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WHY IS VALERIUS FLACCUS A QUINDECIMVIR?

'Valerius Flaccus knows how to write with elegant precision.' – R. Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford, 1958), 89.

> Phoebe, mone, si Cumaeae mihi conscia uatis
> stat casta cortina domo, si laurea digna
> fronte uiret …

In these lines, as critics have long recognized, resides evidence for identifying Valerius Flaccus as a *quindecimuir sacris faciundis*. Emphasis is placed on the tripod emblematic of this sacred office which is here intimately associated with expertise in the oracular communications of the Cumaean Sibyl.[1] The *libri Sibyllini*, the supervision and interpretation of which were amongst the earliest and most conspicuous of the *XVuiri*'s responsibilities, could be traced to the Sibyl at Cumae (Lactant. *Div. inst*. 1.6.10-11, citing Varro, even if this connection was less than the entire story from a strictly historical perspective). Wreathes, too, formed part of the *XVuir*'s equipment, and of course during the Imperial period the Sibylline books were deposited in the Temple of Apollo on the Palatine. In little more than two lines, then, one finds an abundance of references that cannot fail to fashion this addressee of Apollo as a quindecimvir.[2]

Although almost nothing is known about the flesh-and-bone Valerius, it hardly lies beyond the bounds of probability that he was a member of the college of *XVuiri*.[3] None the less, modern inclinations, averse to biographical reconstruction, are keener to

[1] N. Heinsius, *C. Valeri Flacci Argonauticon Libri VIII* (Amsterdam, 1680), ad loc.; G.B. Pius, *Gai Valeri Flacci Argonauticon Libri Octo* (Bologna, 1519), ad loc.; P. Boyancé, 'La science d'un quindécimvir au I^er^ siècle après J.-C.', *REL* 42 (1964), 334–46 = *Études sur la religion romaine* (Rome, 1972), 347–58. Accepted, with a degree of caution, by A.J. Kleywegt, *Valerius Flaccus,* Argonautica *Book 1: A Commentary* (Leiden, 2005), 11. F. Spaltenstein, *Commentaire des Argonautica de Valerius Flaccus (livres 1 et 2)* (Brussels, 2002), 26–8 rejects any connection between these lines and the quindecimvirate.

[2] On the history and activities of the quindecimvirate, see G. Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer* (Munich, 1912), 534–49; K. Latte, *Römische Religionsgeschichte* (Munich, 1960), 397–8; G. Radke, *RE* 24.1114-48; G.J. Szemler, *The Priests of the Roman Republic: A Study of Interactions between Priesthoods and Magistracies* (Brussels, 1972), 21–46, 157–66; J. Linderski, 'Quindecimuiri sacris faciundis', *Brill's New Pauly* 12 (Leiden, 2008), 346–7 (with further literature): originally composed of two members, this college was later expanded (in 367 B.C.) to ten members and, by the time of Sulla, to fifteen. Apollo and the *XVuiri*: Liv. 10.8.2; Obseq. 47; Tib. 2.5.1. On the *libri Sibyllini*, see H.W. Parke, *Sibyls and Sibylline Prophecy in Classical Antiquity* (London, 1988), 136–51. On the poetic implications of locating the Sibylline books on the Palatine, see J.F. Miller, *Apollo, Augustus, and the Poets* (Cambridge, 2009), 234–47.

[3] This conclusion is accepted by J. Rüpke, *Römische Priester in der Antike: ein biographisches Lexikon* (Stuttgart, 2007), 222–3.

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ascertain just why it is that the voice of this epic poem elaborates itself as the voice of a quindecimvir. The importance of this literary moment, 'l'unica autorappresentazione del poeta in tutto il poema',[4] has not gone unobserved, nor the startling and even provocative effect that is achieved here when Valerius' autobiographical move 'ruptures the usual anonymity of the epic narrative voice'.[5]

Sound and sensitive explanations have been advanced. Alessandro Barchiesi, for instance, has proposed that, in his divergence in these lines from the opening of Apollonius' *Argonautica*, Valerius exhibits his awareness of previous literary investigations into the correct interpretation of the Greek epic's ἀρχόμενος σέο (Ap. Rhod. *Argon*. 1.1) (specimens of which are preserved in our scholia) and consequently constructs himself as a poet who, in the beginning of his epic, explicitly evokes Apollo and represents himself as 'una sorta di "agente" di Apollo a Roma'.[6] In the similar but less specific view of Andrew Zissos, the quindecimviral persona is adopted 'for reasons of literary authority',[7] installing Valerius in the role of 'poet-as-priest and making Apollo a twofold patron deity',[8] a proposition that Tim Stover advances further in making his case that Valerius endeavours in his *Argonautica* to rehabilitate and reinvigorate the figure of the *uates* in epic poetry—largely in reaction to Lucan's derogatory treatment of the same figure.[9] Indeed, for Stover, Valerius' priestly posture here underscores 'the religiosity that his status as *uates* bestows on him', and by way of claiming a relationship with Apollo that is at once 'personal and pious' Valerius is able to distinguish his poetic voice from the fractured and conflicted voice of the narrator of the *Bellum Ciuile*.[10] Taking a somewhat different perspective, Gesine Manuwald observes how, because the *XVuiri* supervised the Sibylline books, this passage helps to signal the epic's pervasive engagement with the issue of communication between mortals and the gods.[11]

Notwithstanding the obvious merit of these approaches, in none of them is the literary significance of Valerius' specifically *quindecimviral* posture addressed. Valerius need not have been a *XVuir* in order to configure a relationship with Apollo, or to redeem the vatic posture from Lucan, however relevant his pose may be to each of these literary purposes. And yet Valerius' syntax (*mone, si* …) concentrates our attention specifically on the poet's condition as a *XVuir*: it is because the poet is a *XVuir* that what follows lines 5–7 *can* follow—by way of Apollo's inspiration. Perhaps, then, there is more to be gained from these lines by concentrating closely on the quindecimvirate itself, the very conceit Valerius employs in defining the poetic voice of his epic.

[4] A. Barchiesi, 'Genealogie letterarie nell'epica imperiale: fondamentalismo e ironia', in E.A. Schmidt, F. Paschoud, & C. Wick (edd.), *L'histoire littéraire immanente dans la poésie latine* (Geneva, 2001), 315–54, at 327.

[5] A. Zissos, *Valerius Flaccus' Argonautica, Book 1: A Commentary* (Oxford, 2008), 81.

[6] Barchiesi (n. 4), 326–8, at 327.

[7] Zissos (n. 5), xiv.

[8] Zissos (n. 5), 80.

[9] T. Stover, *Epic and Empire in Vespasianic Rome: A New Reading of Valerius Flaccus' Argonautica* (Oxford, 2012), 151–79.

[10] Stover (n. 9), 157–8, at 157. On Lucan's 'fractured voice', see J. Masters, *Poetry and Civil War in Lucan's 'Bellum Civile'* (Cambridge, 1992), 87–90; J.J. O'Hara, *Inconsistency in Roman Epic: Studies in Catullus, Lucretius, Vergil, Ovid and Lucan* (Cambridge, 2007), 131–9.

[11] G. Manuwald, 'Divine messages and human actions in the *Argonautica*', in A. Augoustakis (ed.), *Ritual and Religion in Flavian Epic* (Oxford, 2013), 35–7. Manuwald also agrees with Zissos that Valerius' quindecimviral pose underlines the poet's relationship to Apollo.

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Unlike *pontifices* or *augures*, the *XVuiri* had variegated responsibilities that ranged widely. Their supervision of the *libri Sybillini* has already been remarked: these were sacred texts, of foreign origin and composed in Greek, which, although appropriated by Rome's civic religion, always sustained something of their alien quality. It is this kind of religious management that is perhaps the most conspicuous aspect of the *XVuiri*'s role in Roman society: they acted, to advance another instance of their role, as intermediaries between the Senate and the *Etrusca disciplina* by consulting Etruscan *haruspices* and conveying the results of their consultation to the Senate; they supervised Greek practitioners of civic cult, in the city's Greek-style worship of Ceres, to adduce only a single example; and they supervised foreign practices annexed by Roman civic religion from farther afield, of which the worship of the Magna Mater was perhaps the most strikingly a stranger to its Roman setting.[12] An essential operation of the *XVuiri*, then, consisted in putting to permanent and profitable Roman uses texts, cults and rites that not only had foreign origins but also remained unalterably foreign even in their new Roman contexts—and yet, owing to their new contexts and the uses to which they were put, were, none the less, Roman as well as imported.

Denis Feeney has done much to unpack the intrinsically Roman habit of preserving, as a defining element of Roman culture, institutions and practices that were explicitly marked as foreign in some important respect, a phenomenon far from infrequent (as we have already seen) in Roman civic religion. An obvious example, to which he refers, is the (unquestionably) Roman practice of performing sacrifice *Graeco ritu*.[13] This cultural habit, as Feeney demonstrates, shaped the Romans' approach to writing their own literature, not least in the Romans' treatment of myth.[14] From this perspective, it begins to become clear how useful an idea it was to fashion the Roman narrator of the *Argonautica* as a prominent expert in the best practices—indeed, in the establishment's official practice—in managing Rome's selection, exploitation and acculturation of originally alien religious texts and rites. The narrator as *XVuir*, then, is a figure that naturally suggests an authority on the correct appropriation and redeployment of literary properties the origins of which lay in Greece.

It must be conceded that there is no evidence that the *XVuiri* exercised their competence as individuals, unlike augurs or pontiffs who very often did. It is true that, during the Republic, individual *XVuiri* can occasionally be viewed expressing themselves on matters pertinent to the duties of their college, often with noticeable effect, but it is far from obvious that in doing so they acted in any official capacity or with incontestable authority.[15] Still, it appears that, whenever the official view of the college was expressed in the Senate, it was (unsurprisingly) a single *XVuir* who spoke on the college's behalf.[16] This practice may have persisted, but in any case, by the Imperial period, there was little

[12] It is a long-standing inference, though not a demonstrable fact (owing to the absence of positive evidence), that, after managing the introduction of Greek cults to civic religion, the *XVuiri* thereafter supervised them: see M. Beard, J. North and S. Price, *Religions of Rome* (Cambridge, 1988), 1.27.

[13] J. Scheid, '*Graeco ritu*: a typically Roman way of honouring the gods', *HSPh* 97 (1995), 15–31.

[14] D. Feeney, *Literature and Religion at Rome: Cultures, Contexts, and Beliefs* (Cambridge 1998), esp. 47–70.

[15] For example, the actions of C. Cato (*tr. pl.* 56) in opposing the restoration of Ptolemy Auletes to the Egyptian throne: see W.J. Tatum, *The Patrician Tribune: Publius Clodius Pulcher* (Chapel Hill, 1999), 200–1. It should be noted that on at least one occasion the Senate rejected a formal decree of the college: Front. *Aq*. 7.4-5, discussed by M.G. Morgan, 'The introduction of the Aqua Marcia, 144–140 B.C.', *Philologus* 122 (1978), 25–58, esp. 41.

[16] Front. *Aq*. 7.5, on the text of which passage see R.H. Rodgers, *Frontinus: De Aquaeductu Urbis Romae* (Cambridge, 2004), 165.

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possibility of any individual—pontiff, augur or *XVuir*—acting independently.[17] Still, it is probably unnecessary to push these realities too far. Here Valerius evokes the crucial function of the quindecimvirate and not the full particulars of the job description as he applies the concept of its essential religious operation to the composition of epic in Rome.

Now if it can be agreed that the quindecimvirate expresses a Roman sensibility that simultaneously preserves and assimilates, respects and annexes, cultural resources originating outside Rome, then reference to his official status as a *XVuir* constitutes an assertion on Valerius' part that, in this epic, one finds the correct (and therefore the best) Roman version of its ultimately Greek material—a version whose superiority is meant to trump any Roman predecessors, whose poetic voices, whatever their merits, lacked Valerius' authority. By the time Valerius began his work, after all, the myth of the Argonauts had received abundant literary treatment in Greek and in Latin literature in more than one genre and by more than one distinguished author. And, for the author of a Latin *Argonautica*, there was an unavoidable precedent: the splendid adaptation by Varro Atacinus, influential and effusively praised by Ovid and (less effusively) by Valerius' contemporary Quintilian, represented a formidable rival achievement the reputation of which Valerius could hardly ignore.[18]

Critics have commented on Valerius' confidence in confronting his own belatedness in taking up the Argonautica myth: instead of being crushed by any anxiety of influence, he instead exerts himself in finding imaginative metapoetic means of scripting his success in retelling his much-told tale.[19] He was, to be sure, hardly the first Latin poet to insist on his own literary authority, and it can hardly be necessary here to rehearse the various tropes employed by Roman writers to inscribe their originality or literary stature, even as they wrote themselves into an existing tradition.[20] Claiming to be first—*primus ego*—was a popular move on the part of Latin poets asserting their originality in introducing some element of Greek literature to Rome.[21] Sometimes, by way of an image tracing itself back to Callimachus, this declaration of priority was formulated in terms of trail-blazing, itself a Greek conceit that could be naturalized through its association with patently Roman institutions, like the triumph.[22] At *Epist*. 1.19.21-34, as is well

[17] The social distinction and significance of the college persisted into the empire: M.W.F. Hoffman Lewis, *The Official Priests of Rome Under the Julio-Claudians* (Rome, 1955), 86–91; R. Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford, 1958), 66; L. Schumacher, 'Die vier hohen römische Priesterkollegia, 69–235 n.Chr.', *ANRW* 2.16.1 (1973), 655–819, esp. 682–90 and 808–12.

[18] Ov. *Am*. 1.15.21; Quint. *Inst*. 10.1.87. Discussion: A.S. Hollis (ed.), *Fragments of Roman Poetry c.60 BC–AD 20* (Oxford, 2007), 196–98.

[19] See, recently, T. Stover, 'Rebuilding Argo: Valerius Flaccus' poetic creed', *Mnemosyne* 63 (2010), 640–50, assembling instances and further bibliography.

[20] Bibliography on this point is abundant, but concise discussions of the matter, with further references, include C.O. Brink, *Horace on Poetry: The 'Ars Poetica'* (Cambridge, 1971), 208–24; D.A. Russell, '*De Imitatione*', in D. West and T. Woodman (edd.), *Creative Imitation and Latin Literature* (Cambridge, 1979), 1–16; S. Hinds, *Allusion and Intertext: Dynamics of Appropriation in Roman Poetry* (Cambridge, 1998), 123–44; M. Citroni, 'Affermazione di priorità e coscienza di progresso artistico nei poeti latini', in E.A. Schmidt, F. Paschoud & C. Wick (edd.), *L'histoire littéraire immanente dans la poésie latine* (Geneva, 2001), 267–304.

[21] E.g. Lucr. 1.117-19; Prop. 3.1.3-4; Hor. *Carm*. 3.30.10-14 (and see the following note); discussion in Citroni (n. 20). See also the texts assembled by J. Linderski, 'The Menander inscription from Pompeii and the expression *primus scripsit*', *ZPE* 159 (2007), 45–55.

[22] Trail-blazing: e.g. Lucr. 1.925-7; Verg. *G*. 3.8-11; Hor. *Epist*. 1.19.21-34. Callimachean origin: *Aet*. fr. 1.26 Pf., but see also Choerilus, *SH* 317 (on which, see recently K.A. MacFarlane, 'Choerilus of Samos' lament [*SH* 317] and the revitalization of epic', *AJPh* 130 [2009], 219-34). Triumphal references: e.g. P. Hardie, *Virgil's* Aeneid*: Cosmos and Imperium* (Oxford, 1986), 48–51; R.F. Thomas,

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known, Horace insists that he was the first to tread the poetic turf of Latin lyric and iambic, an assertion he embellishes by resorting to the technical terminology of Roman law and references to Roman practices in canvassing for political office.[23] And so it goes, poets combining established (Greek) tropes with familiar themes from Roman public life.

It was out of the question, as we have seen, for Valerius to advance any serious claim to literary priority when asserting his literary authority.[24] Still, by describing his literary inspiration by Apollo as dependent on his stature as a *XVuir*, Valerius reworks a long-standing tradition, whereby a Latin poet assumes a priestly guise that harks back to the (Greek) priest of the Muses.[25] In doing so, however, Valerius can distinguish his poetic achievement from that of his predecessors by means of a literary stance that combines a familiar gesture (his address to Apollo)[26] with a pose that is at once novel and (not unlike Horace's elaborations cited above) quintessentially Roman. In doing so, Valerius can affirm the Greek literary tradition he perpetuates at the same time as he vaunts his superiority over his Roman rivals in appropriating it: he is not simply some vague *uates* figure, but rather an official who is expert in managing, for the public good, the right kind of Romanisation.

The artistry of Valerius' self-fashioning may not impress every reader, but, as the example of Horace illustrates, there is nothing exceptionable in his introducing to his proem a suggestive and yet specific Roman institution. His very Roman declaration of literary superiority in the correct appropriation and rendering of the epic tradition he intended to extend or even (following Stover) to restore must matter to any attempt to unpack his appeal to Apollo. And it will be obvious, I hope, that this interpretation of lines 5–7 is compatible with Barchiesi's distinctly Roman Valerius insisting on his learned clarifications to the epic tradition, with Zissos' programmatic authority-figure, or with Stover's Valerius reinvigorating the vatic figure.[27] Indeed, each claim gains something when the real-world qualities of the quindecimvirate are recalled in reading Valerius' proem. In his quindecimviral pose, Valerius finds a conceit that is imaginative

Virgil Georgics Volume 2: Books III-IV (Cambridge, 1988), 36–40; K. Freudenberg, '*Solus sapiens liber est*: recommissioning lyric in *Epistles* 1', in T. Woodman and D. Feeney (edd.), *Traditions and Contexts in the Poetry of Horace* (Cambridge, 2002), 124–40, esp. 135–6, where Freudenberg observes how, in representing his literary accomplishments in the *Odes* and the *Epistles*, Horace 'brings foreign customs in his wake'.

[23] Legal terminology: *Epist*. 1.19.22; cf. E. Fraenkel, *Horace* (Oxford, 1957), 341 n. 2. Canvassing: *Epist*. 1.19.37-40. Horace also portrays himself (again in Roman terms) as *princeps* and *dux*: Freudenberg (n. 22), 135.

[24] Even in his deployment of *prima* as the epic's first word, Valerius draws attention to the divide, literary as well as chronological, separating his poem from the legend it narrates: see Zissos (n. 5), 71–3.

[25] Relevant passages and critical discussion at R.G.M. Nisbet and M. Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace* Odes, *Book I* (Oxford, 1970), 15 and 349; Hardie (n. 22), 11–22; R.G.M. Nisbet and N. Rudd, *A Commentary on Horace* Odes, *Book III* (Oxford, 2004), 8; R. Hunter, *The Shadow of Callimachus: Studies in the Reception of Hellenistic Poetry at Rome* (Cambridge, 2006), 7–8. See also Zissos (n. 5), 79–80.

[26] Poetic inspiration by Apollo is too familiar to require extensive documentation. Apollo's significance in Callimachean poetics (*Aet*. fr. 1.21-8 Pf.; *Hymn* 2.107-12): A. Harder (ed.), *Callimachus* Aetia*: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Oxford, 2012), 2.55-64. Its presence in Roman poetry: e.g. G.O. Hutchinson, *Hellenistic Poetry* (Oxford, 1988), 286–9; Miller (n. 2) with further references (and see the preceding note). Valerius' appeal to Apollo is discussed by Barchiesi (n. 4), 326–9 and Zissos (n. 5), 79–80.

[27] Nor is this approach to the passage an impediment to Manuwald's perceptive reading of it, though it operates along a somewhat different line.

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and which in purely Roman terms expresses his claim to superior literary authority as he negotiates the best Roman expression of an expansive and ancient literary tradition. How could Apollo, especially the Apollo of the Palatine, fail to heed him?[28]

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