An Unnoticed Reminiscence of Aeneid 10.517-20 at Ammianus Marcellinus 22.12.6

The purposes of this article are (1) to adduce a previously unnoticed reminiscence of the Aeneid in the Res Gestae of Ammianus Marcellinus and (2) to discuss what it may reveal about the Augustan poet’s influence on the fourth-century historian.1)

In Book 22 of his history, Ammianus describes the activities of the emperor Julian during his stay in Antioch over the winter of AD 363, as he was preparing for his doomed springtime invasion of Persia. According to Ammianus, the emperor’s preparations involved divination and blood sacrifice on a massive scale. In his disapproving description of Julian’s slaughter of beasts and birds at 22.12.6, the historian echoes Verg. A. 10.517-20, where the poet has Aeneas seize Latin hostages for sacrifice on the pyre of Pallas, whom Turnus has just killed and despoiled:

Sulmone creatos
quattuor hic iuvenes, totidem, quos educat Ufens,
viventis rapit, inferias quos immolet umbris
captivoque rogi perfundat sanguine flammas. (Verg. A. 10.517-20)2)

Hostiarum tamen sanguine plurimo aras crebritate nimia perfundebat tauros aliquotiens immolando centenos et innumeris variis pecoris greges avesque tersus quasitas et mari adeo, ut in dies paene singulos milites carnis distentore saginis victantes inculitus potusque aviditate corrupti umbris captivis inimicis transiret et per plateas suam diversoria portarentur… (Amm. 22.12.6)3)

1) Many of Ammianus’ reminiscences of and allusions to earlier authors were noted first in the variorum edition of Wagner & Erfurdt (1808). The systematic cataloguing of them began with the studies of several German scholars later in the nineteenth century, e.g. Hertz 1874. Hagendahl 1921, 1-15 is fundamental to all later scholarship on the author’s Vergilian allusions, including the supplementary citations of Fletcher (1937) and Owens (1958). More recently, many new reminiscences have been identified in the Dutch commentaries of de Jonge (1935-82), and his continuers den Boeft et al. (1987-2005), as well as in the notes of the Budé editions of Galletier et al. (1968-99).

2) All citations of Vergil are taken from the 1969 edition of Mynors.

3) All citations of Ammianus are taken from the 1978 edition of Seyfarth.
The reminiscence is substantiated by the three underlined words in each passage: while the pairing of perfundo and sanguis is a commonplace of post-Vergilian epic as well as prose, searches of the Packard Humanities Institute and the Bibliotheca Teubneriana Latina-3 digital databases reveal no other coincidences of all three words together in the same syntactic unit. The identification of the reminiscence is further supported by the fact that two of its three words are relatively rare in Ammianus’ extant work: perfundat is one of only three instances of this verb in an active form; immolando is one of only two appearances of that verb in any form at all.4)

Whether or not it was Ammianus’ conscious intention to refer to Verg. A. 10.517-20 would be difficult to prove. Nevertheless, it is both possible to speculate on what prompted him to call up Vergil’s words here, and worthwhile to do so, since such close comparison of texts may contribute to our understanding of the creative and intellectual liaisons between historian and poet. To begin with, it should be noted that the reminiscence is at least superficially apt: where the historian wishes to describe the extraordinary sacrifice of his hero, his text recalls the extraordinary sacrifice of Aeneas. Furthermore, Ammianus enumerates his hero’s victims, just as Vergil does. It is admittedly harder to detect deeper thematic affinities beneath these obvious circumstantial and formal confluences. Yet there are lexical grounds for pursuing those affinities in Ammianus’ use of immolando.

The rarity of the verb in the Res Gestae is nearly matched by its rarity in the Aeneid, where Vergil gives it a highly idiosyncratic and specialized role in the thematic developments of Books 10-12. In etymological terms, immolo is a verb proper to the ritual offering of grain; in Latin texts prior to the Aeneid it is used normatively of animal sacrifice.5) Each and every time Vergil uses the verb in his epic, however, it describes Aeneas’ killing of human beings in explicit, rage-driven vengeance of Pallas: first in his seizure of sacrificial victims quoted above; soon after that in his destruction of Haemonides, Rutulian priest of Apollo and Diana;6) and finally in his slaughter of Turnus at the very end of the poem, arguably the most memorable instance of the word in all of Latin literature.7) Indeed, its semantic

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4) Cf. Amm. 18.4.5 perfudit, 29.2.1 perfuderat, 22.8.34 immolantes.
5) Cf. TLL, OLD s.v. immolo. See also the discussions of Harrison (1991, 203) and Farron (1985, 29).
7) ille, oculis postquam saevi monimenta doloris / exuviasque hausit, furis accensus et ira / terribilis: “tune hinc spoliis indute meorum / eripiare mihi? Pallas te hoc vulnere, Pallas / immolat et poenam scelerato ex sanguine sumit.” (Verg. A. 12.945-9). In this instance, Vergil has Aeneas attribute thought and motive to Pallas.