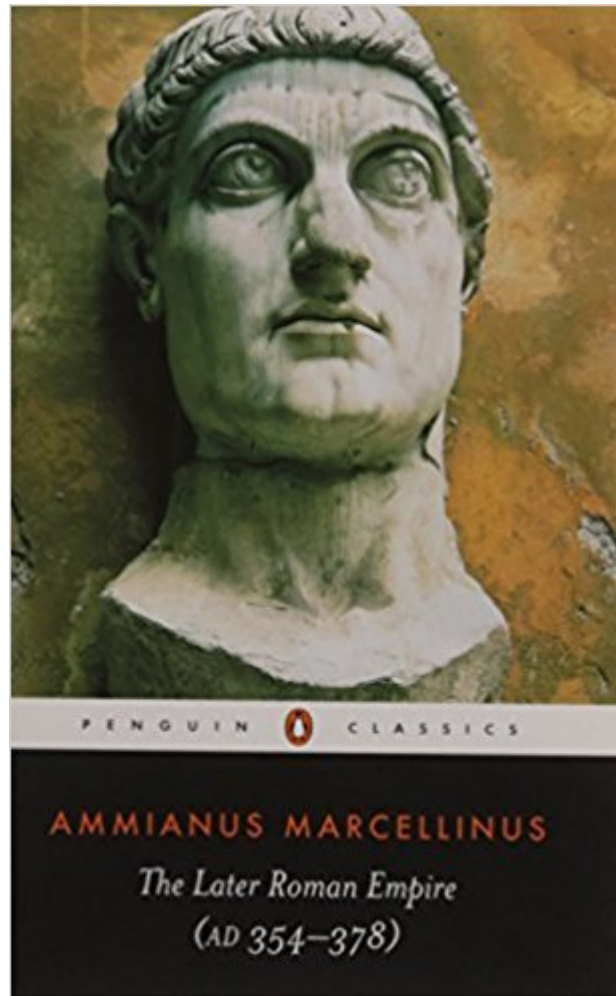




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The Later Roman Empire (A.D. 354-378)



Synopsis

A Roman historian chronicles Rome on the brink of collapse. Ammianus Marcellinus was the last great Roman historian, and his writings rank alongside those of Livy and Tacitus. The Later Roman Empire chronicles a period of twenty-five years during Marcellinus' own lifetime, covering the reigns of Constantius, Julian, Jovian, Valentinian I, and Valens, and providing eyewitness accounts of significant military events including the Battle of Strasbourg and the Goth's Revolt. Portraying a time of rapid and dramatic change, Marcellinus describes an Empire exhausted by excessive taxation, corruption, the financial ruin of the middle classes and the progressive decline in the morale of the army. In this magisterial depiction of the closing decades of the Roman Empire, we can see the seeds of events that were to lead to the fall of the city, just twenty years after Marcellinus' death. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

Text: English, Latin (translation)

Ammianus Marcellinus was the last great Roman historian, continuing the histories of Tacitus from

AD 96 down to his own day. The first thirteen of his thirty-one books are lost: the remainder describe AD 354 - 378. Walter Hamilton translated Plato's Symposium, the Gorgias, Phaedrus and Letters VII and VIII for Penguin Classics. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill is Professor of Classics at Reading University. His books include Suetonius: the Scholar and his Caesars.

Even the most confirmed buffs of ancient or medieval history generally take a while to get around to reading Ammianus. Part of the problem may be that his history falls into the transition period between the ancient and medieval worlds, and thus lies outside the principal sphere of interest for dedicated students of either period. Another problem is that of the four Roman emperors who dominate this history - Constantius II, Julian, Valentinian I and Valens - only the second is a particularly sympathetic character. No matter. This history covers a fascinating epoch - the hinge between the ancient and medieval worlds - and it is full of both intriguing details and unforgettably vivid set pieces, many of which are derived from the author's own personal experience. Ammianus Marcellinus was an emblematic figure of these transitional times - a Greek army officer who wrote his history in Latin; a man of the east, born in Antioch, who spent most of his military career facing the Persians along the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire, but who finished his life as a man of letters in Rome itself; and a pagan who viewed the rise of Christianity with detached objectivity. The quarter century covered by the surviving books of his history - the years 354 to 378 A.D. - begins with the Roman Empire in its late antique heyday. The Empire is still the greatest military power of its time, but is wasting its strength in massive civil wars. At the beginning of Ammianus's narrative, the Empire's main external enemy is still Persia, but his history covers the critical years in which the Roman frontier defenses in the west first began to show signs of cracking under the pressure of the German tribes east of the Rhine. His history recounts the final years of the competent, but superstitious and insecure, emperor Constantius II, the last surviving son of Constantine the Great; the rise in the west of Julian ("the Apostate"), who succeeds his cousin Constantius in 361 and launches two quixotic and ill-starred enterprises -- his attempt to restore paganism as the official faith of the Empire and a massive invasion of Persia that ends with his own death; and the beginning of the divided rule of the Empire under the two brothers Valentinian I and Valens. Ammianus's history closes on a night of blood and fire with the appalling Roman defeat by the Visigoths and Ostrogoths on the plains of Thrace near Adrianople - a portentous event that would lead, in less than a third of a century, to the fall of Rome itself. For the first ten years covered by his history, Ammianus was serving as an intelligence officer on the general staff of the Roman Army of the East. He was an interesting personality: a military man with an intellectually curious and

wide-ranging mind; an unsentimental realist about human nature, but intensely loyal to those he respected; and a man who could pay appropriate tribute to those whom politics or international rivalries made his enemies. These qualities come through in his account (from 355 A.D.) of a chillingly effective covert operation in which he and a small group of officers were sent by Constantius to find a way to eliminate the commander of the Roman Army of the Rhine, who had been forced to declare himself emperor. The mission was a success: they bribed some of the commander's German auxiliaries, who as Ammianus recounts, "made their way into the palace, dragged Silvanus, who was on his way to a Christian service, from the shrine in which the panic-stricken man had taken refuge, and butchered him with repeated sword-thrusts." Then he eulogizes his victim: "Such was the end of a commander of no small merit, who was driven by fear of the slanders in which a hostile clique [at the court of Constantius] had ensnared him in his absence to adopt extreme measures of self-defense." As an example of the vivid first-person accounts that make this book so memorable, I offer the following passage, in which Ammianus describes his adventures in 359 A.D. as the undermanned Roman outposts west of the Tigris brace for the onslaught of an immense Persian army: "[We] marched in haste to make ready for the defense of Nisibis, fearing that the Persians might disguise their intention to besiege it and then fall upon it unaware. While the necessary measures were being pushed on inside the walls, smoky fires were seen flickering from the direction of the Tigris past the Moors' Fort and Sisara and the rest of the country in an unbroken chain right up to the city, in such unusual numbers that it was clear that the enemy's raiding parties had broken through and crossed the river. We hurried on at full speed in case the roads should be blocked, but when we were two miles from the city we came upon a child crying in the middle of the road. He was a fine boy, apparently about eight years old, and was wearing a neck ornament. He told us that he was the son of a man of good family, and that his mother, panic-stricken at the approach of the enemy, had abandoned him because he was an impediment to her flight. Our general pitied him, and on his orders I set the boy before me on my horse and took him back to the city, but I found the walls already invested and enemy parties scouring the neighborhood." Dreading to find myself involved in the miseries of a siege, I put the boy in the shelter of a postern gate that was not entirely shut, and galloped back half dead with fear to rejoin our column, but I only just avoided capture." The informative and often puckishly witty notes accompanying this volume by Andrew Wallace-Hadrill also merit commendation.

I don't appreciate how this translation left out a number of passages, but that is my only complaint. Ammianus Marcellinus and his surviving writings stand out for many reasons; he was one of the last

great Roman historians (and is much more reliable than the writers of the *Historiae Augusta*), he was one of the only Roman soldiers of any rank to leave any writings of his experiences behind, and he was one of the last great pagan writers (though, like his beloved Emperor Julian to whom he devoted much of his writings, he was not unfair in his treatment of Christians and did not judge his fellow men on account of their religion-more than can be said for most of the Christians and pagans alike of his time). Most importantly, though, Marcellinus has left us with the best (and really one of the only) contemporary histories of the mid 4th Century Roman Empire and provides accounts of the climatic battles of Strausborg, Ctesiphon, and Adrianople. Read this book to gain a deeper understanding of Rome's twilight years in the West, and of one of its lasts spurts of energy and glory before being carved into a set of petty Germanic kingdoms.

Ammianus Marcellinus handles the vicissitudes of the later Roman Empire with an eloquence and timeless lore that matches that of his predecessors Livy, Suetonius, and Tacitus. He is not unfamiliar to those who study the ancient world of late antiquity because of the priceless information he provides and the fact that he is one of the few to actually encounter and document facts as they occurred either through personal experience or by the testimonies of his contemporaries. Ammianus was a Greek by descent yet born in Syria, and later became somewhat of an influence in the Roman military. His account of the incursions with the barbarians and persians is very detailed, elaborate, and laced with irony - traits that the great historians were all accustomed to. Ammianus' treatment of the Caesar's: Gallus, Constantius, Julian, Jovian, Valentinian, and Valen's is fair and nearly free from partialty - there is speculation as to whether or not he came in contact with any of the Caesar's. He was a pagan and of course an admirer of the pagan Emperor Julian - this left an impression upon the great historian Edward Gibbon whose prose and sentiments complement Ammianus' in so many fashions. Ammianus never penetrates into the intestinal matters of ecclesiastical affairs, but only mentions Christianity a few times, and this is practically free from bias. Overall as a source to gain a better understanding of the later Roman world with its valiant emperors, frequent internal disasters, military prowess and defeat, and decaying social strata in general, Ammianus Marcellinus' history is the most reliable...the value of this history must not be underestimated.

'Civilized' Humans haven't changed. This serves to remind us how brutally petty and devious we all are.

Ammianus Marcellinus writes history full of events, insights, and information. The decline of the Roman Empire is a particularly interesting era which fades into myth before the eventual emergence of Germanic civilization.

It is an extremely interesting look at the later part of the Roman Empire. The story of the Empire's decline is fascinating and told in a captivating way in this book. It is particularly cool to see the aspects of Medieval Europe slowly becoming visible.

An emperor tries to revive paganism in the face of rising Christianity. Fascinating but extremely violent.

Key Roman history

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