Valerius Flaccus, Argonautica I.5-17

The affirmation of the dynastical principle in the proem of the Argonautica.

Name of the author: Valerius Flaccus
Date: 70 CE to 79 CE
Language: Latin

Category: Roman
Literary genre: Epic and Poetry

Title of work: Argonautica
Reference: I.5-17
Commentary:

In his work Argonautica, Valerius Flaccus added a new development to the Greek epic narrative of Apollonius Rhodius which relates the voyage of Jason and the Argonauts to retrieve the Golden Fleece. This text is an extract from the proem of the first book of Valerius Flaccus’s Argonautica. It is the most discussed passage of the work because of the diversity of the manuscript traditions which makes the editing of the text difficult, and because it is one of the few passages which is useful to the dating of the Argonautica. A majority of scholars (Stover, Ripoll and Zissos) believe that this proem was written between 70 and 79 CE, contrary to others who think that it might have been added to the Argonautica after 89 CE (Liberman). Various elements of the proem show that Vespasian may have been still alive when Valerius Flaccus wrote this text. The fact that the poet insists a lot on Vespasian – presented here as sanctus pater, “holy father”, an honorific address which “anticipates Jupiter’s paternal image” later mentioned in Book I and which clearly recalls Ovid when he presented Augustus as sancte pater patriae, “holy father of the fatherland” (Ovid, Fasti II.127; Stover, Epic & Empire, p. 74) – and Titus’s exploits and that Domitian is just briefly mentioned is another piece of evidence for a date of composition of the proem under Vespasian (Stover, Epic & Empire, p. 7-26).

After appealing to Apollo and to Vespasian for poetic inspiration (v. 5-7), Valerius Flaccus starts his imperial praise. So as to legitimise the Flavian dynasty, he creates various parallels between the destiny of the Flavian family and that of Jason and the Argonauts. The first parallel appears with the theme of the opening of the see (v. 7-9), a typical epic theme which later reappears in Jason’s speech to Acastus (Valerius Flaccus, Argonautica I.169; Ripoll, La morale héroïque, p. 505). Then, the poet alludes to Vespasian’s military operations in Britain, symbolized by the conquest of the Caledonian Ocean (v. 8-9). Vespasian’s naval achievements are said to surpass those of the Julio-Claudians. This statement is hyperbolic, since Vespasian took part in these operations in Britain under Claudius’s command, and is also depreciative for the Julio-Claudians, who are compared to “Phrygians” – a term which might refer to an oriental sluggishness opposed to the Sabine origins of Vespasian (Ripoll, La morale héroïque, p. 505). Valerius uses a common message of Flavian propaganda: the Flavians surpassed the Julio-Claudian dynasty and their achievements mark a “new beginning of Rome” (Stover, Epic & Empire, p. 65). Contrary to Silius Italicus who, in his epic poem Punica, praised Vespasian for his assaults on Britain lands (Silius Italicus, Punica III.594-629), Valerius Flaccus only highlights the naval aspect of his campaign. His aim was mainly to show that Vespasian sailed seas which had never been navigated successfully and was therefore a “contemporary Argonaut” (Stover, Epic & Empire, p. 65).

After the crossing of the sea, both Argonauts and Flavians were facing eastern fights or wars: in Colchis for Jason (Valerius Flaccus, Argonautica VI; Ripoll, La morale héroïque, p. 509), in Judea for the Flavians. Valerius Flaccus explicitly mentions the Jewish war and puts it in relation with the actions of Vespasian’s two sons (v. 12-14). In the verse “Your son is telling the story of how Idume was overthrown” (versam proles tua pandit Idumen, v. 12), Vespasian’s proles (progeny) refers to Domitian. The literary and poetic skills of Domitian are mentioned by various authors (for the references see Zissos, Valerius Flaccus, p. 87). Here, Valerius hints at an epic that Domitian may have started to write and which was dealing with Titus’s siege and destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. As there is no mention of this poem in Statius or Martial, it is possible that it was not finished or made public (Coleman, “The Emperor Domitian,” p. 1090-1091). Nevertheless, the fact that Domitian might have started to write an epic on the Jewish war could be interpreted as an attempt to use epic as a means to legitimise the Flavian conquests. Besides the fact that Domitian may be mentioned here so as to underscore the unity of the Flavian family (Kleywegt, Valerius Flaccus, p. 17), Domitian’s role is limited to the depiction of his brother’s exploits during the Jewish war. Valerius Flaccus presents Titus as the main orchestrator of this war; he appears as the exact counterpart of his
father: Vespasian opened the sea and led western conquests while Titus led ground combat in eastern regions. Such a message fits in with a main theme of Flavian propaganda, according to which the Flavian dynasty was carrying out the world domination scheme inherited from the Augustan period (Ripoll, *La morale héroïque*, p. 506).

Finally, if this proem was actually written under Vespasian’s reign, it would be the first time that the adjective *Solymus*, a shortened form of *Hierosolymarius* (present in the allusion to the *Solymus pulvis*, “the dust of Jerusalem”), is used in a Latin source (this assessment includes other forms like *Solyma*, the city of Jerusalem, and *Solymi*, the Jerusalemites; Kleywegt, *Valerius Flaccus*, p. 18). In addition, this image of Titus “blackened with the dust of Jerusalem” may have inspired Statius, in 95 CE, when he wrote a poem in honor of Crispinius, a boy of sixteen who was the son of M. Vettius Bolanus (consul suffect in 66 CE, governor of Britain from 69 to 71 CE and proconsul of Asia in 76 CE). Statius praises Crispinus and imagines, in an hyperbolic way, the future glorious military campaigns that he could led. Statius asks: “Or shall you tread the dust of Jerusalem (*Solymum cinerem*) and the captive palm-groves of Idumea, who does not plant for herself her fruitful orchard?” (Statius, *Silvae* V.2.138-139). This passage clearly echoes the proem of the *Argonautica* and it shows that, even at the end of Domitian’s reign, the conquest of Judea was still presented as a good example of the military successes of Rome.

Finally, the proem ends with an anticipation of Vespasian’s deification and apotheosis. This passage is a crucial element in the proem’s dating, since some scholars consider that *delubra genti*, “shrines for your family,” is an allusion to the *Templum gentis Flaviae* achieved in 94-95. Nevertheless, this expression may also be an anticipation with an hyperbolic character, since it is not one but various temples which will be established (note the future *institutet*). The most important point is that this anticipation of Vespasian’s deification echoes the transformation into a star of the Argonauts’s ship and the Argonauts’s apotheosis mentioned in another passage (Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica* I.563-573; Ripoll, *La morale héroïque*, p. 509). The anticipation of the imperial worship which was to be organized after Vespasian’s death has to be interpreted as part of the Flavian propaganda, in which the praise of the dynasty’s longevity played an important role.

Thus, in this proem, Valerius Flaccus presents the Flavians as heroes by including references to their exploits, including the Jewish war, into the narrative scheme of the Argonauts’s epic.

Keywords in the original language:

- Caledonia
- cultus
- delubrum
- deus
- genitor
- gens
- Idumea
- pelagus
- polus
- proles
- Solymus

Thematic keywords in English:

- apotheosis
- Argonauts
- deification
- Domitian
- epic
- Flavian dynasty
- Flavians
- heir
- Idumea
Jewish war
Titus
Vespasian
war

Ripoll, François, La morale héroïque dans les épopées latines d’époque flavienne: tradition et innovation (Louvain: Peeters, 1998)

Other sources connected with this document:  Text

Silius Italicus, Punica III.594-629

While Hannibal is about to conquer Italy, Jupiter comforts Venus by foretelling Rome's future splendour under the Flavians.

Read more about Silius Italicus, Punica III.594-629

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