium venerat, ut nec acta nuntiaturus quisquam posset superesse nostrorum.]”
boastful and cowardly, was solely responsible for the losses. Ammianus continues by saying that if the other tribunes had followed Balchobaudes’ poor example, all would have been lost, which tells us that the other (possible ethnically Roman, or at least not-German) tribunes were better and more disciplined. On the other hand, Ammianus does not tell us of Balchobaudes’ ethnic background, and he may be a bad character because of his boastfulness and cowardice, not because of his ethnicity. He was probably not the only non-Roman commander in the Roman army in this battle, so more important to Ammianus and to the battle are the facts that he was a coward, not that he was descended of barbarians. Or is the implication there, and would it have been obvious to Ammianus’ contemporaries?

4. Barbarians described sympathetically

Amidst the constant barrage of charges of inferiority and distasteful traits which Ammianus levels against the Alamanni, at times he also provides us with striking moments of sympathy towards them. At the end of the Battle of Strasburg, Ammianus describes the defeated Alamanni:

And so a great number of them lay there pierced with mortal wounds, begging for death as a speedy relief; others half-dead, with their spirit already slipping away, sought with dying eyes for longer enjoyment of the light; some had their heads severed by pikes heavy as beams, so that they hung down, connected only by their throats; some had fallen in their comrades' blood on the miry, slippery ground, and although their persons were untouched by the steel, they were perishing, buried beneath the heaps of those who kept falling above them.123

Would a 4th century Roman have read this and wept? Would they have mourned such loss of life and turned away in dismay at this harsh and relentless description? Perhaps instead the Roman

---

123 16.12.53 “Iacebant itaque plurimi transfixi letaliter remedia mortis conpendio postulantes, alii semineces labente iam spiritu lucis usuram oculis morientibus inquirebant, quorundam capita discissa trabalibus telis et pendentia iugulis cohaerabant, pars per lutosum et lubricum solum in sauciorum cruore lapsi intactis ferro corporibus acervis superruentium obruti necabantur.”
reader would have delighted in the carnage and salivated at the gory details, vicariously experiencing the righteous carnage through Ammianus’ words. This sentence could be meant as a eulogy to the fallen barbarians who fought for the wrong side and the wrong reasons, written by a Roman who acknowledged the need for the war and loss of life, but still regretted it. It could serve as a warning to other barbarian tribes, although one doubts that many would have had copies of Latin histories to read. It could be a gleeful description of Roman might and mercilessness toward those mad, stupid savages who dared to doubt Rome’s strength, immortalized in this history for aristocratic Romans to read and be proud of.

The “over-eager” Roman soldiers are kept at the banks of a swift-flowing river by the will of the commanders, and watch the following:

[56] As a result it was seen that they stood on the banks and transfixed the Germans with various kinds of darts; and if any of them by his speed escaped this death, he would sink to the bottom of the river through the weight of his struggling body. [57] And just as in some theatrical scene, when the curtain displays many wonderful sights, so now one could without apprehension see how some who did not know how to swim clung fast to good swimmers; how others floated like logs when they were left behind by those who swam faster; and some were swept into the currents and swallowed up, so to speak, by the struggling violence of the stream; some were carried along on their shields, and by frequently changing their direction avoided the steep masses of the onrushing waves, and so after many a risk reached the further shores. And at last the reddened river's bed, foaming with the savages' blood, was itself amazed at these strange additions to its waters.  

---

124 16.12.55, see also footnote 83.
125 Matthews 2007: 247, mentions Ammianus’ use of theatrical imagery when discussing the emperors and notes that “late Roman society at large displayed a taste for the theatrical, for pictorial gesture and pageantry, they is perhaps their most obvious distinguishing feature in relation to the early empire.” Unfortunately he does not discuss this quote in any great detail, noting only that the Rhine is compared to “a piece of decorative stage scenery” and that Ammianus’ use of the word alveus for the river is “in this context a rather poetic usage” (297).
126 16.12.56-7 “(56) Unde id observatum est ut marginibus insolentes confoderent telorum varietate Germanos, quorum siquem morti velocitas subtraxisset, iacti corporis pondere ad ima fluminis subsidebat. (57) Et velut in quodam theatrali spectaculo aulaeis miranda monstrantibus multa licebat iam sine metu videre, nandi strenuis quosdam nescios adhaerentes, fluitantes alios cum expeditioribus linquentur ut stipites, et velut lactante amnis
We must ask why Ammianus includes this vivid description, and why it is so vivid. The words, compelling even in the translation, provide remarkable detail which is concentrated here in a degree not seen elsewhere when Ammianus talks about the Alamanni. Certainly the Roman reader would have been impressed with Ammianus’ eloquence, but that does not explain why he spends it on the Alamanni, the inferior enemy.

In another instance, while not being overtly sympathetic to the Alamanni, Ammianus ignores an obvious chance to disparage them. Following an attack by the Romans on Alamannic territory, “as is apt to happen in times of doubt and confusion, they were panic-stricken by the raid of our cavalry...” Ammianus phrases the barbarians’ panic as something that anyone would feel under the circumstances. He does not make it an ethnic flaw that the Alamanni fled and were panic-stricken at the attacks of the Roman army; surely it would happen to anyone in such times. Because Ammianus does not take the opportunity here to further paint the Alamanni as cowardly, we must interpret this as an example of Ammianus being an impartial historian, and giving the Alamanni in this situation the benefit of the doubt, imploring the reader to empathize with the barbarians. He makes their panic pathetic, and thereby makes the Alamanni empathetic. It is an attitude that Ammianus does not often show, and we cannot ignore it when he does.

Likewise when Valentinian is ambushed by the Alamanni Ammianus has an opportunity to decry the barbarians for their cowardly ambush, but instead he treats the occurrence neutrally, only highlighting the danger in which the emperor found himself by telling us that the body of his chamberlain was never recovered.

violentia vorari quosdam fluctibus involutos, non nulos clipeis vectos præruptas undarum occursantium moles obliquatis metibus declinantes ad ripas ulteriores post multa discrimina pervenire. Spumans denique cruore barbarico decolor alveus insueta stupebat augmenta.”

127 17.1.7 “Ut enim rebus amat fieri dubiis et turbatis, hinc equitum nostrorum adcursu...”

128 27.10.11 “a band of the enemy placed in ambush in a hidden spot would have slain him by a sudden attack, had he not resorted to the last means of safety [devius tendens insidiatricis manus locatae per obliqua subito oppetisset adcursu, ni necessitatis adiumento postremo per labilem limum incitato iumento digressus...]”
Conclusion:

The inconsistencies in Ammianus’ narrative are puzzling. The Alamanni are cowardly, incompetent, bestial and meant for subjugation and also noble and worthy of praise and sympathy. Ammianus seems comfortable writing of them with contempt at one point and compassion the next. Likewise, the Roman soldiers and leaders are paragons of moral virtue, civilization and martial prowess but also separated from the barbarity they despise by only a thin thread of discipline, and Ammianus shows us what happens when it breaks.

We might expect to find a consistent narrative in a chronological history. We expect Ammianus constantly to champion his own people and have the Romans always do right (except when their failure was too great to ignore) and to lay any problems and mistakes on the heads of the untrustworthy barbarians. We expect his depictions of the Alamanni to be universally negative, smug and convinced of Roman superiority in every circumstance. However, in doing so, we do not give Ammianus enough credit for being what he claims to be: an impartial observer of history in which large groups of people do not always conform to one narrative.

No historian can completely cleave herself from the biases and attitudes of her time. The solution must be that Ammianus was an impartial historian by fourth century Romans standards, but not by ours.\textsuperscript{129} He wrote what he saw and what he heard. The final six books of his work, from which many of my examples are drawn, cover the years from 364-78, and they “recount events so recent that Ammianus must have procured his information from such primary sources as official records, eyewitness reports\textsuperscript{130} and personal observation.”\textsuperscript{131} If we trust Ammianus, this

\textsuperscript{129} Crump 1975: 131; Matthews 2007: 465.
\textsuperscript{130} Such as Vadomarius’ report to Ammianus regarding the missive he received from Constantius II to harass Julian’s army (Amm. 21.3-4). Scholars thought that Philagrius had informed Ammianus, but Woods makes a compelling argument to the contrary (Woods 2000: 692).
means that most of the primary sources agreed with common Roman sentiment: that the barbarians were inferior and cowardly and had to be put in their place and that the Romans were superior and always brave and victorious. However, Ammianus must have also encountered and saw fit to include stories about the Alamanni (or the Romans) that did not fit the narrative “agenda.” He told of good barbarians when he had occasion and reason, and though one senses that Ammianus felt shame at it, he also tells of Romans behaving poorly and going against everything that the Romans wanted to be. He plainly did not “spin” his narrative at every opportunity, because to him, that would have been contrary to his mission as a historian and observer of facts. There is undeniable bias in Ammianus’ work, but it is not intentional or malicious.

Today, when a historian (or any writer) writes inconsistently, we expect them to explain them. Ammianus does no such thing regarding the Alamanni, so we must ask why not. It seems unlikely that Ammianus did not realize that the binary distinctions he (and his contemporary society) drew between the Alamanni and Romans were sometimes false, sometimes completely inverted. Ammianus provides numerous examples. Why then does he not explain himself? Perhaps the Roman audience did not see a need for an explanation, or weren’t interested in it. Maybe they did not notice the contradictions.

When recounting the end of Emperor Valens in the Battle of Adrianople in Book 31, Ammianus finds himself with fewer sources than he would like\(^\text{132}\) but he shares all of them instead of choosing one and declaring that to be the truth, or the only explanation, an attitude that Crump attributes to Ammianus’ “inherent honesty” (29). However, other scholars have noted

\(^{131}\) Crump 1975: 23.
\(^{132}\) 31.13.12-6
that Ammianus does omit details that conflict with his narrative about Caesar Julian, all of which suggest that Ammianus could and did pick and choose what sources and details he included in his work. We know about his biased selection for Julian, whereas he is more transparent with Valens, and he does not apply any value to his sources regarding the Alamanni. There is no editorialization, despite the conflict. We must conclude that Ammianus and his audience did not experience any cognitive dissonance in his treatment of the Alamanni. Further, the author and audience were not interested in critically analyzing attitudes towards the Alamanni as we are today.

---

133 Blockley 1977: 230, Ammianus omits stories seen in Zosimus that show activity that would be “considered improper” because it would “reflect badly upon the character of his hero.”
Bibliography


