

Who are the victims of Aeneas' human sacrifice?

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Twice in the *Aeneid*, the killing of Pallas by Turnus provokes an outburst of rage in Aeneas. The second time is at the very end of the poem, the sight of Pallas' *balteus* on the stricken Turnus, just as the latter's appeal for mercy is starting to move the Trojan hero. Abruptly reminded of his dead protégé, Aeneas invokes Pallas' name and plunges his sword into Turnus' body.

The first time is when news reaches Aeneas of Pallas' death at Turnus' hands (10.515–20):

*Pallas, Evander, in ipsis
omnia sunt oculis, mensae quas advena primas
tunc adiit, dextraeque datae. Sulmone creatos
quattuor hic iuvenes, totidem quos educat Ufens,
viventis rapit, inferias quos immolet umbris
captivoque rogi perfundat sanguine flammās.*

(“Pallas, Evander, all was before his very eyes, the table which he had first then approached as a newcomer, and the right hands given [in pledge]. Four young men, sons of Sulmo, he seizes alive at this moment, [and] as many raised by Ufens, to sacrifice them as offerings to the shades and soak the flames of the pyre with prisoners' blood”).¹

It is a profoundly disconcerting moment in the epic. On the one hand, Aeneas is motivated by the most commendable of principles, his debt to the hospitable Greeks who had welcomed him to the site of Rome, as they had earlier welcomed Hercules (*per patris hospitium et mensas quas advena adisti*; “by my father's hospitality, and the table you approached as a newcomer”, 10.460). But his selection of live humans for sacrifice is as shocking to us as it would have

¹ All translations are my own.

been to Romans, who believed, fondly no doubt, that human sacrifice was something their barbarian enemies indulged in, never Romans (Livy 22.57.6).² It follows that the implication in *immolat* (12.949), Aeneas' word, that his slaying of Turnus is a sacrifice, introduces a comparable disquiet to that culminating moment in the poem.

This short article will draw out the implications of a detail of the passage in book 10 that is typically underemphasised, the names that Virgil provides for the progenitors of the sacrificed *iuvenes*, Sulmo and Ufens. The greater degree of identification represented by these names marks an important departure from Virgil's model in the *Iliad*. When Achilles takes Trojan prisoners for sacrifice (*Il.* 21.26–33), and then slaughters them at Patroclus' funeral (23.175–83), the victims are identified only as “twelve fine sons of great-souled Trojans” (23.175, 181) and “twelve youths” (21.27), and while Homer allows himself a rare, explicit note of condemnation of Achilles' action (“bad were the deeds he planned in his mind”, 23.176), the naming of the captives' fathers in Virgil is a personal detail bound to sharpen the transgressive character of Aeneas' behaviour. But the simple fact of naming is not the limit of Virgil's bold innovation here. The focus of this article will be the specific names that Virgil chooses to associate with Aeneas' sacrifice, which will prove to be remarkably provocative in their own right.

Sulmo, one of the major population centres of the Paeligni in central Italy, is best known as the home town of Ovid, and, as the early life of that poet illustrates, with his faltering steps towards a political career in Rome, Sulmo and its elite were by the time of Augustus an integral part of the Roman state. It had not always been so, and some explanation of a character named Sulmo's role in the *Aeneid* (he features only here and when he is killed by Nisus at 9.410–15) is to be found in Virgil's persistent evocation of recent conflict within the Italian peninsula in his own Italian war. Sulmo, and the Paeligni in general, had been among the rebels in the Social War: the cause of their *libertas* “had driven” the Paeligni “to honorable arms”, in Ovid's words, “when anxious Rome feared its allied bands” (*Am.* 3.15.8–10). But we also have a rather obscure notice in Florus' epitome, recording Sulla's revenge on Sulmo after his recapture of Rome in 82 B.C. Florus' turn of phrase, which may reflect an authoritative account of these historical events that lies behind Livy, is in the circumstances quite suggestive (2.8.27–28):³

Possis singulorum hominum ferre poenas: municipia Italiae splendidissima sub hasta venierunt, Spoletium, Interamnium, Praeneste, Florentia. Nam Sulmonem, vetus oppidum socium atque amicum – facinus indignum – non expugnat aut obsidet iure belli; sed quo modo morte damnati duci iubentur, sic damnatam civitatem iussit Sulla deleri.

² S. Farron, ‘Aeneas' human sacrifice’, *AClass* 28 (1985), 21–33, offers ample evidence of Greek and Roman aversion to the sacrifice of humans.

³ My thanks to Ed Bispham for this parallel.

("One could endure the punishment of individuals, [but] the most renowned towns of Italy were put up for auction – Spoletium, Interamnium, Praeneste, Florentia. As for Sulmo, an allied and friendly town of long standing, Sulla, instead of storming or besieging it according to the rules of warfare, committed an act of base injustice in condemning the city and ordering its destruction, even as those who are condemned to death are ordered to be led to execution").

Whether or not Aeneas' treatment of the sons of Sulmo directly echoes a Roman dictator's alleged treatment of the people of Sulmo, this passage seems to represent at least as compelling a point of reference as one favoured by some scholars since Heinze. That is the report of human sacrifice undertaken by Octavian after the capture of Perugia in 40 BC, that Suetonius (*Aug.* 15) and Dio (48.14.4; cf. *Sen. Clem.* 1.11.1 on the *Perusinae arae*) record, without directly endorsing it.⁴

Sulmo represents a place implicated in intra-Italian conflict in previous generations, yet by Augustus' day fully integrated into the Roman polity. Had Ovid pursued the senatorial career that his father had in mind for him, he would have been the first Paelignian member of the Roman Senate. It is paradoxical that violence of such terrifying barbarity in the *Aeneid* is associated with a salient instance, Augustan Sulmo, of successful integration. But here and in the closing scene of the poem, and indeed in the persistent presence of Hercules, a god who embodies both violence and a unifying presence within Italy,⁵ as a precedent for Aeneas, "the incomprehensible currents of violence for order ... are at the heart of the poem and its empire".⁶

The name of the other father, Ufens, carries that paradox to a higher level still. *Ufens* denotes in the *Aeneid* both a river in southern Latium, mentioned in relation to Turnus' forces from Latium (7.802), and a warrior from Nersa in the central Apennines who commands a contingent of rugged Aequiculi (7.744–49) and is one of Turnus' closest lieutenants, a *ductor primus* alongside Messapus and Mezentius (8.6; cf. 12.641–42). Ufens survives his sons (Sulmo had predeceased his) but dies at the hands of the Trojan Gyas at 12.460. A perceptive comment of Servius (*ad* 8.6) identifies Messapus and Ufens as complementary figures, the former, son of Neptune, an expert in horses, and Ufens, the mountaineer, a *pedes egregius* ("excellent footsoldier").

But on the reasonably secure assumption that one "Ufens" unavoidably evokes the other, this name could hardly be more intrinsically Roman. The *tribus Oufentina* was established

⁴ R. Heinze, *Virgils epische Technik*, 1915³, Leipzig, 210–11, n.2; Farron (n.2, above), 26–28; S. J. Harrison, *Vergil, Aeneid 10*, 1991, Oxford, *ad loc.* and 304 for the unconvinced.

⁵ Ll. Morgan, 'A yoke connecting baskets: *Odes* 3.14, Hercules, and Italian unity', *CQ* 55 (2005), 190–203.

⁶ D. C. Feeney, *The Gods in Epic*, 1991, Oxford, 150.

in 318 BC (Livy 9.20.6) and was one of the thirty-five voting tribes of Rome, created for Roman settlers at Terracina and in the Privernum area and named after the local river, later admitting citizens from further afield.⁷ Festus (212 L), following the Augustan antiquarian Verrius Flaccus, gives a slightly distorted account of the tribe's establishment, and quotes the satirist C. Lucilius:⁸

Oufentinae tribus initio causa fuit nomen fluminis Ofens, quod est in agro Privernate mare intra et Terracinam. Lucilius [1133 W]: 'Priverno Oufentina venit fluvioque Ofenté. Postea deinde a censoribus alii quoque diversarum civitatum eidem tribui sunt adscripti.

("The explanation of the Oufentine tribe was in the first place the river-name Ofens, which is in the territory of Privernum between the sea and Terracina. Lucilius: 'from Privernum comes the Oufentina and from the river Ofens.' Afterwards others of different communities were also allocated by the censors to the same tribe").

A fascinating study of an early first-century BC epitaph of a member of the Oufentina tribe, found near Cartagena (Carthago Nova) in Spain, identifies one [?F]avonius Rufus as a Roman expatriate in Hispania Citerior (no doubt involved in the silver mining for which the area was celebrated), on the basis that "in general there were few communities that were registered in the Oufentina, most of them from Latium and none from outside Italy".⁹ (The Favonii were native to Terracina). When Aeneas sacrifices the sons of Ufens, in other words, Virgil deploys a name expressive of Roman citizenship itself.

The names Sulmo and Ufens carry implications both unavoidable and acutely challenging to a Roman reader of this national epic. Not only is the hero indulging in barbaric ritual practice, but in the process the founder of Rome is apparently attacking the very fabric of Rome. These names evoke elements integral to the Augustan polity, and in the case of Ufens a fundamental component of the *populus Romanus*, one of the voting tribes. In the event, the victims are not personally sacrificed by Aeneas, though his responsibility for their death is clear (11.81–82), but one implication of their dispatch along with Pallas' body is that their death will take place on the very site of Rome.¹⁰ It is well appreciated that Aeneas' conflict in Italy,

⁷ H. Mouritsen, 'The *civitas sine suffragio*: ancient concepts and modern ideology', *Historia* 56 (2007), 141–58, at 144.

⁸ The fragment of Lucilius originates in a satire, celebrated in antiquity, in which he had assailed the Roman people "tribe by tribe" (Hor. *Serm.* 2.1.69–71) – the explanation of the scholiast to Persius at Persius 1.114, *secuit Lucilius urbem*, is "because he tore to pieces the thirty-five tribes that constitute the city as a whole".

⁹ B. Díaz Ariño & J. A. Antolinos Marín, 'Una inscripción funeraria republicana procedente de Los Beatos (Cartagena, Murcia)', *ZPE* 179 (2011), 291–294, at 293.

¹⁰ My thanks to Daniel Hadas for this observation.

between communities that will after its conclusion combine to create Rome, has much of the character of a civil war, albeit in mirror image. But how uncompromisingly Aeneas himself is implicated in the moral crisis of civil war, *continua per viginti annos discordia, non mos, non ius* (“unbroken conflict for twenty years, no custom, no law”, Tac. *Ann.* 3.28), perhaps needs underscoring. Aeneas is not only sacrificing human beings, but (fellow-)Romans. This is not, furthermore, some oblique hint of the costs of Empire, nor a subtle further voice. Virgil could hardly have communicated this morally reprehensible dimension of Aeneas’ mission more emphatically (though we must never lose sight of his praiseworthy motivation – Virgil relishes the paradox, it seems).

To return to where we started, while we may be inclined to treat Aeneas’ inordinate violence after the death of Pallas as an isolated aberration occasioned by intense grief, this passage is intimately related to the final scene of the *Aeneid*: it is with Aeneas’ grief and guilt in respect of Pallas, and the transgressive violence it once again provokes in the hero, that Virgil also chooses to end his poem. The ambiguity of Evander’s words at 11.172, *magna tropaea ferunt quos dat tua dextera leto* (“great are the trophies those men bring whom your hand puts to death”), even hints at Pallas’ agency in the deaths of the young men. Who exactly it is that Evander at his son’s funeral is describing as dying by Pallas’ right hand is unclear: either Pallas’ victims in battle, or rather the young men that we have been concerned with, part of the cortège that had accompanied Pallas’ body. If we countenance the latter possibility, there is an implication comparable (even down to the sacral language of *dare leto*) to Aeneas’ claim as he deals a fatal blow to Turnus (12.948–49): *Pallas te hoc vulnere, Pallas / immolat* (“It is Pallas, Pallas who sacrifices you with this blow”).

At the end of the *Aeneid*, as in these scenes of sacrifice (or preparation therefor), the high piety with which the hero fulfils his obligations to Evander and his son coexists with the extreme impiety, a sacrifice of humans (combined in Turnus’ case with a rejection of a suppliant’s plea for mercy), with which he kills.

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