

## AMMIANUS MARCELLINUS

### The Luxury of the Rich in Rome

Source: Ammianus Marcellinus, History, XIV.16. From: William Stearns Davis, ed., Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources, 2 Vols. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912-13), Vol. II: Rome and the West, pp. 224-225, 239-244, 247-258, 260-265, 305-309.

*The following was written only about a generation before Alaric plundered Rome in 410 CE. Ammianus Marcellinus, who observed Rome on a visit, saw the city as full of emptiness, shallowness, and as lacking of all real culture.*

Rome is still looked upon as the queen of the earth, and the name of the Roman people is respected and venerated. But the magnificence of Rome is defaced by the inconsiderate levity of a few, who never recollect where they are born, but fall away into error and licentiousness as if a perfect immunity were granted to vice. Of these men, some, thinking that they can be handed down to immortality by means of statues, are eager after them, as if they would obtain a higher reward from brazen figures unendowed with sense than from a consciousness of upright and honorable actions; and they are even anxious to have them plated over with gold!

Others place the summit of glory in having a couch higher than usual, or splendid apparel; and so toil and sweat under a vast burden of cloaks which are fastened to their necks by many clasps, and blow about by the excessive fineness of the material, showing a desire by the continual wriggling of their bodies, and especially by the waving of the left hand, to make more conspicuous their long fringes and tunics, which are embroidered in multiform figures of animals with threads of divers colors.

Others again, put on a feigned severity of countenance, and extol their patrimonial estates in a boundless degree, exaggerating the yearly produce of their fruitful fields, which they boast of possessing in numbers, from east and west, being forsooth ignorant that their ancestors, who won greatness for Rome, were not eminent in riches; but through many a direful war overpowered their foes by valor, though little above the common privates in riches, or luxury, or costliness of garments.

If now you, as an honorable stranger, should enter the house of any passing rich man, you will be hospitably received, as though you were very welcome; and after having had many questions put to you, and having been forced to tell a number of lies, you will wonder—since the gentleman has never seen you before—that a person of high rank should pay such attention to a humble individual like yourself, so that you become exceeding happy, and begin to repent not having come to Rome ten years before. When, however, relying on this affability you do the same thing the next day, you will stand waiting as one utterly unknown and unexpected, while he who yesterday urged you to “come again,” counts upon his fingers who you can be, marveling for a long time whence you came, and what you can want. But when at last you are recognized and admitted to his acquaintance, if you should devote yourself to him for three years running, and after that cease with your

visits for the same stretch of time, then at last begin them again, you will never be asked about your absence any more than if you had been dead, and you will waste your whole life trying to court the humors of this blockhead.

But when those long and unwholesome banquets, which are indulged in at periodic intervals, begin to be prepared, or the distribution of the usual dole baskets takes place, then it is discussed with anxious care, whether, when those to whom a return is due are to be entertained, it is also proper to ask in a stranger; and if after the question has been duly sifted, it is determined that this may be done, the person preferred is one who hangs around all night before the houses of charioteers, or one who claims to be an expert with dice, or affects to possess some peculiar secrets. For hosts of this stamp avoid all learned and sober men as unprofitable and useless—with this addition, that the nomenclators also, who usually make a market of these invitations and such favors, selling them for bribes, often for a fee thrust into these dinners mean and obscure creatures indeed.

The whirlpool of banquets, and divers other allurements of luxury I omit, lest I grow too prolix. Many people drive on their horses recklessly, as if they were post horses, with a legal right of way, straight down the boulevards of the city, and over the flint-paved streets, dragging behind them huge bodies of slaves, like bands of robbers. And many matrons, imitating these men, gallop over every quarter of the city, with their heads covered, and in closed carriages. And so the stewards of these city households make careful arrangement of the cortege; the stewards themselves being conspicuous by the wands in their right hands. First of all before the master's carriage march all his slaves concerned with spinning and working; next come the blackened crew employed in the kitchen; then the whole body of slaves promiscuously mixed with a gang of idle plebeians; and last of all, the multitude of eunuchs, beginning with the old men and ending with the boys, pale and unsightly from the deformity of their features.

Those few mansions which were once celebrated for the serious cultivation of liberal studies, now are filled with ridiculous amusements of torpid indolence, reechoing with the sound of singing, and the tinkle of flutes and lyres. You find a singer instead of a philosopher; a teacher of silly arts is summoned in place of an orator, the libraries are shut up like tombs, organs played by waterpower are built, and lyres so big that they look like wagons! and flutes, and huge machines suitable for the theater. The Romans have even sunk so far, that not long ago, when a dearth was apprehended, and the foreigners were driven from the city, those who practiced liberal accomplishments were expelled instantly, yet the followers of actresses and all their ilk were suffered to stay; and three thousand dancing girls were not even questioned,

but remained unmolested along with the members of their choruses, and a corresponding number of dancing masters.

On account of the frequency of epidemics in Rome, rich men take absurd precautions to avoid contagion, but even when these rules are observed thus stringently, some persons, if they be invited to a wedding, though the vigor of their limbs be vastly diminished, yet when gold is pressed in their palm they will go with all activity as far as Spoletum! So much for the nobles. As for the lower and poorer classes some spend the

whole night in the wine shops, some lie concealed in the shady arcades of the theaters. They play at dice so eagerly as to quarrel over them, snuffing up their nostrils, and making unseemly noises by drawing back their breath into their noses:—or (and this is their favorite amusement by far) from sunrise till evening, through sunshine or rain, they stay gaping and examining the charioteers and their horses; and their good and bad qualities. Wonderful indeed it is to see an innumerable multitude of people, with prodigious eagerness, intent upon the events of the chariot race!