AMMIANUS' ACCOUNT OF THE ADRIANOPLE CAMPAIGN: SOME STRATEGIC OBSERVATIONS*

by N. J. E. Austin
(University of Rhodesia)

Ammianus' Book 31 covers a period of some twenty-two months between autumn 376 and August 378: his treatment of it contains a considerable amount of emotional and rhetorical material – incidents are accumulated to sustain an atmosphere of growing crisis and impending doom. Ammianus’ interests in this part of his history seem not to be directed primarily towards the military or even the purely historical side, and this factor leads him to reduce the amount of precise detail that is required for a full understanding of the moves and counter-moves carried out by the Romans. This is particularly disturbing in matters of chronology, since the whole episode occupies the twenty-two months with only two indications of the season (31.8.2; 10.1), let alone any more exact form of dating. Any attempt then at assigning dates must remain guesswork. The same would apply to a number of the individuals who are named, and to their precise functions, and also to geographical notices to some extent. What does concern Ammianus, though, is the widespread failure of Roman arms to resist, contain and remove a strong force of invaders: in his opinion it is due to the poor moral standards and often ineffective leadership of the military personnel given the task of dealing with them, though isolated incidents to the contrary are recorded, e.g., the brave conduct of the tribunus Barzimeres at Dibaltum (31.8.9-10). Ammianus’ contacts with the men who had served on the various headquarters staffs and later became his informants would have emphasised these factors as the origins of the failure; and they would have discussed with him alternative courses of action that appeared viable to them in such circumstances. Whether the alternatives recorded and commented upon were Ammianus’ own or those of his informants is not important here, since they seem to be sufficiently well understood to suggest that he is fully aware of their implications. If he had not grasped these implications, it is unlikely that he would have been able to produce a largely self-consistent account of the fighting: an obvious comparison with, for example, Livy’s account of Scipio in Africa, shows the professional soldier-historian in a very favourable light. Ammianus had at the very least visited Thrace (18.6.5; 18.8.2).


1. E.g., 31.4.9; 5.4; 5.9; 7.2. Also his criticisms of the supersession of the dux caurus et diligens Frigeridus by the comes Maurus, 31.10.22.

2. E.g., the historian’s comments at 31.7.2; 8.5, and the evident approval of Sebastianus’ counter-guerrilla methods at 31.11.2, 4, 5.
22.8.1; 27.4.2), and also later some of the battlefields (31.7.16); he was thus able to assess some of the factors (e.g., geographical and climatic) which influenced the conduct of the campaign in the light of what he knew from his own experience, and grafted this on to the information he had acquired by personal contacts.

It is however possible to disentangle and identify a number of distinct phases in the Roman defensive strategy in Thrace from Ammianus' account (in spite of his virtual disclaimer at 31.5.10); their existence can be gauged principally from the fact that over the period increasingly senior personnel were assigned to the area.

The first phase comprises the period of the Visigoths' admission into the empire (31.4). Their admission might well have proceeded more peacefully had there been a more effective organisation of matters such as their food supply (31.5.1), and if there had been Roman military administrators of a rather higher calibre than the comes per Thracias Lupicinus and the dux Moesiae Maximus (31.4.9), and on the civil side, the magistratus of Adrianople. A large number of the immigrants had already been moved away from the point at which they had crossed the Danube, some drafted into new military units for service on the eastern frontiers (cf. 31.16.8), and a second group assigned winter quarters in the country around Adrianople pending being moved on later (31.6.1). But significant numbers still remained in the area between the E. Haemus and the river (31.5.1), where abuses with their consequent unrest were allowed to multiply (31.5.2) until the incidents provoked by Lupicinus at Marcianopolis became to the minds of the immigrant Goths the last straw and open fighting broke out in the eastern part of the region (31.5.5ff): though those under Sueridus and Colias in the Adrianople area looked on with comparatively unconcern (31.6.1). It is possible that the Romans were aware that Fritigerri and his Visigoths were intending to make common cause with the Ostrogothic tribes who were crossing the Danube higher up: the latter had been refused permission to settle within the empire (31.4.12-13), but had clearly taken advantage of the Roman preoccupation with the restlessness among the Visigoths to do so. Moreover, security on the frontiers where they were crossing appears to have been weakened by the withdrawal of patrol boats and their associated troops in order to move the Visigoths on into Thrace proper (31.5.2-3). This withdrawal also seems to be connected with Fritigerri's march towards Marcianopolis, and in this case Lupicinus' action at this place, in what appears as a mismanaged kidnap attempt, may have been a frightened response to the

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6. The role of these two chieftains is discussed by Klein, 'Zur Vorgeschichte der Schlacht von Adrianopolis', *Anzeiger für Altertumswissenschaft* 4, 1951, pp. 189–192.
realisation of the dangers inherent in a combination between the two Gothic groupings. If this incident is viewed in conjunction with the sudden attempt to shift the Goths living around Adrianople (31.6.2ff), it affords an indication of Roman awareness of their own inadequacy to handle on a wide basis any serious disturbances, a theory given substance by the defeat suffered by Lupicinus not far from Marcianopolis (31.5.9), and the subsequent union of the group from Adrianople with Fritigern's force (31.6.3). Thrace was as a consequence plundered, but since the Goths were unsuited and not equipped for siege warfare, the towns were left severely alone (31.6.4). 7

At this point the strategic response of the Romans to the threat was entirely conventional: troops were withdrawn from the Armenian theatre and sent into action under Traianus and Profuturus in Thrace, while some further troops under Richomeres, comes domesticorum in the west, and the dux Frigeridus were expected from the western empire (31.7.3–5). 8

Ammianus however introjects a comment of his own and thus shows the results of experience: he criticises their strategy of making use en bloc of detachments straight from eastern conditions of warfare, instead of utilising them in units of a size much better suited to the conditions of virtual guerrilla war that had been created by the division of the Goths into plundering bands (31.7:2). The subsequent battle near Ad Salices thus turned out to be inconclusive, but was marked by heavy casualties, admittedly on both sides, but which did not improve the Roman position in any way. 9

There followed now a period of virtual stalemate, the Roman side adopting a rather negative policy of blockading the Goths in the defiles of the Haemus mountains in the hope of achieving a solution by starvation through what is probably the winter of 377–378. 10 Richomeres returned to the west in order to bring in further reinforcements (31.8.1–2).

A third phase of the Roman strategic response opened with the arrival of Saturninus as temporary magister equitum, probably at the very end of 377 or beginning of 378 (31.8.3), with instructions to bring assistance to Profuturus and Traianus – unspecific enough to be capable of a wide interpretation. His assessment of the Roman position in the area as a whole seems to have been that it was untenable at that stage, or at least that it was going to be extremely

8. Frigeridus' rank is obscure in Ammianus' account: it would seem that in spite of a degree of emphasis on his role, he was no more than dux Valeriae. See Ensslin, 'Zum Heermeisteramt des spätrömischen Reiches' II, *Klio* 6, 1930, pp. 102–147 (on p. 132), correcting Nischer, 'Das römische Heer und seine Generale nach Amm. Marc.', *Hermes* 63, 1928, pp. 430–455 (on p. 447). That his rank may have been more senior is suggested by his resettlement in northern Italy of Taifali survivors, 31.9.4. PLRE suggests that he was *comes rei militaris*, s.v.
9. Theodoret, *HE* 4.30, calls this a Roman defeat, for which Traianus was reprimanded by Valens; but a defeat could be deduced from Ammianus only by straining the evidence.
10. The negative aspects of this policy are reflected in Ammianus' characterisation of the two generals as anhelantes quidem altius sed imbelles, 31.7.1.
difficult to make any progress against the Goths without proper consolidation, given the current strength of the Roman forces available. Ammianus by no means condemns his policy out of hand: it entailed the withdrawal of Roman troops from the mountains to centres which could be defended more easily and where troops could be concentrated for a vigorous thrust when the situation became clearer.\textsuperscript{11}

There are two pointers to this policy: the first, that fighting took place only at Dibaltum, and the fact that troops were concentrated there – the high-quality corps of Scutarii and Cornuti, as well as \textit{alii peditum numeri} (31.8.9f); and the second, the withdrawal of Frigeridus and his troops from Thrace to the boundary with Illyricum at Succi (31.10.21) – he had initially stationed himself at Beroea (31.9.1), but the Goths were now starting to assemble there in large numbers (31.11.2).

It seems that during this phase the extent of the Gothic invasions was by now much more clearly understood, since a part of the third group of (Ostrogothic) immigrants, that under the chieftains Alatheus and Safrax, after crossing the Danube higher up, were avoided by Frigeridus during his withdrawal to Illyricum – these had been earlier associated with Farnobius and the Taifali, but at some point had separated again – Farnobius and his Taifali were however encountered and put out of action. But the Ostrogothic contingent under Alatheus and Safrax meanwhile seem to have been steadily moving towards the east during this period (cf. 31.9.2), since they eventually linked up with Fritigern’s Visigoths at Adrianople later.

A fourth phase against the invaders, who were now ranging well south of the Haemus and Balkan mountains, opened with the arrival in Thrace of Sebastianus, now promoted \textit{magister peditum praesentalis}, probably not to replace Saturninus but to supplement his activities. A short time later, Valens accompanied by Victor and Traianus moved from Constantinople.\textsuperscript{12} Sebastianus immediately went into action with small units designed to move quickly and to keep the element of surprise constantly in the hands of the Romans, and which did not commit any substantial numbers of Roman troops to an engagement at any one time (31.12.2-3): the comparison with Theodosius’ strategy in Britain comes to mind here (cf. 27.8.7). Sebastianus’ successes were such that Fritigern had to recall his forces from the Beroea-Nicopolis area to Cabyle, and decided to keep to the more open plains where his men would be safer (31.11.5): the Goths could no longer plunder for food and booty with impunity and had to remain confined to a relatively limited area for their security. They had then to move constantly, and it would perhaps

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{digrediparabat consilio non absurdo}, 31.8.5.
\textsuperscript{12} The date: 11 June 378, Socrates \textit{HE} 4.38. Traianus must have returned to Constantinople and been dismissed early in 378 (Theodoret, \textit{HE} 4.30), a fact not mentioned by Ammianus except by implication. See \textit{PLRE} on his position.
have been necessary for them to fight in conditions forced on them by the Romans.

The final phase is that of the emperor's own involvement. Valens attempted to block the routes leading through the mountains that lie immediately to the north of Adrianople, but was unable to hold up the Goths' progress significantly (31.12.2–3). It was shortly after this that the extraordinary failure on the part of his intelligence staff occurred – Ammianus notes it as such: incerto quo errore procursatoribus... in numero decem milium esse firmantibus (31.12.3) – Valens was seriously misled by their assessment of enemy numbers, and so determined to meet them in a static battle. In providing this information, Ammianus does not hesitate to call it an inexplicable mistake, knowing that such errors of assessment could not be anything but disastrous in the circumstances. It was this factor in the assessment of the procursatores that gave Valens the impetus to advance from Nice to Adrianople and commit himself with the inadequate forces at his disposal, and not to wait for Gratian. 13 Ammianus is therefore aware that this information which required critical accuracy, and in this case did not provide it, was one of the major incidents leading to the defeat. He here criticises the quality of the information derived from the report of the procursatores, thus contrasting it unfavourably with the earlier exploratio sollicita (31.12.2), as a result of which Valens was able to ensure that the passes of the region would not be closed to Roman supply trains by the Goths. If Ammianus is right in this, he is quite justified in taking the critical line that he does. A different view however can equally easily be held about this incident, and is derived from an examination of Valens' response to this information; it reflects less well on Ammianus' ability to interpret the facts.

He states that because of a mistake on the part of his intelligence collection services, Valens decided to advance on the Goths as quickly as possible, even though a meeting with his senior officers had not yet been held, and it is clear that any meeting was going to be overruled if any adverse recommendation emerged. 14 It is quite possible then that Valens was in fact given the correct figure for the Gothic forces and that the decision to attack was taken quickly in the light of the fact that only the Gothic infantry under Fritigern was in the vicinity, the cavalry arm under Alatheus and Safrax being at some distance and therefore not available (31.12.12). This view of the procursatores' information

14. The meeting is discussed in detail by Solari, 'Il consiglio di guerra ad Adrianopoli nel 378', Rivista di Filologia e d'Istruzione Classica 11, 1932, pp. 501–505, who puts forward the view that religious factionalism was at work in the council. It seems to me to be an unnecessarily complicated explanation for a meeting concerned with military objectives in a crisis situation, though of course clashes of personality in such matters cannot be entirely ruled out. Background to the possibility of such clashes can be derived from Theodoret, HE 4.30, who implies therefore that Victor and Traianus would be opposed to immediate action: his account agrees with Ammianus' as far as it goes. Zosimus' (4.23.6) is unsatisfactory, being derived from Eunapius' rather thin version.
is strengthened by the fact that *exploratores* in checking the Gothic laager do not appear to have noticed any sudden change in numbers, nor anything else that might have been interpreted in a light inconsistent with the earlier information when it was all collated at Valens’ headquarters (31.12.11). Thus he had the Gothic forces split and should have been easily able to deal with them piecemeal: his decision to move in before the cavalry returned was thus perfectly reasonable and would account for his overruling of the council’s arguments as well as his reluctance to wait for Gratian to arrive. The officers of the council who were opposed to this decision were presumably motivated by the desire to consolidate the Roman strength and then to fight a safer decisive battle against the whole of the Gothic force.\(^{15}\)

The question of the numbers of combatants on each side is particularly relevant in evaluating Valens’ decision to attack before Gratian reached him. I see no real reason to dispute the figure for the Romans arrived at by Delbrück and supported by Grosse, that they comprised about 15,000 to 18,000 men: Stein and Schmidt though reject their conclusions.\(^{16}\) Stein argues that the Roman forces numbered at least 30,000 if not as many as 40,000: he uses the analogy of Julian’s Persian Expedition (65,000 men) and the twelve *legiones* assembled in 370 for a minor Armenian exercise (27.12.16). But the former took at least a year to eighteen months to assemble (which is not the case at Adrianople), and in the latter example, the *legiones* were much more likely not to have been anything like full strength, if in fact Ammianus is referring to *legiones qua legiones*, in the technical sense. But the figure has to be high enough though to accord first with the indication of the size of the force given at 31.12.1, and second, with the implication from the tone of the narrative which suggests that the two-thirds of the army that were lost on the battlefield were sufficient to make a significant difference to the numbers of available mobile troops of the *comitatus*: any loss would be a set-back, though perhaps only more serious locally and in the short term: comparison with the almost off-hand notice of the loss of 1,200 men at 27.2.7 seems to show that this kind of loss could be absorbed easily. Consequently, it is possible to postulate a loss of perhaps 10,000 to 12,000 men would be more appropriate in a major disaster at this period – *numquam pensabilia damna* (31.13.11). Again the steps taken by

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15. Ammianus’ characterisation of the leading opponent Victor as *cunctator et cautus* (31.12.6) is relevant here. His use of the word *cautus* is also significant, and is discussed in an article by Seyfarth, ‘Miles cautus: eine merkwürdige Parallele zwischen Amm. Marc. und einer afrikanische Inschrift’, *Miscellanea Critica Teubner* 2, Leipzig, 1965, pp. 334–336. It would explain Ammianus’ pro-Victor anti-Valens stance here, as well as the sudden, almost hostile, remark about the influence of Sebastianus on the making of the decision, particularly in view of the favourable comments on his conduct of operations up to this point.

Theodosius after his accession to restore numbers implies the loss of a large number of troops.\(^{17}\)

The Gothic fighting force on the other hand appears to have been composed as follows: 10,000 under Fritigern (this figure includes the 2,000 from Sueridus and Colias), and perhaps 8,000 Ostrogoths under Alatheus and Safrax.\(^{18}\) If this last group was absent at the time of the council, then Valens' decision makes sense.

Fritigern however appears to have realised (31.12.12) that he was by no means assured of a victory and made three attempts to negotiate, all of which were no more than attempts to gain time by delaying Valens and allowing the Ostrogoths cavalry time to get back. The first embassy to the emperor occurred the evening before the battle, and was in due course rejected; the second took place on the field of battle, and is recognised by Ammianus as mere temporisation (31.12.13); the third was still in progress when the Gothic cavalry made its appearance, and a failure of discipline among the Sagittarii and Scutarii had caused fighting to begin in one sector (31.12.16–17). Thus Fritigern was successful in his deception of Valens through his attempts to negotiate, and in delaying him in his intention to crush the Goths piecemeal and quickly: and so by only half a day, Valens failed to achieve what he had set out to do.

Given this background, it is unreasonable to criticise the emperor as Ammianus does, as *procaci quodam calor perculsus* in the taking of the first decision to attack (31.12.3), and in alluding with hindsight to *funesta destinatio* (31.12.7): these criticisms in the light of the above analysis tend to imply that his assessment of Valens’ strategy in the period immediately preceding Adrianople is open to question. The account of the role of Sebastianus in the council-of-war is in my opinion decisive in arriving at this conclusion – this general had been operating in guerilla warfare against small marauding bands of Goths in precisely this area; he therefore would have had an extremely thorough knowledge of the relevant conditions and of how the Goths worked. If then, as Ammianus says (31.12.6), Sebastianus urged Valens to act immediately, it would be from this position of considerable experience, and he would appreciate the advantages of moving in quickly to destroy the Gothic infantry before the cavalry returned and formed a united force. By noticing the role of Sebastianus in this way, Ammianus reveals information that does not really corroborate the implication of complete incompetence on the part of Valens: the historian emerges with credit.

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\(^{17}\) Jones, *Later Roman Empire*, p. 156.


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