RAISING ONE’S STANDARDS? DOMITIAN AS MODEL IN AMMIANUS 14.1.10

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ABSTRACT

Ammianus describes the Caesar Gallus at 14.1.10 as ‘raising the standards of his obstinacy’. The unusual phrase is framed by a double allusion to Virgil’s Aeneid and must be a referene to a description of the emperor Domitian at Silvae 4.2. Whereas Ammianus’s normal practice in alluding to Statius is to use him simply as a repository of arresting phraseology, here he makes a more pronounced political point through intertextual allusion. Gallus is frequently compared to Domitian throughout Book 14 of Ammianus’s history; here the comparison is used to illustrate how Gallus is rather less effective a tyrant than his predecessor. A subtle allusion thus foreshadows the Caesar’s downfall.

At the culmination of the opening section of Book 14, Ammianus portrays the praetorian prefect Thalassius deliberately provoking the anger of the evil Caesar Gallus:

Thalassius nero ea tempestate praefectus praetorio praeens ipsa, quoque arrogantis ingenii, considerans incitationem eius ad uniuersi angri discrimina, non maturitate vel consiliis mitigabat, ut aliquotiens celestis potestates iras principum mollierent, sed adversando iurgandoque eum parum congrueret, eum ad rabiem potius estebat, Angustain actus eius exalgerando crebervine doves, idque (incertum qua mente) ne lateret affectans, quibus mos Caesar acrius efferatus, quod contumaciæ quoddam vexillum altius erigens, sine respecti salutis alienæ vel suae, ad nertenda opposita, instar rapidi flaminis irremovabili impetu ferriatur.¹

¹ Text and translations of Ammianus are taken from J.C. Rolfe (ed.), Ammianus Marcellinus (Cambridge MA, 1939-50); text and translations of Statius, Silvae 4 are taken from K. Coleman (ed.), Statius Silvae 4 (Bristol 1988), from elsewhere in the Silvae, D.R. Shackleton Bailey (ed.), Statius Silvae (Cambridge MA, 2003); text of Virgil is taken from R.A.B. Mynors (ed.), P. Vergili Maronis Opera (Oxford 1969); translations of Virgil are from D. West, Virgil – the Aeneid (London 1990). Thanks are due to the journal’s anonymous reader, who made a number of very helpful suggestions and comments. The errors remain my own.
Now at that time Thalassius was the Praetorian Prefect at court, a man who was himself of an imperious character. He, perceiving that Gallus’s temper was rising, to the peril of many, did not try to soothe it by ripe counsel, as sometimes high officials have moderated the ire of princes; but rather roused the Caesar to fury by opposing and reproving him at unseasonable times; very frequently he informed the emperor of Gallus’s doings, exaggerating them and taking pains — whatever his motive may have been — to do it openly. Through this conduct the Caesar was soon still more violently enraged, and as if raising higher, as it were, the standard of his obstinacy, with no regard for his own life or that of others, he rushed on with uncontrollable impetuosity, like a swift torrent, to overthrow whatever opposed him (Amm. 14.1.10).

The picture of the increasingly enraged Gallus is marked by a complex of imagery that draws heavily on allusion to earlier Latin poetry. It has been remarked upon before that the simile comparing Gallus to a swift torrent that carries away everything in its path alludes to passages in Book 2 of Virgil’s Aeneid:

\[
\text{in segetem veluti cum flamma furentibus Austris}
\]
\[
\text{incidit, aut rapidus montano flumine inorens}
\]
\[
\text{sternit agros, sternit sata laeta bonumque labores}
\]
\[
\text{praeipitisque trahit silvas;}
\]

When a furious south wind is carrying fire into a field of grain, or a mountain rivet whirls along in spate, flattening all the fields, the growing crops and all the labour of oxen, carrying great trees headlong in its floods (Aen. 2.304-07).

\[
\text{non sic, aggeribus ruptis cum spumae annis}
\]
\[
\text{exuit oppositisque excitit surgite onis;}
\]
\[
\text{fertur in arma fures cum labore campoque per omnis}
\]
\[
\text{cum stabulis armenta trahit.}
\]

No river foaming in spate was ever like this, bursting its banks and leaving its channel to overwhelm everything in its path with its swirling current, as it bears down furiously on ploughed fields in a great wave, and cattle and their pens are swept all over the plain (Aen. 2.496-99).

In his description of Gallus, Ammianus conflates two images from the Virgilian description of the fall of Troy. The first image likens Aeneas listening incomprehendingly to the city being sacked to the sound of fire or flood destroying fields of crops, the second likens the Greeks flooding
through Troy to a river bursting its banks. The dastardly Gallus’s wicked nature is underlined by careful allusion to the Greeks sacking Troy. Ammianus neatly inverts the pattern in the Aeneid so that Rome’s Caesar is identified with the enemies of Rome’s founding father.

However, this double allusion to Virgil also acts as a frame for a further allusion to a phrase in Statius’s Silvae. The odd and highly unusual metaphorical phrase vexillum altius erigens may well be a play on a description of the emperor Domitian in Silvae 4.2, and it is Ammianus’s invocation of the model of Domitian that will form the basis for discussion in the rest of this note:  

\[\text{ipsum, ipsum capito tantum spectare nucanit}\\ \text{tranquillum utilius et maiestate serena}\\ \text{mulcentem rados summittentemque modeste}\\ \text{fortunae uexilla suae; tamen ore nitebat}\\ \text{dissimulatus bonos.}\]

On him, on him alone had I leisure avidly to gaze, tranquil in his expression, with serene majesty tempering his radiance, and modestly dipping the standards of his eminence; yet a splendour that he tried to hide shone in his countenance (Silv. 4.2.40-44).

There may have been an appeal to Ammianus in reading the poetry of a man of Greek background writing in Latin, but he alludes to Statius rather more sparingly than he does to Virgil. There is certainly nothing in the Res Gestae that corresponds to the programmatic invocation of the Aeneid at 15.9.1. Ammianus refers to Statius infrequently and most of those references are to his Thebaid. Although Ammianus clearly knew Statius’s Silvae, one only very

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2 These allusions were highlighted in Peter O’Brien’s paper on ‘Vergilian allusion and the Gallus of Ammianus’ at the APA conference of 2006. While Ammianus’s use of ferebatur need not, given the commonness of the verb in such descriptions, be an allusion to Aen. 2.498, the specific link is certainly suggested by the first allusion to Aeneid 2. For a broader discussion of Ammianus’s use of allusion in Books 15-25 to Virgil’s Aeneid, see P. O’Brien, ‘Ammianus Epicus: Vergilian allusion in the Res Gestae’, Phoenix 60.3-4 (2006) 274-303.

3 See J-M. Hulls, ‘Lowering one’s standards: on Statius, Silvae 4.2.43’, CQ 57.1 (2007) 198-206. This allusion is not mentioned by P. de Jonge (ed.), Sprachlicher und historische Kommentar zu Ammianus Marcellinus XIV.1-7 (Groningen 1935) ad loc. It seems unlikely that the praetorian prefect would have had his own personal vexillum, although cf. V.A. Maxfield, The Military Decorations of the Roman Army (London 1981) 84; and I am unaware of any specific element of praetorian iconography that would encourage Ammianus to use the image of a vexillum in this non-military context.
rarely finds reminiscences of this work. Statius's poetry clearly lacks the sort of programmatic importance for Ammianus which O'Brien has argued for in the historian's use of Virgil. Rather, Ammianus used Statius as a source of linguistic elegance and variety, picking arresting, unusual and flamboyant phraseology from the Statian corpus and incorporating it into his own historical account for rhetorical and literary effect. Apposite examples of this technique of Ammianus include his description of rough terrain in Book 27 (\textit{isdemq antesignanis per hirta dumis et aspera magno nisu in edita sublimitates erepsit}, 'led by the same champions through places rough and shaggy with thickets, by a mighty effort scrambled up to the lofty heights', Amm. 27.10.12), which has a linguistic parallel in Statius, \textit{Silvae} 3.1 (\textit{steriles hic nuper harenas / et sparsum pelago montis latus hirtaque dumis / saccu nec ulta pata faciles nest nigia terras arnere erat}, 'a little while ago all we could see here was barren sand and sea-splashed mountainside and rocks shaggy with scrub and earth scarce willing to suffer the print of foot', \textit{Silv.} 3.1.12-15). The context of Statius's phrase, contrasting the recent wildness of the location with the shrine which now houses Pollius's Hercules statue, has little to do with Ammianus's narrative of fighting against the Alamanni. Similarly, Ammianus's sententious criticism of Valens's abuse of power (\textit{non reputant ea/ta nimium potestate quod recte institutis ne cum iniuriam quidem incommodis in delicta convenit rerum voluntaria}, 'since excessive power does not reflect that it is unworthy for men of right principles, even to the disadvantage of their enemies, willingly to plunge into crime', Amm. 29.2.12) uses similar phrasing but seems almost diametrically opposed in purpose to Statius's depiction of Rutilius Gallicus's mild exercise of power (\textit{pareere verberibus nee qua inbet alta potestas / ire, 'to spare the lash nor go where height of power commands', Silv. 1.4.44-5). In this regard, Ammianus follows the commonplace method of reading Statius among authors of later antiquity. This suggestion that Ammianus was interested only in Statius for his language is not intended to

4 For other reminiscences of Statius, see G.B.A. Fletcher, 'Stylistic borrowings and parallels in Ammianus Marcellinus', \textit{RPh} 11 (1937) 377-99, at 388; E.E.L. Owens, \textit{Phraseological Parallels and Borrowings in Ammianus Marcellinus from Earlier Latin Authors} (unpubl. diss., London 1958), at 201. These two pieces of scholarship list 10 separate parallels with Statius, 8 from the \textit{Thebaid}, 2 from the \textit{Silvae}. New allusions continue to be identified.

belittle the historian’s skill, but rather to reflect a broader feature of the reception of Statius in antiquity. The Flavian poet was read (in particular his *Thebaid*), but rarely the target of detailed intertextual allusion by later authors.\(^6\)

Statius’s metaphorical phrase, *summittentem uexilla*, was seemingly unique and unparalleled in Latin, and Ammianus’s neat reversal, *uexillum erigens*, must surely allude to *Silvae* 4.2.\(^7\) As when employed in the *Silvae*, the phrase is striking, rather awkward and creates an image that is perhaps rather difficult to visualise. Gallus’s increasing and uncontrollable anger is represented as a military standard being raised (*altius* further emphasising the difference between *summittentem* and *erigens*). As with Statius’s usage, we may think of the images of emperors carried on separate poles and of the fact that the names of emperors may have been inscribed underneath *uexilla*. As Statius does, Ammianus links the present participial phrase with a genitive, although his *contumaciae* must be a deliberate contrast with Statius’s *suae fortunae*. As Statius does, Ammianus surrounds the image of the *uexillum* with imagery from the natural world, though where Statius used calm meteorological vocabulary (*tranquillum*, *serena*, *mulcentem*, *radios*, *nietebal*), Ammianus uses the image of a raging torrent that takes us back, through allusion to Virgil, to the violent sack of Troy.

Yet I would like to suggest that, in his allusion to Statius at 14.1.10, Ammianus goes a little further than the norm by taking us back to the meaning and context of Statius’s passage. Here the historian is not simply using Statius as a repertoire of words and phrases, but uses a learned allusion to an *exemplum* to emphasise the unpleasant and unrestrained temperament of his subject. It seems that the essential change from his usual practice lies in Ammianus’s desire to allude to the example of Domitian through Statius’s poetry, thus combining a learned allusion and an arresting and unusual metaphorical Latin phrase with a political point.

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\(^7\) On the uniqueness of the phrase in Statius, see Hulls (note 3) esp. 200-01, 204. We might compare Seneca’s *subrectis uexillis* at *NQ* 1. *praef.* 10 (cf. *Ben.* 5.15.6) although his use of the phrase in the comparison of ant and human armies lacks quite the extreme metaphorical thrust of our two main examples. On the possible force of *quoddam*, here apparently intensifying the metaphorical force introduced by *selut*, cf. J. Linderski, *Roman Questions II* (Stuttgart 2007) 334 n. 13 on Cic. *Div.* 1.98.
Domitian is used several times elsewhere by Ammianus as an example to illustrate the vices of bad emperors. In the aftermath of Gallus’s death, the emperor Constantius II, who hated brave and energetic men, as Domitian once did (ut Domitianus quondam, Amm. 15.5.35), learns with great joy of the death of Silvanus. Later, Constantius is depicted surpassing Domitian, Caligula and Commodus in his cruelty (Ca/i/a/ae et Domitian i et Commodi inhumanitate/jac/i/superabat, Amm. 21.16.8). Perhaps most pertinent for our purposes is the suggestion that Gallus differed as much in character from his brother Julian as Domitian had done from his brother Titus (tamt a temperatis moribus Iuliani differens fratris, quantum inter Vespasiani filios fiit Domitianum et Titum, Amm. 14.11.28). The example of Domitian is never far away from Ammianus’s thoughts when writing of bad emperors, and there appears in this moment a neat parallel between Gallus and Domitian in particular.

We may thus explore the phrase contumaciae quoddam uccilla altius erigens (Amm. 14.1.10) in this light. When Statius wrote of Domitian ‘lowering his standards’ in Silvae 4.2, he called to mind a specific set of military images, in particular that of the triumphal general, in a non-military context. Domitian attempted to hide his triumphal bearing in the civilian context of a banquet in the Palatine palace, but because of his supremely belligerent and Jovian looks, marked above all by the redness of his face, this military demeanour literally shone through. This Statius linked with Domitian’s public display of modesty – a failed attempt to hide his supreme military glory expressed as the lowering of uccilla – which failed because Domitian’s blush revealed him as triumphator.9 Looks are crucial to the complex image. Yet the implicit juxtaposition of Domitian and Gallus by Ammianus does more than simply equate one tyrant with another. Gallus’s weaknesses are highlighted by contrasting him with Domitian. Gallus is not the supreme ruler of the Roman empire,10 he lacks Domitian’s dissimulative skill, and his looks and behaviour make him rather more obvious than Statius’s complex and multi-

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8 See R.C. Blockley, Ammianus Marcellinus: A Study of his Historiography and Political Thought (Brussels 1975), at 20-21 and 30-54; R.C. Blockley, ‘Ammianus Marcellinus’ use of Exempla’, Florilegium 13 (1994) 53-64. Ammianus may have been aware of the description of Domitian in Eutropius’s Epitome 7.23, and may mention Eutropius at 29.1.36 as a historical figure, if the praetorian prefect and the historian are to be identified.

9 See Hulls (note 3). After his assassination, Domitian’s blush became known as a mark of his angry temperament and his attempts to dissimulate this. There is still scholarly debate on the true nature of Domitian and his regime, but Ammianus can only have viewed him as an extreme tyrant.

10 A key theme of Silvae 4.2. See Hulls (note 3) 204-06.
layered emperor. Furthermore, Gallus is depicted by Ammianus as rather more handsome than his tyrannical predecessor:

\[\text{fuit autem forma conspicitus bona, decente filo corporis membrorumque recta copaga, flava capillo et molli, barba licet recens emergente lanugine tenera, ita tanien ut materius auctoritas emineret}\]

He was conspicuous for his handsome person, being well proportioned, with well-knit limbs. He had soft golden hair, and although his beard was just appearing in the form of tender down, yet he was conspicuous for the dignity of greater maturity (Amm. 14.11.28).

The combination of good proportions, blonde hair and a youthful beard strongly suggests the lion-type familiar from the descriptions of ancient physiognomists.\(^\text{11}\) Surprisingly, given Ammianus’s otherwise negative appraisal of Gallus, the physiognomical description of him as a leonine figure would indicate an overwhelmingly positive character.\(^\text{12}\) We need, it seems, to compare this with the less flattering description of Domitian’s appearance by Suetonius,\(^\text{13}\) and one suspects that the combination in Gallus’s physiognomy of youthful, leonine appearance with an air of mature authority suggests an essential contradiction within his nature and goes some way to reflecting his impetuous and tyrannical character.\(^\text{14}\) Furthermore, Gallus’s wispy beard and blonde hair may suggest the physiognomy of another tyrannical model, the emperor Nero.\(^\text{15}\) Gallus’s leonine looks fulfil a further interpretive function; they reflect the unmanageable temper of a man who is unable to control his feelings. Gallus is \textit{conspicuis} where Domitian was a dissimulator. Statius’s image is peculiarly appropriate for Ammianus’s purposes here because the Flavian poet attempted to put a positive spin on features of his emperor that later became the hallmarks of his tyrannical reign – Domitian’s dissimulation,


\(^\text{12}\) Similar descriptions are made of Julian (25.4.22) and Valentinian (30.9.6). Cf. Suet. \textit{Aug.} 79.

\(^\text{13}\) Suet. \textit{Dom.} 18.

\(^\text{14}\) See Blockley (note 8) 20 and n. 14. Reading physical characteristics is also a key feature of Julian’s accession: Amm. 15.8.16.

his aggressive demeanour, and the blush that revealed his inner thoughts.16 Gallus, however, is incapable of such artful deceit, and wears his heart on his sleeve. Openness is at the heart of Thalassius’s manipulation of Gallus – he takes the trouble not simply to inform on the young Caesar to Constantius behind his back, but does so openly to enrage Gallus still further (cum ad rabiem poius emibrabat ... ne lateret affectans, Amm. 14.1.10). Thus it is the contrast between Gallus and the exemplum that Ammianus adduces that is at the heart of this allusion to Statius.

Domitian is depicted lowering his standards of his fortune (that is, of his imperial power and pre-eminence). The phrase suggests modesty, calmness, yet underlines his supreme authority. For a reader such as Ammianus, it is also possible to see through Domitian’s dissimulation and know (as a careful reader of Tacitus, for example) of his true character as an unmitigated tyrant. The manner in which Ammianus alludes to this phrase suggests an inversion in the depiction of Gallus. Gallus raises the standard, not of his authority, but of his obstinacy. Gallus does not control his temper, but, goaded by Thalassius, he reveals it ever more openly, a failing that undoubtedly anticipates his being killed by Constantius by the end of Book 14 of the Res Gestae. Gallus as a raging torrent is not merely disastrous for Rome, he is also self-destructive. Whilst he is compared to Domitian, Gallus is a lesser version of one of the archetypal Roman tyrants. Gallus lacks Domitian’s subtlety and capacity for dissimulation, and for this reason he will not last long as Caesar.

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16 Cf. Plin. Pan. 48.4; Tac. Agr. 45.2; Hist. 4.40; Suet. Dom. 18.1-2.
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