

Brill's Companion to Valerius Flaccus

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Introduction

Mark Heerink and Gesine Manuwald

Scope of the Companion

While the late first-century rhetorician Quintilian famously regretted the death of Valerius Flaccus (*Inst.* 10.1.90: *multum in Valerio Flacco nuper amisimus*, ‘we have recently suffered a great loss in Valerius Flaccus’), modern readers have not shared his implied appreciation of the Flavian epic poet for a long time. Instead, in the wake of damning judgements of influential scholars, people have rather avoided Valerius’ poem (like others of the period), regarding it as imitative and inferior to Virgil and showing signs of a secondary belatedness. Fortunately, the tide has turned in the last few decades, stimulated by important publications, in particular Philip Hardie’s book *The Epic Successors of Virgil* (1993). Interest in Flavian epic is now burgeoning, with interesting work on all three poets—Valerius Flaccus, Statius and Silius Italicus—in progress. This change in attitude has taken longer to reach Valerius Flaccus than, for instance, Statius. And so Valerius is the last of the Flavian epic poets to receive a Companion.

The publication of a Companion to Valerius indicates that this poet has achieved the status of an accepted author; at the same time it will hopefully stimulate further interest and research. For this should help to break out of a vicious circle in which scholars do not work on certain topics or authors because no basic tools are available, and others do not provide these tools since nobody seems interested. Now that recent editions of the Latin text, new translations into several European languages and commentaries on the work as a whole as well as on almost all individual books are available, it seems timely to take stock, to provide an overview of what is central to Valerius and to explore further avenues of research.

Altogether the contributions in this Companion attempt to cover key aspects of Valerius’ *Argonautica* and of current research on the poem. They approach those from a range of angles and sometimes favour different conclusions; this illustrates the variety of potential approaches and the vibrancy of the field (summaries of all chapters can be found in the Abstracts section).

Part 1 starts from the basics, the establishment of the text; owing to the rather bad transmission and fairly recent re-evaluations of the relative

importance of the known manuscripts, this is a crucial part of Valerian studies. It then moves on to consider aspects of Valerius' language and style, including narrative structures with a metapoetical dimension. Part 2 identifies key themes, such as myth, philosophy and politics, and discusses them within the contemporary context. Part 3 looks at the characters in the epic; besides the protagonists Jason and Medea, the 'other Argonauts' are also considered. Part 4 is devoted to Valerius' Latin intertexts, i.e. earlier poems (mainly epics) to which his own work alludes implicitly or explicitly, as well as the contemporary Flavian epics of Statius and Silius Italicus, which seem to refer back to the *Argonautica*. While there is no separate section on Valerius' Greek intertexts, all chapters engage with the two most important of these, Homer's epics and Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*, as their influence is relevant to almost all topics. Finally, Part 5 deals with the later reception of the *Argonautica* by studying one outstanding item, the conclusion of the epic written by Giovan Battista Pio in the early sixteenth century.

Outline of the Epic's Plot

Valerius' *Argonautica* recounts one version of the myth of Jason and his men, the Argonauts. As a basic familiarity with the story is assumed in most contributions, a brief summary of the myth and its treatment in Valerius is provided here.

Jason's tyrannical uncle Pelias, the king of Iolcus (in Thessaly), has been warned against a challenge to his position from his nephew and therefore seeks to destroy him. Hence he sends Jason to retrieve the Golden Fleece, which stems from the ram on which the Greek Phrixus, together with his sister Helle, fled to Colchis (on the Black Sea) and is now kept there in the grove of the god Mars. Accordingly, a group of heroes led by Jason travels from Iolcus to Colchis in the divine ship *Argo* and thus completes the first voyage across the open sea.

The Argonauts have to face a number of dangers during the voyage and later in Colchis: as a precondition for handing over the Golden Fleece, the local king Aetes asks Jason to confront fire-breathing bulls and earthborn men. With the support of the magical arts of Aetes' daughter Medea, who has fallen in love with him, Jason manages to complete these tasks successfully and to win the Golden Fleece.

Medea and Jason flee from Colchis, pursued by the Colchians. The Colchians are led by Medea's brother Absyrtus in some versions; in others Medea has taken her brother with her as a hostage. Jason and/or Medea kill Absyrtus and

thus are able to escape the pursuers. After some further adventures the Argo returns to Iolcus. Subsequently Medea and Jason have to move to Corinth, where Jason abandons Medea for his new bride Creusa, which provokes her revenge.

Before Valerius, this story had already been given various literary forms. The most detailed of the surviving ones is the narrative in Apollonius Rhodius' epic *Argonautica*, from the Hellenistic period, which presents the entire Argonautic enterprise, from the start of the journey until the return to Colchis, in four long books. It is generally agreed that this poem formed the basis for Valerius' plot, though he added and omitted scenes. Structurally, he most likely envisaged an epic of eight books (the extant text breaks off at 8.467), with a second proem in the middle (5.217–23) after the model of Virgil's *Aeneid*, the main exemplar in terms of narrative style, language and motifs.

Valerius' first book covers Pelias' instructions, Jason's reaction, the building of the Argo and the gathering of the crew with divine support, Jason's recruitment of Pelias' son Acastus, preparations for departure and the catalogue of the Argonauts, a divine scene, in which Jupiter outlines his 'plan of the world', the Argonauts' undergoing their first sea storm as the sea gods are enraged, Pelias' intention to kill Jason's parents back home, and their suicide in response.

From Book 2 until the beginning of Book 5, the actual journey is covered, punctuated by a number of stopovers: a stay at Lemnos (Book 2); a stop near Troy, where Hercules rescues the Trojan princess Hesione (Book 2); the appearance of Phrixus' sister Helle when the Argonauts cross the 'Hellespont' (Book 2); a stay on Cyzicus, where the Argonauts kill many of their former hosts in a tragic misunderstanding (Books 2–3); a 'rowing contest', during which Hercules breaks his oar (Book 3); a stop in Mysia, where Hercules loses his comrade Hylas owing to Juno's machinations and is left behind as the Argonauts sail on (Books 3–4); the confrontation with King Amycus in Bebrycia, where the Argonaut Pollux defeats him in a boxing match (Book 4); the crossing of the Bosphorus, where Orpheus tells the story of Io (Book 4); the visit to the blind seer Phineus, when the Argonauts Calais and Zetes chase away the Harpies tormenting the seer, who then reveals indications of the Argonauts' future (Book 4); the passage through the Symplegades, which brings the Argonauts into an entirely new world (Book 4); the visit to the Mariandyni, where they are hospitably received by King Lycus, but where the helmsman Tiphys and the seer Idmon die (Books 4–5); and the remainder of the voyage to Colchis with a series of brief incidents (Book 5).

After the second proem early in Book 5, the situation in Colchis is introduced in a flashback. When the story continues with the Argonauts' arrival, they meet the princess Medea, who directs them to the temple of Sol in the town. After

admiring the sanctuary, which is elaborately described, they encounter King Aetes, who asks them to support him in his fight for power against his brother Perses and announces that he will then hand over the Golden Fleece; the book closes with a dinner, at which the Colchian fighters are presented, and a divine scene, where Jupiter indicates the future power relations in Colchis, but allows the other gods to act freely within this framework. Book 6 mainly consists of the description of the battle, partly seen through Medea's eyes, and her emerging love for Jason, which is kindled by Juno's intervention. The opening of Book 7 reveals that Aetes is not handing over the Golden Fleece, but rather demands that Jason should fight the fire-breathing bulls and the earth-born men first. Juno redoubles her efforts on Medea and eventually gets her to assist Jason with her magical faculties. With the help of these and by means of his own strength Jason goes through the trials successfully. At the beginning of Book 8 Jason overcomes the dragon guarding the Golden Fleece with Medea's support, captures the Golden Fleece and sails off with the spoil and Medea. Her mother is devastated, and a contingent led by her brother Absyrtus sets off to pursue the Argonauts. The Colchians catch up with the Argo just as the wedding ceremony between Medea and Jason is being conducted. As a result of Juno's interference the Argonauts are able to ward off the Colchian pursuers, but they are no longer willing to take Medea with them. Jason is about to discuss this issue with Medea when the text breaks off.

Since nothing is known about Valerius' life except for what can be inferred from the epic itself (his only attested work) and Quintilian's comment, it is uncertain whether the poet died at this point or did not finish the epic for some other reason, or whether the ending of a once complete epic was lost in transmission. If the final part of the epic ever existed, it has left no traces. Quintilian's comment dates the poet's death to before c. 95 CE, and there are allusions to the conquest of Jerusalem in 70 CE in the proem (1.12–14) and to the eruption of the volcano Vesuvius in 79 CE in a simile (4.507–9). Beyond that there are no clear indications of the date of composition. Current consensus seems to be that the poem was probably started during the 70s CE and that it was either finished by 79 CE or that composition continued into the early 90s CE.

Scholarship on Valerius Flaccus

The first edition (*editio princeps*) of Valerius' *Argonautica* was published in Bologna in 1474, followed by a number of further editions until the middle of the sixteenth century. Despite this early interest, the poem was relatively

neglected by more modern scholarship in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thanks to the general low regard for post-Virgilian, ‘Silver’, Latin literature. Whenever texts of this era were studied, the approach tended to be judgemental.

As a result of this limited interest, until relatively recently the only commentaries on the entire poem were the Latin works by Wagner (1805) and Langen (1896–7). Besides, apart from the Loeb edition by Mozley (1934), hardly any translations of the entire poem into a modern language were easily available. In the last decades of the twentieth century interest in Valerius returned. In 1970 a new Teubner edition of the *Argonautica* appeared (by Courtney) and a detailed study of the manuscripts by Ehlers, which revised earlier assumptions; this was followed by his Teubner edition in 1980.

Since the late 1990s editions and commentaries on Valerius have been produced in greater numbers: besides excerpts in anthologies, there is now a Budé edition with a revised text and French translation (by Liberman (1997, 2002)), another French edition (by Soubiran (2002)), a new English translation (by Barich (2009)), supplementing the Loeb edition by Mozley (1934), an Italian translation (by Caviglia (1999)), a German translation (by Dräger (2003)), two annotated translations into Spanish (by López Moreda (1996) and by Río Torres-Murciano (2011a)), a Portuguese version (by Gouvêa Júnior (2010)) and a Polish translation of the first half of Book 3 (by Śnieżewski (2003)). Spaltenstein (2002, 2004a, 2005) has completed a (French) commentary of the entire poem in three volumes, and other scholars have provided commentaries on individual books (or parts thereof): Book 1—Kleywegt (2005), Galli (2007), Zissos (2008); Book 2—Harper Smith (1987), Poortvliet (1991a); Book 4—Korn (1989), Campanini (1996), Murgatroyd (2009); Book 5—Wijsman (1996); Book 6—Fucecchi (1997, 2006), Wijsman (2000b), Baier (2001); Book 7—Taliercio (1992), Stadler (1993), Perutelli (1997); Book 8—Lazzarini (2012), Pellucchi (2012).

In the area of interpretation too the increasing interest in Valerius is shown in the rising number of publications. There were some important (mainly German) works on the *Argonautica* in the 1970s, in particular the study by Adamietz (1976) and the dissertation by Lüthje (1971), as well as articles by von Albrecht, Burck and later Lefèvre (1971–2012). Since the late 1980s/early 1990s the number of works (in English, German, Italian and, later, French) has increased; several published dissertations and collections of papers are now available (see especially the three volumes of *Ratis omnia vincet* (Korn and Tschiedel (1991), Eigler and Lefèvre (1998) and Spaltenstein (2004b)). Important works from this period covering more than Valerius are Denis Feeney’s *The Gods in Epic* (1991) and Philip Hardie’s *The Epic Successors of Virgil*

(1993). Further monographs in English on Flavian epic followed (e.g. McGuire (1997)), while the studies of Hershkowitz (1998b) and now Stover (2012a) are still the only monographs in English dedicated entirely to Valerius. From the 1990s onwards, Andrew Zissos studied important aspects that have furthered the literary appreciation of the epic in a series of articles; an overview of the state of the art (with bibliographical references) is provided in his commentary on Book 1 (Zissos 2008).

Bibliographical surveys on Valerius are provided by Ehlers (1971–2) for 1940–71 and Scaffai (1986b) for 1938–82, both annotated, by Cuypers (2012), offering a list with emphasis on recent works, and by Stover (2012b), in an annotated, selective overview.