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“Terrible Diseases” Spreading Among the Romans in *Res Gestae* by Ammianus Marcellinus

STRESZCZENIE

„Okropne choroby” panoszące się wśród Rzymian w ujęciu Ammiana Marcellina

Opisywanie chorób nie było celem Ammiana Marcellina. Wspominał o nich wtedy, kiedy wymagała tego narracja i przedstawiane przez niego wydarzenia. Nie traktował ich instrumentalnie. Nie zamierzał za ich pomocą przekonywać czytelników do lansowanych przez siebie tez. Odwoływał się za to chętnie do ówczesnej wiedzy medycznej czy to w celu przeprowadzenia ich naukowej klasyfikacji, czy opisu. Ammian Marcellin wyraźnie rozróżniał choroby, atakujące pojedyncze osoby oraz choroby występujące masowo. Przy czym, jeśli chodzi o pierwsze z nich, trzeba podkreślić, że pisał o nich zdawkowo. Więcej miejsca poświęcał zarazom. Podchodził do nich w sposób beznamiętny, odwołując się do ówczesnej wiedzy i nie mieszając do tego sił nadprzyrodzonych. Światopogląd Ammiana Marcellina ujawnił się natomiast w jego wywodach na temat kwestii związanych z leczeniem chorób nie tylko za pomocą stosownych lekarstw, ale też amuletów, zaklęć staruszki czy uzdrawiania z licznych chorób przez herosa. Niezwykle interesujące są zarazem jego dywagacje dotyczące czynników warunkujących zdrowie, świadczące o dużym stopniu świadomości w tej materii. Historyk dysponował wiedzą o zależności zdrowia od właściwej diety, umiarkowanego stylu życia, zabiegów hartujących ciało, czystego powietrza i wody czy zdrowego, łagodnego klimatu.

Słowa kluczowe: Ammianus Marcellinus, choroby, zarazy, Późne Cesarstwo Rzymskie

ABSTRACT

Describing diseases was not the aim of Ammianus Marcellinus. He mentioned them whenever the narrative and the events he described required it. He did not treat them instrumentally. Neither he intended to use them to convince his readers of the theses he promoted. At the same time, he eagerly referred to the medical knowledge of that time, be it in order to carry out their scientific classification or description. Ammianus Marcellinus clearly distinguished between diseases suffered by individuals and mass diseases. As for the first, it must be emphasized that he wrote about them casually. He devoted more space to the plague, which he approached in a dispassionate way, invoking the knowledge of his time, without involving supernatural powers. Still, Ammianus Marcellinus's worldview manifested itself in his remarks on issues related to the healing of diseases, not only with appropriate medicines, but also with amulets, spells of an old woman, and the healing of many diseases by a divine hero. His reflections on the factors that influence health are also of particular interest and show that he was particularly aware of this issue. The historian knew about the dependence of health on a proper diet, a moderate lifestyle, body hardening treatments, clean air and water, and a healthy mild climate.

Keywords: Ammianus Marcellinus, diseases, plagues, Late Roman Empire

IN the fourth century after Christ, Greco-Roman culture flourished once again, as is amply demonstrated by the historiographical works produced at the time. One of the most famous authors of classical historiography of that period was undoubtedly Ammianus Marcellinus¹, writing in Latin, follower of traditional cults. In the surviving part of his work *Roman History* (*Res Gestae*), covering the years 353–378, Ammianus Marcellinus frequently mentioned various kinds of diseases. According to his account, the Romans, inhabitants of the world's capital, were affected by “terrible diseases” (*morborum acerbitates*) to a greater extent than elsewhere². In their treatment, the historian stressed,

¹ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum libri qui supersunt*, Hrsg. C.V. Clark, Bd. I, Berlin 1910 [hereinafter: Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum*]. There exist extensive sources on Ammianus Marcellinus. Cf. the bibliographies contained in the works: R.C. Blockley, *Ammianus Marcellinus: A Study of His Historiography and Political Thought*, Brussels 1975; J. Matthews, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus*, Michigan 2007; G. Kelly, *Ammianus Marcellinus: The Allusive Historian*, Cambridge 2008; D. Brodka, *Ammianus Marcellinus. Studien zum Geschichtsdnken im vierten Jahrhundert n. Chr.*, Kraków 2009; and especially in: F.W. Jenkins, *Ammianus Marcellinus. An Annotated Bibliography 1474 to the Present*, Leiden–Boston 2017.

² Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum* XIV 6, 23.

all medical art was helpless, and the only salutary and effective means of fighting disease was the isolation of the sick.

In this article I examine Ammianus Marcellinus’s opinion on diseases. I answer the questions why, in the historian’s opinion, incurable diseases were spreading in the Eternal City in the first place? To what extent was he versed in the types of diseases and did this correspond to the medical knowledge of the time? Was he aware of the causes of the conditions described? Did he pay attention to people’s attitudes toward diseases? Finally, did he mention their treatment?

An analysis of Ammianus Marcellinus’s mention of disease in the capital of the *Imperium Romanum* proves a broader context of his statement. This is because it concerns a fragment of a larger *passus*, in which the historian speaks critically about the inhabitants of Rome at that time³. The author laments that *Urbs* is no longer, as it once was, the seat of all virtues (*virtutum omnium domicilium*). Not only did its residents lose the hospitality, so essential to their ancestors, as a consequence of empty conceit⁴, but they also expelled foreigners for fear of food shortages, which Ammianus Marcellinus already considered wickedness⁵, especially since he had earlier written about the abundance of food⁶ and the long and health-damaging feasts held by rich Romans⁷ who boasted of their wealth⁸. He also pointed out that the citizens of the Eternal City showed great respect and reverence for people who were unmarried and had no children⁹. According to Ammianus Marcellinus, countless Romans from society’s lowest and poorest strata spent their nights in wine taverns¹⁰. The historian stressed that the mob, fond of immoderate wine drinking, would start riots should the beverage run out¹¹. Other citizens of Rome, meanwhile, wasted their time at theatrical performances. They played dice avidly or indulged in the passion of chariot racing from dawn to dusk¹².

³ Cf. A. Młeczek, *Dekadencja moralna społeczeństwa rzymskiego w “Res Gestae” Ammiana Marcellina*, Kraków 2019, pp. 281–354.

⁴ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum* XIV, 6, 21–22.

⁵ *Ibidem*, XIV, 6, 19.

⁶ *Ibidem*, XIV, 6, 16.

⁷ *Ibidem*, XIV, 6, 14.

⁸ *Ibidem*, XIV, 6, 9–10.

⁹ *Ibidem*, XIV, 6, 22.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, XIV, 6, 25.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, XIV, 6, 1.

¹² *Ibidem*, XIV, 6, 25.

Thus, his mention of incurable diseases that vexed the inhabitants of the world's capital to a greater extent than elsewhere should be read in this context. In addition, this interjection allowed the historian to emphasize the recklessness and inconsistency of the Romans, who, on the one hand, avoided contact with the sick, and, on the other, were unconcerned about the risk of falling ill and undertook long-distance travel when, for example, they received an invitation to a wedding, counting on the gift of gold customary on such occasions¹³.

In Ammianus Marcellinus's account, one can distinguish references to diseases affecting specific individuals and those of a mass nature, referred to as pestilence.

Cases of diseases of individuals

The dictionary definition of the words "disease" or "illness" is short: "an unhealthy condition caused by infection, a disorder"¹⁴, else: "unhealthy state of the body or mind"¹⁵. When mentioning such situations in *Res Gestae*, Ammianus Marcellinus used the word *morbus*, meaning sickness, but at the same time worry or a morbid passion¹⁶. It is, therefore, understandable that the historian was primarily interested in diseases plaguing the rulers whose reigns he was concerned with by virtue of the events he depicted. Thus, he discussed, albeit rather briefly, the illness of Emperor Constantius that led to his death. According to Ammianus Marcellinus, the ruler's ailments began with a slight fever (*leviore febrī*), which he caught on the road and which manifested in Tarsus. Initially, the emperor thought that "movement during the journey would help him overcome the crisis caused by poor health". He continued the expedition the following day, which, however, was already impossible a day after that, when "intensifying illness stopped him in his tracks" (*morbi gravitate*). Ammianus Marcellinus reported only one symptom: a high fever that so "inflamed the veins" (*urentē calore nimio venas*) of the ruler that it was impossible to touch

¹³ *Ibidem*, XIV, 6, 24.

¹⁴ *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, new ed., London 1987, p. 291, s.v. *disease*.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 521, s.v. *illness*.

¹⁶ *Słownik łacińsko-polski*, ed. M. Plezia, vol. III, Warszawa 1998, p. 535, s.v. *morbus*.

his body, which the historian likened to a heated hearth¹⁷. The patient had difficulty breathing, and during the agony “there were pauses in his breath”. Finally, in the historian’s account, the ruler fell silent, although he was still “struggling with his fading life for a long time before he parted from the world”¹⁸.

Ammianus Marcellinus also drew attention to the circumstances of Emperor Jovian’s death at a young age. According to his account, this ruler, aged only 33, was said to have departed this world “distended by indigestion (*cruditate distentus*) when he greedily absorbed a mixture of various foods”. However, the historian did not rule out the possibility that his death was caused by a noxious odor (*odor noxius*) in a bedroom freshly painted with lime, or from overheated glowing coals there, which was said to have led to swelling of the head (*extuberato capitis*)¹⁹.

Ammianus Marcellinus devoted some space to the curious case of the illness of Emperors Valentinian and his brother Valens, which occurred immediately after the former was declared co-regent of the latter (year 364). At the time, both succumbed to a violent attack of fever (*febris*). The historian stressed that although the hope of a long life for both was confirmed, a thorough investigation was ordered in order to determine the cause of their illness. The actual reason for the investigation, according to Ammianus Marcellinus, was the intention to pacify the alleged opposition associated with the former Emperor Julian’s entourage and thus attempt to defame the memory of that ruler. In doing so, Ammianus cites opinions circulating at the time on the subject: “persistent rumor had it” (*loquebatur pertinax rumor*). The historian made it clear that the investigation did not detect even a trace of conspiracy (*ne verbo quidem tenus insidiarum indicio ullo reperto*)²⁰. So in this case,

¹⁷ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum* XXI, 15, 2: “paulatimque urente calore nimio venas, ut ne tangi quidem corpus eius posset, in modum foculi fervens”.

¹⁸ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum* XXI, 15, 2–3. Ferdinand Moog and Alex Karenberg (*Roman Emperors Suffering from Apoplexy: The Medical and Historical Significance of Classical Literary Sources*, “Journal of Medical Biography” 2004, vol. XII, p. 48) state that Ammianus noting the deaths of Emperors Constantius II and Valentinian I “describes many symptoms” and “demonstrates his knowledge of pathophysiology and refers to commonplace aetiologies as contemporary physicians used them”.

¹⁹ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum* XXV, 10, 13.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, XXVI, 4, 4. Cf. also Zosimus, *Historia Nova*, III, 14, 15, ed. E. Paschoud, Paris 2000. David Woods (*The Baptism of the Emperor Valens*, “Classica

the illness, as perceived by the public and Ammianus Marcellinus himself, became an excuse to crack down on political opponents. The historian also wrote about another illness of Emperor Valentinian, which almost led to his death (in 367)²¹. However, he did not specify what type of illness was involved. In turn, when reporting on the circumstances of the death of Valentinian I (year 375), he pointed out a number of symptoms accompanying the death of the ruler²². The historian discussed them in some detail. The emperor's misfortune began with his uncontrollable anger, after which he suddenly lost his voice and breath. The ruler was flushed, but the blood stopped circulating and he was covered in a deadly sweat. His insides were said to burn like fire, indicating high fever consuming his body. For some time, despite these ailments, the ruler retained consciousness. In the end, however, before he died, he was covered with blue spots, wheezed, gnashed his teeth and made uncontrollable movements of his hands. According to Ferdinand Moog and Axel Karenberg, these symptoms indicate a neurological illness²³.

When describing the cruelty of Valentinian, Ammianus Marcellinus offers some very interesting reflections on the subject of anger, considered an ulcer of the soul (*ulcus... animi*), "vexing for a long time, or even constantly" (*diuturnum, interdumque perpetuum*), which can be seen as a kind of mental disorder. The historian, citing the opinion of the sages (*prudentes*), indicated that the affliction was born of weakness of mind. These sages, relying on the argument of probability (*argumento probabili*), argued that more prone to anger were "the weakened rather than the healthy (*incolumibus languidi*), women rather than men, the old rather than the young, people burdened with worries rather than the happy"²⁴. As it seems, Ammianus Marcellinus was inspired by Lucius Annaeus Seneca, known as Seneca the Younger or the Philosopher, and his extensive philosophical dialogue *De ira*, which he devoted to anger²⁵.

et Mediaevalia" 1994, vol. XLV, pp. 211–221), relying on Ammian's account of the aforementioned illness of Valentinian, argues that the emperor's baptism occurred in 364, shortly after his accession to the throne.

²¹ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum* XXVII, 6, 1.

²² *Ibidem*, XXX, 6, 1–6.

²³ F.P. Moog, A. Karenberg, *Untersuchungen zum Tode Valentinians I in der Schilderung des Ammianus Marcellinus und anderer Autoren*, "Würzburger Medizinhistorische Mitteilungen" 2003, Bd. XXII, pp. 113–134.

²⁴ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum* XXVII, 7, 4.

²⁵ Seneca, *De ira*, I, 13, 5; I, 20, 3; II, 19, 4; III, 9, 4–5, [in:] *Moral Essays*, ed. J.W. Basore, London–New York 1928. Cf. D. Budzanowska, "Iram dixerunt

As for illnesses of non-emperors mentioned by name, the historian limited himself to merely listing the afflictions that plagued them. Thus, he reported that the newly appointed praetorian prefect Domitian, appointed by Emperor Constantius and sent to Syria, avoided contact with the resident Caesar Gallus, for a long time citing an illness as his excuse (*morbosque diu causatus*)²⁶, and that Salustius, elected emperor after Julian’s death, did not want to assume power because of his illness and old age (*causant morbos et senectutem*)²⁷.

Ammianus Marcellinus did not devote much space to the illnesses of named individuals in his *Res Gestae*. Rather, he wrote about diseases in general terms, referring to the term *morbis*, sometimes only detailing specific ailments, such as swelling of the head (*extuberato capitis*), distention with indigestion (*cruditas distentus*), attack of fever (febris), slight fever *levis febris* or, finally, *ulcus... animi*.

Cases of pestilence

The dictionary definition of the terms *plague* and *pestilence* is succinct: “an attack of disease causing death and spreading quickly to a large number of people”²⁸. When writing about plague, Ammianus Marcellinus used a variety of vocabulary: *labes* (XIV, 6, 24; XIX, 4, 6; XXIII, 6, 24), *lues* (XIX, 4, 7; XXIII, 6, 77), *pestis* (XIX, 4, 8), *pestilentia* (XIX, 4, 1; XIX, 4, 2). *Labes* means both disease and pestilence. Its semantics, however, is broader. The word also means a fall, collapse of something, earthquake, misfortune, doom, ruin, annihilation, but also blemish, disgrace and bad seed²⁹. In turn, the word *lues* means disease and pestilence, but also misfortune, doom, ruin³⁰. Similarly, the term *pestis* refers to pestilence and disease, especially contagious, but also means doom, destruction, death, bad seed³¹. *Pestilentia* means primarily pestilence, plague,

brevem insaniam”, czyli o gniewie jako szaleństwie w dialogu “De ira” Seneki Młodszego, “Symbolae Philologorum Posnaniensium” 2013, vol. XXIII, no. 1, pp. 57–70.

²⁶ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum* XIV, 7, 10.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, XXV, 5, 3.

²⁸ *Longman dictionary...*, p. 784, s.v. *plague*; p. 768, s.v. *pestilence*; p. 889, s.v. *zaraza*.

²⁹ *Słownik łacińsko-polski...*, vol. III, p. 298, s.v. *labes*.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 394, s.v. *lues*.

³¹ *Słownik łacińsko-polski*, ed. M. Plezia, vol. IV, Warszawa 1998, p. 146, s.v. *pestis*.

epidemic, but also venom, malice, corruption³². Addressing the systematics of pestilence, Ammianus Marcellinus used the terms *pandemos*, *epidemos*, *loemodes*³³, not found in other literature from that time discovered thus far³⁴.

In his work *Res Gestae*, he briefly recapitulated the knowledge of his contemporaries about the plague. In doing so, he referred generally to philosophers and famous physicians.³⁵ According to them, “pestilences (*pestilentias*) arise from excess cold or heat, moisture or drought”³⁶. Indirectly, the historian thus referred to the humoral theory of Hippocrates, developed by Galen³⁷, widely accepted in the fourth century³⁸. It proved that a balance between four humors – fluids circulating freely in the human body, which were supposed to be blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile – was necessary to maintain health. These fluids were believed to have characteristic properties of each other: blood was hot and moist, phlegm – cold and moist, yellow bile – warm and dry, and black bile – cold and dry. Dryness, dampness, cold and heat were also factors that characterized the environment. And in it, harmony between the aforementioned factors was also desirable. Its violation led to various complications and precisely to diseases³⁹.

³² *Ibidem*, vol. IV, p. 145, s.v. *pestilentia*. This was the term most often used to describe pestilence in Roman literature. Cf. J. Iwańska, *Znaczenie terminu epidemia w starożytnej literaturze grecko-rzymskiej. Próba analizy na wybranych przykładach*, “Seminare” 2014, vol. XXXV, issue 4, p. 181.

³³ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum* XIX, 4, 7.

³⁴ On the semantic development of the term epidemic in Greco-Roman literature, cf. J. Iwańska, *op. cit.*, pp. 178–183.

³⁵ Although he did not name them, among philosophers he may have been referring to Plato (*Timaeus* 87a) and Aristotle (*De partibus animalium* 673b), and among physicians to Hippocrates and Galen.

³⁶ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum* XIX 4, 2: “Nimietatem frigoris aut caloris uelumorisautsiccitatis pestilentias gignere philosophi et illustres medici tradiderunt”.

³⁷ Cf. J. Jouanna, *The Legacy of the Hippocratic Treatise the Nature of Man: The Theory of the Four Humours*, [in:] *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen: Selected Papers*, ed. P. van der Eijk, transl. N. Allies, Leiden–Boston 2012, pp. 335–359.

³⁸ Cf. Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Ad populum Antiochenum homilia* 10; idem, *De poenitentia homilia* 5, 5. Cf. also W. Cerań, *Jan Chryzostom o leczeniu i lekarzach*, “Acta Universitatis Lodziensis. Folia Historica” 1993, issue 48, pp. 5–6.

³⁹ Cf. on this subject: T. Brzeziński, *Wiedza o budowie i czynnościach organizmu ludzkiego*, [in:] *Historia medycyny*, ed. idem, Warszawa 1988, p. 100; M. Koszko, *Skąd brać rekruta do armii i dlaczego? Antyczna nauka wyjaśniająca*

Ammianus Marcellinus thus referred to the then widely accepted theories regarded as scientific, pointing out that “inhabitants of swampy and wet areas suffer from coughs, eye diseases and similar ailments, while attacks of fever plague the population of the hot zone. But while fire is more effective than all other elements, dryness leads to death sooner”⁴⁰.

When dealing with diseases spreading rapidly among wide swathes of the population, the historian drew attention to noxious fumes either resulting from the fetor of decomposing bodies⁴¹, or emanating from the ground and leading to a thickening of the air, making it difficult to rid organisms of their secretions, thus leading to their death⁴². In doing so, the historian referred to the testimony of Homer⁴³ and argued: “for this reason, as Homer states, and it is known to us and from many later experiences, when a pestilence of this kind (*labes*) breaks out, animals die sooner than humans because they constantly have their heads turned downward”⁴⁴.

Ammianus Marcellinus then went on to systematize the different types of pestilence, in which he relied, albeit without mentioning it, on the findings of Hippocrates⁴⁵. Thus, he wrote, “The first type of pestilence (*luis*) is called pandemic – it causes the inhabitants of drier areas to suffer from frequent attacks of fever; the second type, epidemic, occurs seasonally, weakens visual acuity and causes a dangerous accumulation of moisture; and finally, the third type of pestilence, lemodic, also occurs seasonally, but causes rapid death”⁴⁶.

sugestie Wegecjusza zamieszczone w dziele “Epitoma rei militaris”, “Piotrkowskie Zeszyty Historyczne” 2001, vol. III, pp. 21–23; idem, Smaki Konstantynopola, [in:] Konstantynopol – Nowy Rzym. Miasto i ludzie w okresie wczesnobizantyńskim, eds M.J. Leszka, T. Wolińska, Warszawa 2011, pp. 472–474.

⁴⁰ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum* XIX, 4, 2.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, XIX, 4, 5.

⁴² *Ibidem*, XIX, 4, 6.

⁴³ According to Homer (*Ilias*, I, 1–51), the plague with which Apollo infected the Achaeans, thus punishing them for insulting his priest, affected the animals first: dogs and mules.

⁴⁴ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum* XIX, 4, 6.

⁴⁵ Hippocrates, *Epidemics* 2, 4–7, ed., transl. W.D. Smith, Cambridge 1994, Loeb Classical Library 477, *passim*.

⁴⁶ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum* XIX, 4, 7.

When he wrote about the terrible diseases prevalent among the Romans⁴⁷, he most likely had in mind various kinds of infectious diseases that could be described as pestilence. For he considered them incurable, since he pointed out the helplessness of all medical art in relieving them.

As for the specific cases of pestilence referred to by Ammianus Marcellinus, it is necessary to mention first the epidemic raging in Attica in the fifth century BC. The historian, citing the account of Thucydides, wrote about a terrible disease that fell on the Athenians at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War (*acerbo genere morbi vexavit*)⁴⁸, and called it a catastrophe (*clades*).

Elsewhere in his work, the historian, describing the siege of Amida by the Persians in the year 359, mentioned the plague that spread there⁴⁹. In his account, the fierce struggle to hold the city entailed the deaths of such a large number of defenders that not only was it impossible to keep up with the burial of the fallen, but there was not enough space for graves. As a consequence, the plague (*pestilentia*) added to the misfortunes hounding the city. It broke out, as the historian notes, “because the bodies were devoured by vermin in humid heat, and the inhabitants were exhausted for many reasons”⁵⁰. Ammianus Marcellinus called it a pernicious pestilence (*exitiali peste*)⁵¹, but while he indicated that it tormented (*quasatis*) the population sheltering behind Amida’s walls, he reported that it only killed only a small number of people. The text indicates that the immediate cause of the deaths was excessive heat, and thus, as might be assumed, high fever afflicting the sick⁵². According to the historian, the difficult situation was aggravated by the multitude of people (*multitudo augebat*). Clearly, therefore, according to him, human concentrations contributed to the spread of

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, XIV, 6, 23: “morborum acerbitates”.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, XIX, 4, 4.

⁴⁹ Cf. G. Sabbah, *La Peste d’Amida (Ammien Marcellin 19.4)*, [in:] *Mémoires du Centre Jean Palerne*, vol. III (*Médecins et Médecine dans l’Antiquité*), ed. idem, Saint-Étienne 1982, pp. 131–157; J. Matthews, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus*, Michigan 2007, pp. 57–67.

⁵⁰ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum* XIX, 4, 1.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, XIX, 4, 8.

⁵² In the opinion of Odette Gaudin (*Remarques sur le texte “La peste d’Amida [Ammien Marcellin, 19,4]”*, [in:] *Études de médecine romaine*, ed. G. Sabbah, Saint-Étienne 1988, pp. 39–41) it was botulism or meningococcal disease.

the plague. Only ten days after its outbreak, a small rain was enough to disperse the compacted and dense air and restore people to good health⁵³.

A particular kind of pestilence, a plague of primordial times (*labes primordialis*), was mentioned by Ammianus Marcellinus in book 23 of his work, chapter 6⁵⁴. It allegedly infected Roman troops after the capture of Seleucia in the year 165, when they ransacked a temple described by the historian as the temple of Apollo Comaeus⁵⁵. The Romans apparently accessed some kind of a secret cache, earlier inaccessible to the people thanks to “the secret art of the Chaldean priests”, and “some kind of plague from primordial times” was released from there. According to Ammianus Marcellinus, it had “in itself the power of incurable diseases, and in the era of Verus and Marcus Antoninus it contaminated with a deadly disease everything from the very borders of Persia to the Rhine and Gaul”⁵⁶. It is interesting that although Ammianus Marcellinus, a follower of traditional cults, mentions the capture of a statue

⁵³ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum* XIX, 4, 8.

⁵⁴ The plague is extensively discussed in many sources. Cf. among others J.F. Gilliam, *The Plague under Marcus Aurelius*, “American Journal of Philology” 1961, vol. LXXXII, no. 3, pp. 225–251; R.J. Littman, M.L. Littman, *Galen and the Antonine Plague*, “The American Journal of Philology” 1973, vol. XCIV, no. 3, pp. 243–255; R.P. Duncan-Jones, *The Impact of the Antonine Plague*, “Journal of Roman Archaeology” 1996, vol. IX, pp. 108–136; P. Janiszewski, *Natura w służbie propagandy. Kataklizmy i rzadkie fenomeny w łacińskich brewiariach historycznych i w “Historia Augusta”*, [in:] *Chrześcijaństwo u schyłku starożytności. Studia źródłoznawcze*, vol. II, eds T. Derda, E. Wipszycka, Kraków 1999, pp. 55–66; J.R. Fears, *The Plague under Marcus Aurelius and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, “Infectious Disease Clinics of North America” 2004, vol. XVIII, no. 1, pp. 65–77; Ch. Bruun, *The Antonine Plague and the ‘Third-Century Crisis’*, [in:] *Crises and the Roman Empire: Proceedings of the Seventh Workshop of the International Network Impact of Empire, Nijmegen, June 20–24 2006*, eds O. Hekster, G. de Kleijn, D. Slootjes, Leiden–Boston 2007, pp. 201–218; M. Vlach, *The Antonine Plague and Impact Possibilities During the Marcomannic Wars*, [in:] *Marcomannic Wars and Antonine Plague. Selected Essays on Two Disasters that Shook the Roman World*, eds M. Erdrich, B. Komoróczy, P. Madejski, M. Vlach, Brno–Lublin 2020, pp. 23–36; B. Sitek, *Pestis Antonini. Reakcja Marka Aureliusza na globalną starożytną epidemię*, “Teka Komisji Prawniczej PAN Oddział w Lublinie” 2020, vol. XIII, no. 1, pp. 389–399.

⁵⁵ According to the findings of Richard P. Duncan-Jones (*The Antonine Plague Revisited*, “Arctos” 2018, vol. LII, p. 43), the aforementioned epidemic can be found in sources in the years 165–192.

⁵⁶ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum* XXIII, 6, 24.

of Apollo from Seleucia and the burning of that city by Roman troops, he does not directly link the pestilence that later afflicted the *Imperium Romanum* to the punishment sent by the gods.

It is not known what disease ravaged the Roman Empire at that time. Smallpox, typhus and bubonic plague are considered today⁵⁷. We also do not know how far-reaching the effects of the aforementioned plague were. Orosius indicated that it ravaged all of Italy, and cities and settlements became depopulated and decayed to the point that they were left as ruins overgrown with forests⁵⁸. Some scholars even believed that in time that epidemic led to the collapse of the Roman empire⁵⁹. Ammianus Marcellinus also suggested some kind of plague or contagious disease (*pestilentiae morbus*) that allegedly attacked soldiers in different parts (*per varia sparserat*) of *Imperium Romanum*⁶⁰.

Prevention and treatment

Ammianus Marcellinus did not overlook issues related to prevention and treatment⁶¹. In the case of pestilence, that is, infectious diseases, as the historian emphasized, a salutary remedy was to refrain from visiting a friend, even when it appeared that said friend was suffering from a disease similar to the one that afflicted the cautious visitor. Another “quite effective remedy” (*remedium aliud satis validum*), used by the “even more cautious”, Ammianus Marcellinus considered to be a purifying bath given to servants sent to visit acquaintances plagued by some ailment in order to gather information about their condition, before they were allowed to return home. It seems that the historian himself considered such treatment exaggerated, since he stated: “they are so much afraid of the pestilence viewed even through someone else’s eyes”⁶².

⁵⁷ A.R. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius: A Biography*, New York 2000, pp. 49–50; J.F. Gilliam, *The Plague under Marcus Aurelius*, “American Journal of Philology” 1961, vol. LXXXII, no. 3, p. 225; R.J. Littman, M.L. Littman, *op. cit.*, pp. 243–255. Yan Zelener (*Genetic Evidence, Density Dependence and Epidemiological Models of the “Antonine Plague”*, [in:] *L’Impatto della “peste Antonina”*, ed. E. Lo Cascio, Bari 2012, pp. 167–177) argues in favor of smallpox.

⁵⁸ Orosius, VII, 15, 5–6.

⁵⁹ Ch. Bruun, *op. cit.*, pp. 201–218; J.R. Fears, *op. cit.*, pp. 65–77.

⁶⁰ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum* XXX, 6, 4.

⁶¹ Cf. A.F.J. Guzmán, *El mundo de la medicina antigua en Amiano Marcelino*, “Athenaeum” 2001, no. 89, pp. 223–229.

⁶² Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum* XIV, 6, 23: “ita etiam alienis oculis uisa metuitur labes”.

Thus, he did not know the cause of the spread of diseases, but clearly, according to his account, an effective way to protect against diseases for which there was no cure was isolation from sick people. Avoiding pestilence even became proverbial, since Ammianus Marcellinus – describing the customs of the Persians – pointed out that the latter “avoided exquisite feasts and excesses, and above all excessive drinking, like the plague” (*luis*).

However, the mentioned isolation was applied inconsistently. For, as the historian reported, “others, in spite of all this caution, do not heed their weakened bodies, but when they receive an invitation to a wedding, where gifts of gold are laid on the open right hand, they rush eagerly as far as to Spolegium”⁶³, a town 150 kilometers from Rome. Thus, there were people who, tempted either by the prospect of a wedding party or by the possibility of getting rich, risked a long journey and contact with a large group of revelers, heedless of the threat of contagion involved. As such, the Roman community did not act in a coherent and responsible manner.

Treatment was first and foremost the responsibility of the physician, as evidenced by Ammianus’ description of the sudden illness of Valentinian I in 375, when a physician (*medicus*) was tirelessly sought⁶⁴. As for the direct fight against illness, he pointed to various methods. Four times he wrote about the treatment by means of medicines. Thanks to various medicines, Emperor Valentinian I (*imperator remediis multiplicibus recreatus*), reportedly close to death, was said to have recovered in 367⁶⁵. According to an account by the historian Menophilos, an eunuch of King Mithridates of Pontus managed to cure the seriously ill (*vexatam asperitate morborum*) Drypentina, that ruler’s daughter, with various medicines (*remediorum solacio plene curatam*)⁶⁶. Ammianus Marcellinus stressed that no medicines helped the dying Emperor Constantius, afflicted with high fever and severe dyspnea⁶⁷. The historian mentioned treatment with medicines even when he defended the reliability of dreams and other signs sent to people by the gods. At the time, he proved that if they sometimes do not work, it is only the fault of their interpreters. He pointed out that

⁶³ *Ibidem*, XIV, 6, 23.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, XXX, 6, 4.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, XXVII, 6, 4.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, XVI, 7, 10.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, XXI, 15, 2–3.

“a grammarian sometimes expresses himself in a barbaric manner, and a musician may play a false note, and a doctor may not know the right medicine, and yet neither grammar, nor music, nor medicine has ceased to exist for this reason”⁶⁸. The historian also mentioned a plant called Ra, growing on the banks of the river of the same name, whose root was used to make various medicines⁶⁹.

In *Res Gestae* Ammianus Marcellinus names other means of healing than just medicines. He expressed faith in the power of the famous soothsayer Mobsos, who after his death, as a *heros* “very effectively cures numerous diseases” (*dolorum varietati medentur plerumque sospitales*)⁷⁰. He also mentions wearing amulets around the neck (*remedia... collo gestaret*) as a remedy against fever – quartana (*quartanus*) or against other ailments (*doloris alterius*)⁷¹. He pointed out that the medical art of the time permitted (*quod medicinae quoque admittit auctoritas*) the use of an old woman’s spell (*anile incantamentum*) to relieve pain (*ad leniendum adhibuisset dolorem*)⁷².

One of the methods of treatment described by Ammianus was bloodletting. It was used, albeit unsuccessfully, to save the dying Valentinian I. Despite repeatedly puncturing the vein, not even a drop of blood would flow. The historian seems to suggest that the lack of success in this case was due to the very high fever that plagued the ruler. As a result, the internal organs burned or dried up and “some passages for the blood (which we now all hemorrhoids) were closed and incrustated by the cold chills”⁷³.

Determinants of health

It seems extremely interesting that the historian saw a connection between a proper diet and moderate lifestyle and health. Characterizing Emperor Constantius, he argued that the emperor “led a modest and sober life, kept moderation in eating and drinking,

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, XXI, 1, 12–14.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, XXII, 8, 28. Reference to the Volga River and the rhubarb roots that grew near it. Cf. Ammianus Marcellinus, *Dzieje rzymskie*, transl. I. Lewandowski, Warszawa 2001, p. 398, note 88.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, XIV, 8, 3.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, XIX, 12, 14.

⁷² *Ibidem*, XVI, 8, 2.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, XXX, 6, 5; English translation: Ammianus Marcellinus. With an English Translation By John C. Rolfe, vol. III, Cambridge 2014.

and thus enjoyed such good health that he rarely contracted any diseases”⁷⁴. Ammianus Marcellinus, indicating that people who stay away from “debauchery and superfluity” keep their health, cited “centuries of experience and medical science”⁷⁵. Elsewhere in *Res Gestae*, he indicated that his contemporaries often needed the help of medicine because of their lifestyles – neither frugal nor abstemious. So this time he implicitly suggested the dependence of health on an temperate lifestyle⁷⁶.

The historian pointed out how important for one’s health is the location of the place of residence. He stated that in Alexandria in Egypt, “healing breezes blew”, and the air there was calm and mild.⁷⁷ In contrast, in Canopus, twelve miles away, gentle winds blew and a healthy climate prevailed. The whisper of a warm breeze was said to give the impression of being “out of our world”⁷⁸. According to Ammianus Marcellinus, a healthy and mild climate was also found in Arabia Felix, where, in addition, there were supposed to be hot springs of healing waters⁷⁹. Tibetan Seres, who lived a blissful life, enjoyed a pleasant and healthy climate. These positive conditions for health were created by clean air, very mild, weak winds and large areas of shady forests⁸⁰.

Ammianus Marcellinus was convinced that almost all peasants living in the high mountain areas of Thrace Proper, Mysia and Scythia (today’s Dobrudja) surpassed the average inhabitants of the *Imperium Romanum* in robust health (*salubritate virium*) and enjoyed “a privilege of longevity” (*praerogativa quadam vitae longius*). These villagers linked the state of their health to abstaining from a mixture of warm foods and the absence of contamination by the sins of civilization (*nullis adhuc maculis rerum humanarum infectos*). They also cited the beneficial effects of the “constant freshness of the dew”, which strengthened and hardened their bodies with its icy drops, and of clean air or the life-giving rays of the sun⁸¹.

⁷⁴ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum* XXI, 16, 5.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, XXI, 16, 5.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, XXII, 16, 18.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, XXII, 16, 8.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, XXII, 16, 14.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, XXIII, 6, 46.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, XXIII, 6, 67.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*, XXVII, 4, 14.

The historian stressed the importance not only of clean air, but also of clean water for health. He pointed out that “according to certain opinions, it is air and water, as it usually happens, poisoned by the fetor of decaying bodies or something similar, that destroys health the most”⁸². Later in his argument, he expressed the opinion that “a sudden change in the air makes diseases less severe”⁸³. He then cites the knowledge of others (*affirmant etiam aliqui*), albeit without any names, indicating that, according to them, it is the air thick with excessive concentrations of fumes from the earth, making it difficult to remove secretions from the body, that becomes the cause of death for people⁸⁴.

The historian also mentioned another factor harmful to health, namely deadly fumes emanating from a fissure in the ground in Assyrian territory⁸⁵. Health was also negatively affected, in Ammianus Marcellinus’s opinion, by the food that the Roman army managed to get after the death of Emperor Julian during the expedition to Persia. According to the historian’s account, the Romans could not find any food at that time except for southernwood (*abrotanum*), wormwood (*absinthium*), arums (*dracontium*) and other kinds of meagre herbs, which were supplemented with the meat of camels and other pack animals⁸⁶. Unhealthy, therefore, according to Ammianus Marcellinus, were not only the indicated plants, but also the meat of the said animals. The historian did not exclude the possibility that the death of Emperor Jovian was caused by a noxious smell in a bedroom freshly painted with lime, or by overheated glowing coals there, which allegedly lead to swelling of the head⁸⁷. He was therefore aware of the pathogenic nature of both factors, although it is likely that the second case may have been more about the lethal effects of carbon monoxide.

Ammianus Marcellinus, therefore, was well aware that health depends on a proper diet, moderation in eating and drinking, abstaining from “debauchery and indulgence”, hardening the body, access to clean air and water, a healthy, mild climate or the benefits

⁸² *Ibidem*, XIX, 4, 5.

⁸³ *Ibidem*, XIX, 4, 5: “uel certe aeris permutationem subitam aegritudines parere leuiores”.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, XIX, 4, 6.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, XXIII, 6, 17.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, XXV, 8, 6.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, XXV, 10, 13.

of the sun. Similarly, he was aware of the harmfulness of certain plants and foods, fumes from the earth or freshly lime-painted rooms.

Summary

Describing diseases was not Ammianus Marcellinus’s goal. He mentioned them when the narrative and the events he depicted required it. He did not treat them instrumentally. He did not intend to use them to convince readers of the ideas he was advocating. Instead, he readily referred to the medical knowledge of the time, whether for scientific classification or description. Ammianus Marcellinus clearly distinguished between diseases suffered by individuals and those occurring en masse.

With regard to the former, it should be noted that he wrote about them in a perfunctory manner, defining them with the term *morbus*, sometimes only detailing particular ailments, such as swelling of the head (*extuberato capitis*), distention with indigestion (*cruditas distentus*), attack of fever (*febris*), slight fever (*levis febris*), or finally ulcer of the soul (*ulcus... animi*). On the other hand, in the latter case, namely diseases spreading amongst large concentrations of people, he employed technical terms used in Latin at the time. He used them in a context suggesting the rapid spread of diseases referred to by the Latin term for pestilence, as well as pointing to their tragic consequences, leading to the death of infected masses of people. As a follower of traditional cults, Ammianus Marcellinus approached pestilence as such in a dispassionate manner, appealing to the knowledge of the time and leaving supernatural forces out of it, unlike, for example, the Christian Eusebius of Caesarea, author of *Ecclesiastical History*, who treated diseases, including pestilence, as an instrument in the hands of God, through which the One intervened in history on behalf of Christians. Eusebius tried to convince the reader of God’s alliance with humans, a heavenly *symmachia* (οὐράνιον συμμαχίαν)⁸⁸, which would lead humanity to salvation by carrying out the plan of divine providence⁸⁹. Ammianus Marcellinus’s worldview,

⁸⁸ Eusebius Caesariensis, *Historia kościelna* IX, 7, 16, transl. A. Caba based on the transl. by A. Lisiecki, ed. H. Pietras, Krakow 2013.

⁸⁹ Cf. P. Janiszewski, *op. cit.*, pp. 36–37; *Eusebius of Caesarea Tradition and Innovations*, eds A. Johnson, J. Schott, Washington 2013, *passim*.

on the other hand, was revealed in his arguments on issues related to curing diseases not only with appropriate medicines, but also with amulets, old woman's incantations or healing from numerous diseases by a *heros*. Also very interesting are his reflections on the determinants of health, testifying to his high degree of awareness in that regard. The historian knew that health depends on a proper diet, a moderate lifestyle, body-hardening treatments, clean air and water or a healthy, mild climate.

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