

**A Textual Note on Valerius Flaccus,
Argonautica 2.632**

The transmitted text of Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica* 2.629-636, at the start of the Cyzicus episode, reads as follows:¹

*terra sinu medio Pontum iacet inter et Hellen
ceu fundo prolata maris; namque improba caecis* 630
intulit arua uadis longoque per aequora dorso
litus agit: tenet hinc ueterem confinibus oris
pars Phrygiam, pars discreti iuga pinea montis.
nec procul ad tenuis surgit confinia ponti
urbs placidis demissa iugis; rex diuitis agri* 635
Cyzicus.

(Arg. 2.629-636)

* per S: sub L: om. V

“In the gulf midway between Pontus and Helle lies a land, as it were cast up from the bottom of the sea, for it thrusts its fields boldly into hidden shallows and drives its shore through the waters in a long spine: one end is connected to ancient Phrygia with neighbouring shores, the other is occupied by a mountain with two peaks, the slopes in between covered with pine trees. Not far off, near the borders of the shallow sea, there rises a city, built down from the gentle slopes. The king of this rich land is Cyzicus.”

In his commentary on the second book of the *Argonautica*, Poortvliet notes that *confinia* (634) is “a bit awkward after *confinibus* in 632.”² This awkwardness is emphasised by the fact that both words are in the same metrical position and that the substantive *confinium* occurs in only two other places in the *Argonautica* (*primae ... confinia terrae*, 4.574; *trucis ad confinia Ponti*, 8.180), whereas there is only one other occurrence of the (substantivated) adjective *confinis* (*ad confine papillae*, 6.374). The appearance of both the adjective *confinibus* and the substantive *confinia* within the space of three lines is thus rather suspicious. I would therefore like to examine the possibility that either *confinia* in 634 or *confinibus* in 632 is corrupt.

1. *Confinia*

As in the other occurrences, *confinia* in 634 appears in the fourth and fifth metrical feet, and is in the accusative case. In fact, the entire phrase *ad tenuis ... confinia ponti* (634) specifically recalls *trucis ad confinia Ponti* (8.180). The meaning of line 634 has been debated, however, mostly with regard to the meaning of *tenuis*, which is generally taken to mean “shallow”, referring to the water on either side of the isthmus, the location of

¹ The text used is that of EHLERS (1980), with one alteration (*per* instead of *sub* in line 2.631). My translation is based on MOZLEY (1934). I would like to thank Gerard Boter for his invaluable advice and feedback. I am also grateful to the anonymous referees for their useful comments.

² POORTVLIET (1991), p. 314.

the city of Cyzicus.³ Harper Smith notes that “*tenuis* is unusual in meaning ‘shallow’, i.e. narrow from top to bottom, rather than from side to side (...). It would be more appropriate of the peninsula’s narrow neck.” Consequently, she proposes to change *ponti* to *pontis* (“the bridge referred to in Strabo 12. p. 575”), or *tenuis* to *gemini*, “recalling phrases used of the isthmus of Corinth ...”.⁴

Spaltenstein, however, comments that *tenuis* is the kind of hypallage that Valerius favours, this particular instance being very close to *Arg.* 7.22, where *tenui* qualifies *limen* rather than *Eoo*:⁵

*tum iactata toro totumque experta cubile
ecce uidet tenui candescere limen Eoo.* (Arg. 7.21-22)

“Then, as she [*Medea*] restlessly tosses and tries now this, now that side of her couch, look – she sees the narrow threshold shimmering white at dawn.”

Line 2.634 would then be interpreted as follows:⁶

nec procul ad tenuis surgit confinia ponti
“Not far off, near the narrow strip separating the sea ...”

This hypallage would, however, be a bit far-fetched; in the example from Book 7, the morning light (*Eoo*) could still be interpreted as being “narrow”, although it is clear that *tenuis* actually qualifies *limen*, but in 2.634 the *tenuis ponti* would not immediately be understandable as “narrow sea”; in fact, this combination would more readily be interpreted as “shallow sea”, a meaning of *tenuis* that is not common, as we just saw, but does occur: *OLD* 4c mentions *tenui* ... *sulco* (“shallow furrow”) in Virgil, *Georgics* 1.68 and 2.89 as instances.⁷

This interpretation of “shallow” would also better fit the immediate, geographical context; following Apollonius Rhodius’ description of Cyzicus (*Arg.* 1.936ff.), Valerius stresses the paradoxical nature of this peninsula that seems an island and vice versa,⁸ as there is an isthmus connecting Cyzicus to the Phrygian mainland, which is, however, now and then washed over (cf. Ap.Rhod., *Arg.* 1.938: ἐπιμβύρεται ἰσθμός, “the isthmus is washed over”). Thus Cyzicus is immediately introduced as a *terra* instead of Apollonius’ νῆσος (*Arg.* 1.936), but Valerius then says that it was “as it were cast up from the bottom of the sea” (*ceu fundo prolata maris*, 2.630) and that it “thrusts its fields boldly into hidden shallows” (*improba caecis / intulit arua uadis*, 2.630-631), which rather seems to denote an island. The ambiguity continues with the description of the isthmus: the (is)land “drives its shore with a spine through the waters” (*longoque per aequora dorso /*

³ E.g. MOZLEY (1934), HARPER SMITH (1987), p. 267, POORTVLIET (1991), p. 314, and LIBERMAN (1997), follow LANGEN (1896-7), p. 200 in interpreting *tenuis* this way: “*tenuis – confinia ponti* indicant vicinam terrae continentis regionem, ubi pontus tenuis et vadosus est.”

⁴ HARPER SMITH (1987), p. 268.

⁵ SPALTENSTEIN (2002), p. 483, referring to p. 65-66 for an extensive list of Valerius’ use of hypallage and other transpositions.

⁶ Cf. also DRÄGER’s (2003), p. 402 translation and interpretation.

⁷ Cf. POORTVLIET (1991), p. 314.

⁸ Cf. SPALTENSTEIN (2002), p. 483: “... Val. montre ce *dorsum* qui touche à la fois à la presqu’île et au continent, avec une redondance qui doit souligner le côté paradoxal de cette géographie.”

litus agit, 631-632), which in its turn suggests a peninsula.⁹ When Valerius then writes a few lines later that a city lies “near the borders of the shallow sea”, this fits the paradoxical picture of this semi-island / semi-peninsula better than Spaltenstein’s interpretation “narrow strip separating the sea”, which would describe the isthmus as a firm strip of land and thus neutralize the paradoxical situation so carefully constructed. Be that as it may, it is clear that *confinia* in 634 is completely understandable and thus not in doubt.¹⁰

2. *Confinibus*

Accepting *confinia* in 624, I would question the authenticity of *confinibus* in line 632. It appears in the fourth and fifth metrical feet, as in the other occurrence of the adjective as well as the three instances of *confinia* in the *Argonautica*, but the ablative case is unique. More importantly, however, the meaning of the word is not satisfactory: *confinibus oris* should mean “with bordering / neighbouring shores” and in fact denotes one and the same shore, i.e. the semi-submerged isthmus connecting Cyzicus to Phrygia, which can be said to be both Cyzicus’ and Phrygia’s shore; compare lines 631-632, where the isthmus is described as the “shore” (*litus*) of Cyzicus, which it “drives through the waters.” So *oris* continues the paradoxical description of Cyzicus as an island with a shore that is at the same time its connection to the mainland, making it a peninsula, and *confinibus* with its association of borders is thus decidedly odd in this context. Understandably, the slightly awkward phrase has led to misinterpretations / mis-translations. As Harper Smith notes, for instance, “‘oris’ refers to the ‘common boundary’ it shares with Phrygia (not ‘whose shores meet it’, Mozley).”¹¹ Her own as well as Poortvliet’s interpretation that it should mean “common boundary” is, however, not in accordance with the Latin either.¹² I wonder whether *confinibus* might not be a corruption of an original *communibus* (“common / shared shores”). From a palaeographical point of view this change is easy, and the supposed scribal error would be understandable with the similar *confinia* in the same metrical position two lines below. Most importantly, however, *communibus*, which does occur in this metrical position once more in the *Argonautica* (*commune*, 8.176), makes better sense,¹³ with a more effective plural that

⁹ DILKE (1965), p. 108 and EHLERS (1970), p. 72 interpret the *dorsum* as a ford, to support the reading *sub aequora* (L) instead of *per aequora* (S). The latter reading is, however, more likely, as it makes better sense with *agit* and, moreover, because the isthmus was also not completely submerged in Apollonius’ *Argonautica* (1.938; quoted above), which clearly inspired Valerius’ passage (HARPER SMITH [1987], p. 267; cf. POORTVLIET [1991], p. 313; LIBERMAN [1997], p. 214-215). SPALTENSTEIN (2002), p. 483 adds: “*per aequora* (vers 631) est plus vraisemblable et montre mieux le paradoxe [see n. 8 above] que *sub aequora* ...”.

¹⁰ The possible allusion to OVID, *Metamorphoses* 15.291-292 (so HARPER SMITH [1987], p. 267), which deals with the boundary between Sicily and the Italian mainland before the street of Messina came into existence (*donec confinia pontus / abstulit*, “until the sea took away the common boundary”), perhaps also confirms that *confinia* in 634 is the right reading.

¹¹ HARPER SMITH (1987), p. 267. Cf. BARICH (2009), who translates “one side extends to coasts that neighbor ancient Phrygia.”

¹² POORTVLIET (1991), p. 313: “‘One part holds Phrygia with a common boundary (in plain English ‘borders on ancient Phrygia’) ...”.

¹³ The word also occurs in 4.761 (*communesque*); 7.227 (*communem*); 7.228 (*communes*).

reinforces the ambiguous geography of Cyzicus, as the shores mentioned actually describe the one, shared (and paradoxical) shore that is the isthmus:

... tenet hinc ueterem communibus oris
pars Phrygiam, pars discreti iuga pinea montis.

“... one end is connected to ancient Phrygia with shared shores, the other is occupied by a mountain with two peaks, the slopes in between covered with pine trees.”

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