

AMMIANUS MARCELLINUS ON THE PERSIAN INVASION OF A.D. 359

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IN A.D. 358, AFTER AN ABORTIVE round of negotiations, the Persian king, Shapur II, threatened the Roman emperor, Constantius II, with war if the Romans did not cede to him Mesopotamia and Armenia.¹ By the former he probably meant that part of eastern Mesopotamia, including the fortress-city of Nisibis, which the Persians had ceded to the Romans in 299.² Constantius, of course, rejected the demand, but no invasion took place in 358. In 359, however, the Persians, advised by a renegade Antoninus, who had familiarised himself with the weakness of the Roman defences, launched a full-scale invasion which caught the Romans off their guard; their senior and most experienced general in the East, Ursicinus, had been withdrawn to the imperial court at Sirmium in Pannonia for promotion to the rank of *magister peditum in praesenti*. When news of the Persian preparations reached Sirmium, Ursicinus, who was still on his way there, was ordered to return to the East to oversee the defence, though real power was left in the hands of his incompetent successor as *magister equitum per Orientem*, Sabinianus. The Persian plan of attack was to by-pass the border fortresses such as Nisibis, which they had often in the past attacked without success, and to march straight upon Syria to plunder the rich and defenceless cities of that region. However, the flooded condition of the Euphrates deflected them northwards, and on their way they were provoked into besieging Amida, the major fortress of the area north of the Tur 'Abdin mountains (= Mt Izala). After 73 days they captured the city and destroyed it. But the Persians themselves suffered heavy losses, and, since the season was now advanced (early October), they withdrew to their own territory. A commis-

¹The account of the negotiations is in Amm. Marc. 16.9 and 17.5. Modern discussions (amongst many) by G. B. Pighi, *Nuovi studi ammianeï* (Milan 1936) 131–199; P. Barceló, *Roms auswärtige Beziehungen unter der constantinischen Dynastie (306–363)* (Regensburg 1981) 89–91; R. C. Blockley, "Constantius II and Persia," in *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History* 5 (Brussels, Coll. *Latomus*), forthcoming.

An earlier form of the present paper was given to a seminar at the University of Manchester in May 1986. On that occasion the author greatly benefited from a number of observations and suggestions made by Professor W. C. Brice, whose knowledge of the topography of what was Roman Mesopotamia is first-hand. The referees of this paper for *Phoenix* also made a number of suggestions which have been incorporated. I, of course, claim sole credit for the errors that remain.

²For the treaty see Petrus Patricius frs. 13 and 14 (in *FHG* 4.188 f.). For the date 299 see T. D. Barnes, "Imperial Campaigns, A.D. 285–311," *Phoenix* 30 (1976) 182–186.

sion was established to look into the fall of Amida, and when it admitted some evidence damaging to Ursicinus, the general reacted angrily and was cashiered for his intemperate language.

This is a summary of the standard account of the invasion of 359, based upon the narrative of Ammianus Marcellinus (18.4–19.9 and 20.2), the main source. Ammianus' account has been much criticised on two counts: first, that it is disproportionately long and introduces personal reminiscences of the author (who took part in the war); and second, the authenticity or accuracy of a number of the details has been called into question. Most recently, along the first line of criticism, John Matthews has remarked Ammianus' inclusion of "his exploits, often resembling tales of excitement and adventure reminiscent of a Hollywood screenplay rather than solemn Roman history."³ There are, actually, just four of these exploits in the part of the *History* under discussion, that part in which, more than in any other, Ammianus makes himself prominent as an actor in the events. These are: the flight from Nisibis and Ammianus' brief return to take a lost child to safety (18.6.9–16); a reconnaissance mission across the Tigris into Corduene (18.6.20–7.2); a Persian ambush from which Ammianus escaped into Amida (18.8.4–14); and Ammianus' escape from Amida as the city fell (19.8.5–8). Even in these episodes the excitement, though emphasised, is not worked to excess. Moreover, one of them (the mission to Corduene) holds a significant place in the development of events, while the other three serve to fit the siege naturally into the narrative and guarantee Ammianus' own status as an eyewitness source.

The description of the siege of Amida, the centrepiece of the narrative, has also been criticised for excessive prominence,⁴ the implication being here, too, that the author has been self-indulgent. Although it would be rash to deny that Ammianus' own participation might have led him into overestimating the importance of the siege, historiographically it is justified as one of the rare accounts of a siege written by a participant who had been on the inside of the besieged city. Ammianus himself is careful not to cast his account as a personal memoir, for as soon as he is within the city, the "I," which is used in the eyewitness episodes that precede, is replaced by "we." Furthermore, references to the siege in other writers do suggest that it was regarded as important.⁵ It is, therefore, unnecessary to accept Sabbah's argument to justify the long account as the link which connects the key battles of

³J. Matthews, "Ammianus' Historical Evolution," in B. Croke and Alanna M. Emmett, eds., *History and Historians in Late Antiquity* (Sydney, etc. 1983) 34.

⁴Matthews *ibid.*: "Yet the prominence of the personal memoir [i.e., in the account of Amida] . . . is disconcerting." Cf. G. Sabbah, *La méthode d'Ammien Marcellin* (Paris 1978) 475.

⁵*Cons. Const. a.* 358; Zon. 13.9.30–31; Ephraem *Carm. Nisib.* 4–12 (pp. 81–97); Faust. Byz. 4.20.

Strasbourg, where Julian crushed the Alamanni in 357, and Adrianople, where the Goths destroyed Valens and his army in 378.⁶

Serious criticism of the reliability of Ammianus' account of the Persian invasion began with Thompson's rejection of Ammianus' picture of Ursicinus as an able and long-suffering general, who was hamstrung at every turn by conspirators at court working on the suspicion and timidity of the emperor Constantius.⁷ Thompson argued that Ammianus' picture reflected Ursicinus' view of himself; that he was by no means the paragon of brilliance that he thought he was; and that Constantius handled him with kid gloves and thoroughly appreciated his qualities. Later Rosen went both further than Thompson and in a different direction.⁸ He argued that Ammianus' aims were as much literary as historical, and that he wished to write an account which was exciting and dramatically pleasing and which recalled the literature of classical antiquity through the frequent use of *topoi* and other forms of reference. Finally, Sabbah argued for two purposes which themselves were not entirely compatible: to present Ursicinus' actions during the war in a good light and to emphasise the importance of the siege and defence of Amida. This Ammianus achieved by organising his material in such a way as to separate some of Ursicinus' actions from developments which, in conjunction, could have formed the basis for a critical estimate of the general.⁹ Thus, despite Austin's protests against Rosen,¹⁰ Ammianus emerges as a rather skilful writer who was prepared to take liberties with the truth both for artistic and for personal motives.¹¹ This is a far cry from the older views of a somewhat stuffy and naive, if pompous, writer, who was basically honest and reliable.¹²

⁶Sabbah (above, n. 4) 470 f. In fact, one of the key elements in his argument, that the loss of seven legions at Amida caused Constantius to demand troops from Julian, is apparently contradicted by Ammianus (20.4.2).

⁷E. A. Thompson, *The Historical Work of Ammianus Marcellinus* (Cambridge 1947) 42–55, esp. 47 ff.

⁸K. Rosen, *Studien zur Darstellungskunst und Glaubwürdigkeit des Ammianus Marcellinus* (Bonn 1970) 10–68.

⁹Sabbah (above, n. 4) 472–478.

¹⁰N. J. E. Austin, "In Support of Ammianus' Veracity," *Historia* 22 (1973) 331–335. Rosen's arguments (above, n. 8, 43 f.) against the authenticity of the mission to Corduene are not well-founded, even though some of the details that Ammianus claims to have observed are suspicious. However, his rejection of the information on the flooding of the Euphrates is more persuasive (see below 258, and n. 51).

¹¹The most extreme argument for personal motivation is by T. G. Elliott, *Ammianus Marcellinus and Fourth-Century History* (Toronto 1983). Cf. the more measured and persuasive estimate by R. L. Rike, *Apex Omnium. Religion in the Res Gestae of Ammianus* (Berkeley, etc. 1987).

¹²This opinion, still reproduced in many of the textbooks (cf., e.g., M. Grant, *The Ancient Historians* [New York 1970] 384), presumably derives from the famous appraisal by Gibbon (4.426 [1783 ed.]). Cf. the judgement of J. Gimzane, *Ammien Marcellin, sa vie et son oeuvre* (Toulouse 1889), esp. 398 f.

Ammianus' account of the Persian invasion of 359 is a very self-consciously literary and literate piece of writing, whose debts to the classical models have been thoroughly illustrated.¹³ Ammianus treats his narrative as a unity, prefacing it with a piece of deliberately theatrical writing that both sets the structure for the first part of the account and demands of the listener or reader a particular emotional stance towards those who are cast as the principals, Shapur and Ursicinus, and by extension towards the other actors in the drama.¹⁴ The trumpets of disaster (a favourite metaphor of Ammianus) open the narrative by announcing two scenes (18.4.1–3).¹⁵ First, the Persian king, surrounded by the savage tribes now allied to him,¹⁶ consults the powers below (*tartareis manibus*) and prepares his forces, burning (*flagrans*) to increase his territory at Roman expense. We are then translated to the workshops (*fabrica*) of the Roman court, which are hammering day and night at the anvil (*incudem*), producing not weapons of war, as would have been appropriate to the circumstances, but allegations against Ursicinus to influence the emperor, *suspicax ac timidus*, both to the general's detriment and to the detriment of the Roman state. The instigators of this activity are Eusebius and the court eunuchs, whose intent is not the public interest, but personal aggrandisement and revenge.

The contrast between the determined aggression of the Persian king and the distractive corruption at the Roman court continues throughout what is effectively the preface of the account (18.4.1–6.7).¹⁷ The *protector* Antoninus, having collected detailed information on the disposition of Roman troops and supplies, defects to the Persians (5.1–3), while the courtiers obtain the replacement of Ursicinus as *magister equitum per Orientem* by the inert and incompetent Sabinianus (5.4–5); then Antoninus urges Shapur to overrun Roman Mesopotamia (5.6–8), while Ursicinus is withdrawn to Sirmium (6.1–2); Antoninus, learning of the departure of Ursicinus, urges

¹³The linguistic and stylistic borrowings are indicated in the Budé edition by Galletier, Fontaine, and Sabbah, and in P. de Jonge's *Philological and Historical Commentary on Ammianus Marcellinus XVIII* (Groningen 1980). On the literary and referential nature of the narrative see Rosen (above, n. 8), esp. 51–61, and N. Bitter, *Kampfschilderungen bei Ammianus Marcellinus* (Bonn 1976) 16–54.

¹⁴R. A. MacMullen, "Some Pictures in Ammianus Marcellinus," *Art Bulletin* 46 (1964) 435–455, well illustrates the general theatricality of Ammianus' style of presentation, though his references are to other modes of expression, such as architecture, sculpture, and costume. Ammianus' own love of theatre-similes (e.g., 16.6.3; 12.57; 20.12; 26.6.15; 27.11.12) suggests that the present passage makes a more direct reference to the theatre, though painting or frieze-sculpture are other possibilities (cf. MacMullen 453 f.).

¹⁵See 15.2.1 for another example of trumpets announcing a scene or a development in events (obviously military, but possibly theatrical also).

¹⁶Persian alliance with the Chionitae and Gelani: 17.5.1.

¹⁷The unity and dramatic structure of this part of the narrative are well brought out by Sabbah (above, n. 4, 472 f.). Rosen (above, n. 8, 10) obscures the unity of the structure by treating 18.4 as the proem and dividing the narrative after 18.6.4.

the Persians to strike straight at Syria (6.3–4); then Ursicinus is ordered to return to the East to take command of the war under the nominal leadership of Sabinianus (6.5–7). By the end of this “preface” the characteristics of the two sides are set: Persian vigour, demonic determination, and good planning, against Roman corruption, incompetence, and inertia. The reader is prepared for the coming disasters, and Ursicinus, while returned to the front line of battle, is removed from the line of critical fire, since events have gained a momentum that is clearly beyond his control.

This contrast informs the whole of the rest of the narrative. On the Persian side Shapur, advised by Antoninus at three crucial points,¹⁸ is given prominence, especially during the siege of Amida, where his energy, forcefulness, and ferocity are remarked on a number of occasions. Before the siege began he approaches the city wall, a magnificent figure: “The king himself, mounted on a horse and taller than the rest, rode before the whole army, wearing instead of a diadem a golden image of a ram’s head set with precious stones, exalted too by the various nations and their leaders of diverse ranks who accompanied him” (19.1.3). When assailed from the walls he rages, *quasi in sacrilegos violati . . . templi* (*ibid.* 6); during the fighting itself he rushes into the fray like an ordinary fighting man (19.7.8); and when the final assault begins, he appears *ad potiunda sperata ira et dolore exundans, nec fas ullum oculis habiturus* (8.1), driving on the nations under his command. The siege of Amida itself receives epic treatment.¹⁹ Before it begins, the son of the Chionite king is slain, and the two sides fight over his body like the Greeks and Trojans over Patroclus (19.1.7–9); and on the first day of the siege it is said that the Chionitae, Gelani, Albani, and Segestani each invested the walls at one of the four cardinal points. They march up, backed by elephants, *ultra omnem diritatem taetri spectaculi formidanda* (2.3), and stand before the city all day, *ut fixae [acies] nullo variato vestigio, nec sonitu vel equorum audito hinnitu* (*ibid.* 5).

In contrast, on the Roman side Sabinianus, called a *homunculus* (18.6.8), relaxes amongst the tombs of Edessa (a hit at his Christianity), enjoying entertainment *militari pyrrhice sonantibus modulis pro histrionicis gestibus* (7.7, by which Ammianus probably means, sarcastically, that he drilled his troops as a substitute for watching pantomimes).²⁰ Ammianus says directly that Ursicinus was the only worthy adversary of the Persian king: even if he

¹⁸18.7.10; 10.1; 19.1.1. At each point Ammianus regards the advice as good.

¹⁹The epic treatment of the siege has been remarked by, e.g., Rosen (above, n. 8), and Bitter (above, n. 13, esp. 22 f.).

²⁰The commentary of de Jonge (above, n. 13, 238 f.) partly misconstrues this passage and misses some of its point. The phrase *per Edessena sepulchra* goes closely with *more vitae remissioris fluxius agens* and, while harping upon the Christianity of Sabinianus and the Edesenes as well as the civilian background of the former, implicitly condemns him for not advancing to the war front, as did Ursicinus. It is thus, under the sarcasm, a comment on strategy and

were living in Thule, he should have been sent for, and when the curiae and peoples of the East heard that he was being withdrawn, *iniecta manu detinebant paene publicum defensorem* (18.6.1–2). Yet Sabinianus, who had been chosen to replace him through corruption (clearly implied at 18.5.6, where *venundatae subito potestatis pretium* is said to have been distributed after his appointment), compelled Ursicinus to remain inactive since he was mindful of the instructions that he had received at court. These instructions, which were secret (19.3.2: *clam vero corde retinens* [Sabinianus], *saepe in comitatu sibi mandatum*), seem to have been issued unknown to Constantius, who apparently remained ignorant of the manoeuvres against Ursicinus.²¹ Ursicinus' consequent ineffectiveness during the siege of Amida is emphasised by the simile of the lion not daring to rescue its cubs trapped in a net because it had been deprived of its teeth and claws (19.3.3).

I have dwelt at some length upon Ammianus' literary treatment of his material because, in my view, it is through literary presentation, including the organisation of the narrative, that Ammianus communicates, or rather imposes, his interpretation of events. Although because of his diffuseness (and, I suspect, basic honesty) Ammianus does provide us with some data to support alternative interpretations, his usual approach to his material is, like that of Tacitus, authoritative. Even when he does make direct comments upon events and (more often) persons, these are usually of a generalising or moralising nature.²² He rarely essays a detailed discussion and justification of his interpretation, in the manner of Polybius, or uses speeches to provide alternative points of view, as Thucydides. Many of Ammianus' judgements are allusive, conveyed in his highly metaphorical language, and his interpretations are, therefore, usually part of the fabric of the narrative. His dramatic structure, emotionally-charged language, and almost monotonously-rhythmical prose style sweep the reader (or even more so, the listener) along, making it hard for him to disengage his judgement. The narrative is, as a result, impressionistic rather than precise and tends to dissolve into ambiguity under detailed analysis.²³

Although the part of Ammianus' *History* in which he elucidated the

not, as de Jonge suggests, a claim that Sabinianus drilled his troops in a burial ground. De Jonge (242) does, however, in my opinion, correctly construe *pro histrionicis gestibus* (as against the Budé edition).

²¹While the images used by Ammianus, such as that of the Gorgon (18.4.2), tend to imply that Constantius was involved in the manoeuvres against Ursicinus, the direct statements by the historian clearly indicate that he was not. Constantius remained a passive party until after the fall of Amida, when he was provoked by Ursicinus' retorts (and perhaps evidence of his negligence).

²²The most obvious examples are the imperial necrologies. From the section under discussion cf. 18.4.5, where an *exemplum* censures Constantius' harkening to the court eunuchs.

²³Cf. the penetrating remarks of E. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, tr. W. Trask (Princeton 1953; repr. 1957) 45–52.

causes and origins of the Roman-Persian war of which the attack of 359 was a part is lost, he does remark elsewhere (25.4.23) that he traced its origin to Constantine who greedily believed the lies of the philosopher Metrodorus. Metrodorus had apparently journeyed to India, and on his return offered Constantine some precious stones, claiming that many more had been stolen by the Persian king. The war began when the Persian king rejected Constantine's demand for their return.²⁴ Thereafter the war gained its own momentum, so that, it seems, no further explanation was required, even for Julian's invasion of Persia in 363, which is treated as a natural response to earlier Persian attacks.²⁵ Ammianus concedes that this was not everybody's opinion: some regarded Julian's attack as an unjustified renewal of hostilities.²⁶ The available evidence might be taken to suggest that Ammianus interpreted and structured Roman-Persian hostilities from the outbreak under Constantine in such a way as to justify Julian's invasion, which formed the climax and the termination of them.

Although the invasion of 359 followed ten years of comparative quiet,²⁷ Ammianus does not discuss the reasons for the flare-up. His view is that when Shapur, ambitious to conquer Roman-held territory, had settled his wars elsewhere, which he did in 357, he was bound to attack the Romans.²⁸ Ammianus' main purpose is to explain the failures of the Romans in the war, which culminated in the destruction of Amida. These failures he grounds in what he sees as the major characteristics of the whole of Constantius' reign: the timidity and paranoid suspicions of the emperor, which were worked upon by corrupt courtiers, especially the eunuch chamberlains, for their own gains.²⁹ According to Ammianus, these vices of the regime not only led to the removal and subsequent ineffectiveness of Ursicinus,³⁰ but also provided the Persians with their strategy and their success in the invasion, and perhaps even the impetus for the attack itself (the last is left unclear). The explanation is as follows (18.5.1–3 and 6–8):³¹ Antoninus, formerly a rich merchant who had crossed over to the military and had become an accoun-

²⁴On the use of the story of Metrodorus see the Budé edition of Ammianus, vol. 4.2.241 f., n. 597.

²⁵22.12.1; 25.4.24–26. In fact, the only clear statement of Julian's motives (22.12.2) indicates personal ambition.

²⁶22.12.3: *turbas intempestivas*; 25.4.23: *novos bellorum tumultus ad perniciem rei communis*; cf. 23.5.16.

²⁷After Constantius' departure for the campaign against Magnentius and Shapur's failure against Nisibis in 350, there was a *de facto* truce until 359, with only minor raids taking place.

²⁸Shapur's territorial ambitions are stated at the outset: *augendique regni cupiditate supra homines flagrans* (18.4.1)

²⁹Cf. the general statement at 21.16.16.

³⁰See above 246.

³¹On the defection and role of Antoninus see Rosen (above, n. 8) 17–20; de Jonge (above, n. 13) *ad locc.*

tant (*rationarius*) on the staff of the *dux Mesopotamiae*, had reached the rank of *protector*. The illegal actions of some *potentes* had caused him huge debts, and when the office of the *comes sacrarum largitionum* was called in to enforce them (presumably being involved as an interested party), he gave in and acknowledged them.³² Then he set about collecting detailed information on troop dispositions and the relevant logistics, which showed that, since the bulk of the army and its supplies were in Illyricum with the emperor, the eastern defences were weak. He had already been in contact with the Persian commander, Tamsapor (*et antea cognitus*, 18.5.3), presumably giving him information to prove his value. Having collected all the necessary information, he fled to the Persians and encouraged them to overrun Mesopotamia while the Romans were distracted elsewhere and unable to oppose them in the field. The importance of Antoninus is also acknowledged by Libanius (*Or.* 12.74), who calls him a second Demaratus and says that he promised to betray Antioch to Shapur. Ammianus, who calls him *ex contraria specie Zopyri illius similis Babylonii proditoris* (18.5.3), perhaps as a conscious and rather forced variant upon the more obvious Demaratus, says that he advised the attack on Syria only after he learned of the withdrawal of Ursicinus (18.6.3).

The threat to Syria is one element in a neat explanatory scheme. Corruption robs the Romans of the full use of Ursicinus and this not only encourages the Persians to widen their objectives to include Syria, but also gives them the key to success. Thereafter the events unfold, susceptible only to chance or random initiative. These occur at two key points. First, the Euphrates happened to be flooded by melting snows so that the Persians abandoned the march to the west and, on Antoninus' advice, turned north in order to cross the river upstream where it was shallower. Ammianus' comment on this decision is *convertuntur ergo ad ea quae amplectenda fortuita daret occasio, spe concepta praeter opinionem exclusi* (18.7.10). Then, when passing by Amida, Shapur was deflected into besieging the city by an attack upon himself and the slaying of the Chionite king's son. This, Ammianus says (19.1.4), was contrived by *caeleste numen ut Romanae rei totius aerumnas intra unius regionis concluderet ambitum*. The siege of Amida destroyed the city but also cost Shapur so much time and manpower that he was forced to withdraw without crossing the Euphrates (19.9.1 and 9).

The structuring of events according to a scheme that is based ultimately upon corruption and which, as it develops, is susceptible only to chance or random initiative, has an element of realism in it. There were occasions in the warfare of the period when one side seized the initiative and the other

³²If Antoninus is the one mentioned in Libanius *Ep.* 210, he had been burdened by the *curiales* of Nisibis with a *sitigia*, a *munus extraordinarium* which cost him heavily, and then, illegally, with a second one which he could not afford (so de Jonge [above, n. 13] 112–114).

scrambled even to react.³³ But the result of the use of this scheme here is that, once events have begun to unfold, Roman strategy does not have to be examined. Corruption-induced inertia personified by the *homunculus* Sabinianus and a toothless and clawless Ursicinus suffice.

When, however, the Roman strategy is examined, even on the incoherent data supplied by Ammianus, questions arise over Ursicinus' actions. His political position had been difficult even before the attack. There had been suggestions at court that over his ten-year tour as a commander in the East his popularity had grown too great and he was entertaining imperial ambitions for his sons (14.11.3); and there is no reason to suspect that Ammianus fabricated these suggestions even if, as Thompson argued, Constantius took them nowhere near as seriously as the paranoid Ursicinus thought.³⁴ More immediately, however, Antoninus, who, it has been plausibly conjectured, may have been feeding Tamsapor information as early as 357,³⁵ is permitted by Ammianus (18.8.5) to call Ursicinus his *patronum . . . et dominum* who had tried to protect him from the alleged creditors. This suggests that this important defector was, or had been, a personal dependent (perhaps as *protector*) of the commander-in-chief of the eastern defences.³⁶ In the light of this, the temporary withdrawal of Ursicinus from the East and the appointment of the second *magister*, Sabinianus, might have appeared a wise precaution. Certainly, the promotion of Ursicinus to *magister peditum in praesenti* seems to have envisaged his speedy return to the East with the emperor and the praesental field army for a campaign against Persia, but the presence of the emperor and the *comitatus* would have much inhibited any independent designs Ursicinus might have entertained. On the other hand, the returning of Ursicinus to oversee the emergency defence supports Thompson's point about Constantius' lack of suspicion.

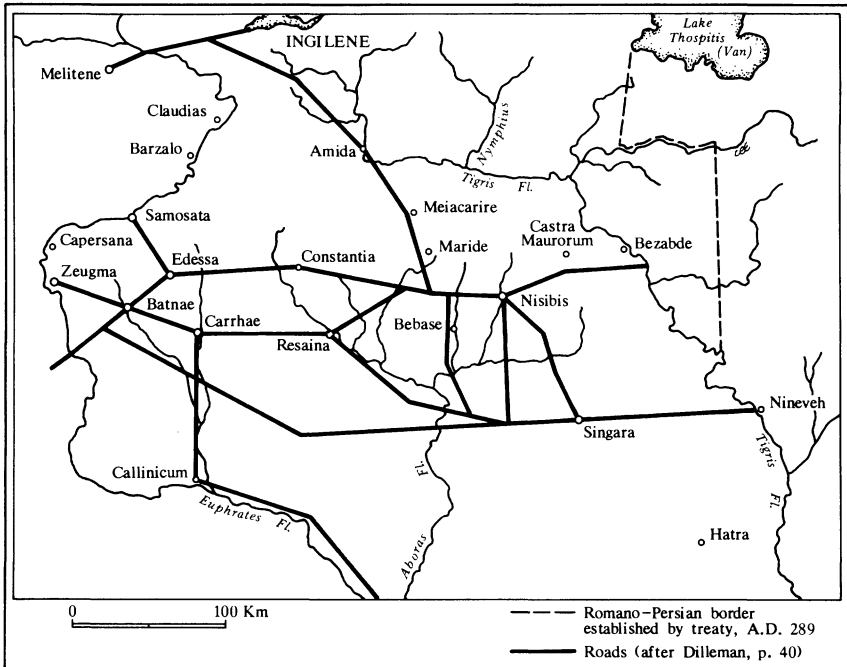
After the hasty return of Ursicinus the Roman strategy in the face of the Persian invasion appears to have been as follows. When the news of Persian preparations arrived, the first thought was to prepare Nisibis for a siege, since it had been the prime target of Persian attacks since the 330s. Ursicinus went to Nisibis and observed that bands of raiders (*vastatoriae manus*, 18.8.9) were operating from the Tigris right up to the city. The nature of this action was unclear; it could have been merely another of the local raids that had been regularly mounted by the Persians since 350. Only when Ursicinus had reached Meiacarire on the road north to Amida did he learn that the

³³That Ursicinus was always one step behind the Persians was brought out by N. J. E. Austin, *Ammianus on Warfare* (Brussels 1979, Coll. *Latomus*) 25–27.

³⁴Thompson (above, n. 7) 47.

³⁵The suggestion is Barceló's (above, n. 1, 89, and n. 416), who pointed out that Ammianus (18.5.3) says that before his defection Antoninus held many secret meetings with Tamsapor.

³⁶It also raises the possibility that Antoninus, as a *protector*, had been an acquaintance of Ammianus.



raiders were led by the senior Persian officers in the region, Tamsapor and Nohodares (18.6.16). This indicated more than a local raid, and Ursicinus was worried (*curarum crescente sollicitudine*, *ibid.* 17). Upon reaching Amida Ursicinus received information that led him to conclude that the attack was indeed far more than a raid, even of moderate strength. For there scouts brought in a message in cipher hidden in a scabbard which had been smuggled out of Persia from Procopius, one of the Roman envoys sent by Shapur in late 358/early 359 who had been detained by the Persians (18.6.17–19). When the message was deciphered (with difficulty since it was very obscure), it was taken to indicate that the Persians intended not an attack upon Mesopotamia but a full-scale invasion of Syria itself.³⁷

In order to confirm this information Ammianus was sent on a reconnaissance via Corduene. He was able to observe that a large Persian army, led by Shapur himself, was crossing the river Anzaba near to Nineveh (18.6.20–7.2).³⁸ This was proof that a full-scale invasion was underway. When this was reported to Ursicinus, he assumed that it also confirmed the

³⁷For discussion of the message and its meaning see R. C. Blockley, "The Coded Message in Ammianus Marcellinus 18.6.17–19," *EMC/CV* ns 5 (1986) 63–65.

³⁸See above, n. 10, for Rosen's doubts over the authenticity of this mission. With Austin I accept that it took place.

message of Procopius and concluded that the Persians would march due west via Carrhae to attempt to cross the Euphrates at Zeugma or Capersana. He, therefore, ordered the evacuation of Carrhae, the burning of the plains along the route, and the fortification of the west (*citerior*) bank of the river (18.7.3–6). Shapur, however, turned north to reach Bebase, 150 kilometers away from Constantia, the latter being on a parallel road which led to the Euphrates.³⁹ When he reached Bebase, he was informed that the river was flooded and decided to change his line of march, pushing north along the road via Amida in order to attempt the crossing of the Euphrates further upstream at Barzalo and Claudias (18.7.9–11). According to Ammianus, when he was informed of this move north *certis speculationibus* (18.8.1), Ursicinus prepared to leave Amida for Samosata in order to break the bridges at Zeugma and Capersana. If Ammianus is correct, then the information that Ursicinus received must have been collected before the main Persian force had reached the junction of the road to Amida, so that the general still thought that they were striking west. Of more immediate importance, however, was the failure of Ursicinus' scouts to observe that a force of 20000 men, led by Tamsapor and Nohodares, was already on the way north to Amida. These slipped past a cavalry picket on the road, reached the vicinity of Amida, and ambushed Ursicinus' party as it was leaving the city (18.8.2–5). As a result, the Roman forward command was scattered, Ammianus escaping into Amida, Ursicinus fleeing north into the Taurus mountains (18.8.9–13). The siege of Amida began, and Sabinianus sat tight at Edessa despite Ursicinus' urgings that he should mount diversionary attacks on the besiegers (19.3). Where Ursicinus was after his escape is not made clear, though when Ammianus escaped from Amida he reached Melitene in Lesser Armenia where, he says (19.8.12), *reperit ducem comitaticum iam profecturum*.⁴⁰ If this officer were Ursicinus (whose flight into the Taurus Mountains would have pointed him in the general direction of Lesser Armenia), it seems that after leaving Amida he concluded that the Persians were on their way to the upper Euphrates and settled at Melitene to co-ordinate the defences there.

Ammianus says that when Ursicinus was ordered to return to the East he was placed in charge of the war, *ad alium omni potestate translata* (18.6.5). By this he seems to mean that Sabinianus retained command of the eastern field army. Certainly, Ursicinus was able to issue orders to the authorities at Nisibis, the *dux Mesopotamiae*, and the governor of the province, and have them obeyed promptly (18.6.8–9; 7.3–4). In addition to a number of complaints of Sabinianus' inertia (18.5.5; 6.7–8; 7.7), the only hard evidence of

³⁹For the location of Bebase (= Tell Chaker Bazar) on a north-south road linking the Singara-Carrhae and Nisibis-Constantia roads see L. Dilleman, "Ammien Marcellin et les pays de l'Euphrate et du Tigre," *Syria* 38 (1961) 290–292.

⁴⁰The text is corrupt at this point, though the sense is clear. For *dux* used non-technically of Ursicinus cf. 15.2.2; 5.20.

his non-cooperation which Ammianus offers is his refusal to commit light-armed troops to attack the besiegers of Amida (19.3.1). This refusal may have been the result of fear that these troops would be at risk from the forces of Tamsapor and Nohodares, which, after reaching Amida, appear to have pushed north and west into Ingilene and to the Euphrates to plunder and, presumably, to guard against such an attack from the rear as Ursicinus proposed.⁴¹ These details suggest that the command of the Roman side was not arranged as Ammianus claims, but that it was shared, Sabinianus stationed at Edessa, preparing and drilling what was available of the field army (18.7.7: *militari pyrrhice sonantibus modulis*—interpreted without a sarcastic connotation), well-situated to face a direct thrust west to the Euphrates, and Ursicinus in command of the forward line of fortresses with which he was familiar, having been in charge of them for a number of years.⁴² Despite Ammianus' statement (18.9.3) that the six legions which were in Amida in addition to its regular garrison had thrown themselves into the place ahead of the Persian advance, it is clear that this increase of strength was at least partly pre-planned. The Theodosian Code (1.7.1; 28 May, 359) authorises troop redeployments in the East by the *magister equitum et peditum*, and at least one of the legions had been brought from a considerable distance (the Decimani Fortenses from Aila in Palaestina Salutaris); moreover, the Illyrian cavalry that failed to spot the Persian vanguard are called *recens . . . missi* (18.8.2).⁴³ These movements, like the summoning of Ursicinus to Sirmium, were probably part of the build-up for the campaign by the emperor himself against the Persians, which Shapur's attack forestalled.⁴⁴

If the Roman command was arranged as I have suggested, then Ammianus' explanation of the failure of the Roman defence—the inertia and incompetence of Sabinianus—is unacceptable, and Ursicinus must be assigned some of the blame. I suggest that the cause of the failure was a fundamental error made, and persisted in, by the high command—perhaps both Ursicinus and Sabinianus—who assumed that the Persians were plan-

⁴¹Capture of Ziata in Ingilene, 19.6.1; Persian marauders operating close to the upper Euphrates, 19.8.10 (this passage also indicates that Roman cavalry were in the area).

⁴²Cf. 18.6.2 (A.D. 359): *nihil amiserat [Ursicinus] per decennium*. At this period the eastern border troops were the overall responsibility of the *magister equitum per Orientem*.

⁴³These redeployments were remarked by Rosen (above, n. 8) 29, n. 5. They were too recent to have been known to Antoninus, who was in Persia by winter 358/9 (Liban. *Or.* 12.74). If these troops had been moved as part of the build-up for an invasion, then it was appropriate that Ursicinus, as projected commander of that invasion, should command them.

⁴⁴One of the referees of this paper suggested that Ammianus' account is completely misleading and that Ursicinus was in sole command of the defence. On the available evidence this is possible. But split commands, with the dangers that resulted of confusion and lack of cooperation, were common from the fourth to the seventh centuries, especially in the East. For Constantius' reign see R. C. Blockley, "Constantius II and his Generals," in C. Deroux, ed., *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History* 2 (Brussels 1980, Coll. *Latomus*), esp. 475–480.

ning a direct thrust at Syria and permitted this assumption to dictate their whole strategy. The only independent indication that the Persians were aiming at Syria is the coded message from Procopius which was received and interpreted by Ursicinus' staff.⁴⁵ All the other evidence in Ammianus is what Antoninus is said to have advised the Persian council of war at various stages, and this is more likely to have been founded on Ammianus' speculation than on hard information. Certainly, Libanius (*Or.* 12.74) implies that Antioch was the Persians' objective, but the speech in which his statement was made was written in 363, the statement was made for effect,⁴⁶ and when the conviction that Antioch was the target emerged cannot be ascertained. The possibility exists that the message of Procopius was Persian "disinformation."⁴⁷ More importantly, the certainty exists that Roman strategy was formed by it. And Ursicinus, as the forward commander, was the one who committed the crucial errors that resulted.

At the beginning of the campaign Ursicinus proceeded to Nisibis, clearly envisaging the possibility of the usual kind of war of sieges. His subsequent removal to Amida is consistent with this, suggesting that he was touring the major strongpoints. At Amida he received the secret message warning of an attack on Syria; and Ammianus' reconnaissance confirmed that a full-scale invasion was underway. At this point Ursicinus had time, since the main Persian force cannot have been far beyond the Tigris near to Nineveh, about 400 km. away, and he was aware only of *vastatoriae manus* operating around Nisibis; a band of Persians had pursued him from Nisibis but, as far as he knew, had proceeded westwards along the road towards Constantia.⁴⁸ The picket of 700 horsemen which was on the road to Amida suggests a guard only against marauders (18.8.2). In addition to Ammianus' failure to mention any measures to strengthen Amida's defences, the clearest indications that Ursicinus did not consider the city to be in immediate danger are that he permitted a fair to take place there (18.8.13) and that he failed to gather in or destroy the ripening crops in the area, which provided an important resource for the Persians (19.2.2) that perhaps allowed them to sustain the siege for 73 days. Furthermore, even after he had learned that the Persians had moved north from the Singara-Carrhae road, Ursicinus himself still

⁴⁵Ammianus (18.6.19) notes the difficulty of interpreting this message. If Austin's view (above, n. 33, 14 ff.) that Ammianus was an intelligence officer attached to HQ is correct, then he would have been closely involved in its interpretation. Even if the duties of the HQ staff were not as clearly demarcated as Austin thinks, nevertheless, Ammianus' presence on the staff and his clear interest in the interpreting of the message do suggest that he was involved.

⁴⁶Libanius is exaggerating the insecurity in the East and in Antioch because he wishes to claim that it was ended by Julian's arrival as Augustus.

⁴⁷See Austin (above, n. 33) 27 for another possible example of Persian "disinformation" during this campaign.

⁴⁸At 18.6.15 the Romans make for the mountains to the right (= north) while the Persian follow a decoy horse to the left (= west).

planned to proceed to the crossing points of the Euphrates that had been assumed earlier to be their objective.

Ursicinus, however, had failed to discover that the "raiders" led by Tamsapor and Nohodares were in fact a force of 20000 men advancing up the road to Amida. This is a remarkable breakdown of intelligence on the part of the general, who, we are assured, already knew *certis speculationibus* (18.8.1) that the Persians had decided at Bebase, 150 km. to the south, to strike north. One of three explanations offers itself: either the scouts were incompetent and did miss the force of 20000 men, which, when they were observing the main Persian force, was between themselves and the general to whom they were to report; or Ursicinus never received a report and Ammianus' account is a fabrication; or Ammianus has run together two distinct developments, Ursicinus' learning that the Persians had struck north and the alleged decision of Shapur at Bebase to march still further north via Amida. If the information that the Persians had turned (rather than decided to turn) north was actually gathered, it is much more likely that this occurred when they left the Singara-Carrhae road than at Bebase, when they were already marching towards the north and were close to the road to Constantia.⁴⁹ In this case, Ursicinus was still able to assume that they were aiming at Syria via the road by Constantia, and this would make sense of his decision to proceed from Amida to Samosata even after receiving the report. Had he first learned, however, of the move north when the main Persian force was at Bebase, then the force led by Tamsapor and Nohodares must have already been on the Amida road (which leaves the Constantia road only a few kilometers to the west of the turn off from Bebase), so that it could hardly have been missed even by the most incompetent scouts.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, it seems clear that, after receiving the secret message and the information from Ammianus' mission, Ursicinus was, and remained, convinced that the Persians intended to march westwards to the Euphrates and completely omitted

⁴⁹ Ammianus' narrative (18.7.10–8.1) leaves it unclear whether Ursicinus learned of the change of plans by the Persians at Bebase or whether he was simply informed that they had been observed to alter direction at that place. The former seems to be out of the question, since it would indicate spying at the discussion itself which, in the unlikely event that it occurred, would have also revealed the movements of Tamsapor and Nohodares. The difficulty with the latter is that Bebase was not a turning point, although if it were the place where the Persians were first observed marching north, it could loosely be regarded as such. With the view advanced here, that speculation on the Roman side lies behind the "facts" that Ammianus reports, cf. Austin's view (above, n. 33) that the "report" of the Persian intention to cross the Euphrates at Barzalo and Claudias was mere speculation by Ammianus (and Ursicinus).

⁵⁰ Another possibility, even less creditable to Ursicinus and Ammianus, is that the observation that the Persians were striking north has been deliberately delayed to Bebase by Ammianus in order to give Ursicinus less time to organise the defence of Amida and thus to head off the charge that he should have planned for the siege of the city once he had learned that the enemy had moved from the Singara-Carrhae road.

to plan for other eventualities, so that Amida was compelled to undergo a siege for which it was unprepared.

When one looks at the Persian movements independently of Ammianus' glosses on them, an alternative interpretation of their strategy suggests itself: that they never planned to march to the Euphrates and that Amida, the depository of mural artillery for the region (18.9.1) and the fulcrum of the border defences north of the Tur 'Abdin mountains, was the objective from the outset. In short, despite the alleged advice of Antoninus to do so (18.6.3), the Persians had not abandoned their usual strategy of attacking the frontier defences of Roman Mesopotamia, but had merely shifted their efforts from the Nisibis sector to an area further north. Shapur's route from the Tigris via Singara and then northwards via Bebase was not a deviation from his direct advance westwards caused first by the firing of the plains and then by the report of the flooded condition of the Euphrates (an unlikely, if not impossible, occurrence in mid-July if it were the result of melting snows, as Ammianus claims).⁵¹ The route was the one planned from the beginning, and Ammianus' interpretation of developments was based upon what he and Ursicinus expected to happen, not what did happen.⁵² This interpretation of the Persian movements would not, of course, have been attractive to Ammianus, since it shows Ursicinus completely misreading the situation and renders his initiatives (such as the firing of the plains along the Singara-Carrhae road) irrelevant to the course of events.

Once Ursicinus had fled north after the ambush at Amida, he could do little to retrieve the situation. Sabinianus sat tight at Edessa, perhaps because he still feared that the Persians would turn towards the southwest and, new to his command and with a force which cannot have been large, was unwilling to move from his position.⁵³ Although there were perhaps 7000–10000 fighting men in Amida, including battlefield troops, and at least one high-ranking officer, the count Aelianus (perhaps the governor of the place),⁵⁴ no

⁵¹The arguments of Rosen (above, n. 8, 45–47) against the veracity of Ammianus' claims at this point are convincing, despite the attempted refutation by Austin (above, n. 10, 332 f.) based upon the modern observation of a river in Africa. However, even if Austin's contention were correct and the Euphrates impassible, Ammianus' use of the data to explain Persian motives is speculative and does not bear upon the argument that Amida was the Persian objective from the beginning.

⁵²Austin (above, n. 33, 26 f.) also suggests that the Romans misinterpreted the Persian strategy. His reconstruction, however, differs from mine.

⁵³At 18.5.2 Antoninus is said to have collected information on the weakness of the eastern army (which must be the field army). In the fifth century it appears that the eastern field army needed praesental reinforcements to enable it to undertake a major campaign (L. Scott, *The Magistri Militum of the Eastern Roman Empire in the Fifth Century* [diss., Cambridge University 1972] 10).

⁵⁴On the forces in the city see de Jonge (above, n. 13, 288–295), who notes that, of the seven legions, at least four were *comitatenses* or *pseudocomitatenses*, i.e., battlefield rather than

attempt appears to have been made to challenge the Persian vanguard. The defenders, apparently convinced that the Persians did not intend to attack the city since they were thought to be pressing on to the upper Euphrates,⁵⁵ waited behind their walls for the main army to arrive. There may have been some reason, then, for the bitter remark of the *comes sacrarum largitionum* Ursulus as he viewed the ruins of Amida in the next year: "Look with what spirit the cities are defended by the soldiers, for whose generous pay the wealth of the Empire is inadequate" (20.11.5).⁵⁶

After the withdrawal of the Persians, Ursicinus was summoned again to court and promoted to *magister peditum in praesenti* (20.2.1). But criticisms of his actions during the invasion reached Constantius' ears, and a commission was appointed to investigate the destruction of the city. Ammianus condemns these criticisms from the outset as *facta crimina* (*ibid.*) and claims that the commissioners, in fear of the chamberlain Eusebius, rejected the obvious explanation, *Sabiniani pertinaci ignavia haec accidisse* (*ibid.* 3), and looked at *inania quaedam, longeque a negotio distantia* (*ibid.*). When Ursicinus heard of the direction that the commission's deliberations were taking, in anger he criticised the emperor for his lack of control over affairs and for grieving over the false account of what happened at Amida, with the result that he was cashiered (*ibid.* 4). Ammianus' account of the investigation, which adopts Ursicinus' point of view without discussion, is perfunctory and gives no information on the nature of the allegations against him. Thompson, here following Ammianus' version, concludes that Ursicinus was fired for "truculent ill-humour."⁵⁷ A less charitable and more plausible interpretation suggests that evidence of negligence was offered and accepted, which led to the dismissal of Ursicinus and perhaps Sabinianus also (who is never mentioned again).

If the analysis above has merit, why was Ammianus at such pains to defend Ursicinus, from whose blunders he suffered in Amida? Ammianus was a member of Ursicinus' headquarters staff which was responsible for helping its commander to form strategy.⁵⁸ Thus, if Ursicinus was in error, so was Ammianus. Furthermore, it appears that the views of Ursicinus' staff

garrison troops. Ammianus' words on Aelianus at 19.9.2 might suggest that he was in command of the city and its defence.

⁵⁵Ammianus is emphatic on this point: *ut monuerat Antoninus . . . ut transiturus Amidam, 18.10.1; aliorum Antonini consilio festinantem, 19.1.3*. The importance of this point (or assumption, in my opinion) to the historian is underlined by his appeal in both places to the name of Antoninus to authenticate it.

⁵⁶There appears to have been some opposition amongst the battlefield troops to this policy of passive defence, which is reflected in the frustration of the Gallic soldiers at being forbidden hand-to-hand conflict (19.6.3-4).

⁵⁷Thompson (above, n. 7) 54.

⁵⁸See above, n. 45. Even if Austin's conjectures on Ammianus' functions are rejected, it is clear that he was a member of the HQ staff.

dictated, or at least influenced, the dispositions of the defenders of Amida both before and during the siege. Thus, Ammianus would have had some responsibility for whatever *crimina* the commission of enquiry endorsed. Finally, Ammianus does appear to have had a strong loyalty to his chief, which gave him an unqualified belief in Ursicinus' ability and an acceptance of his views. Thompson, I think, was correct to insist that, like Ursicinus himself, Ammianus believed passionately that the general had been consistently and badly wronged.⁵⁹ And for this he held Constantius responsible.

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⁵⁹Thompson (above, n. 7) 54 f.