

Why is Valerius Flaccus a Quindecimvir?

At *Argonautica* 1.5-7, it is nearly universally recognised, the poet identifies himself as a *XVvir sacris faciundis* (the observation comes as early as Heinsius 1680; only Sapelstein 2002, 26-8 demurs) – an abrupt and unique autobiographical moment in this epic (Barchiesi 2001, 327; cf. Zissos 2008, 81). Although it is possible to read these lines as little more than a specimen of biography (e.g. Rüpke 2007, 222-3), critics have preferred to look for poetic, not personal, significance in this passage. After all, Valerius goes on to fashion his priestly status as an essential condition for the existence and integrity of the poem that follows (*Argon.* 1.5: ...*mone, si...*). Hence the common (and not unreasonable) view that in these lines Valerius' has adapted the *vates* figure that is such a familiar element in earlier Latin poetry (moderately different takes on this approach can be found in Barchiesi 2001, 326-8; Zissos 2008, 79-80; Stover 2012, 151-79; Manuwald 2013, 35-6).

But this interpretation is perhaps too generic and in any case it ignores Valerius' specificity in this passage: why a quindecimvir? It also neglects a characteristic function of the *XVviri* in Roman civic religion, which lay in the appropriation and management of foreign practices in such a way that they became authentically Roman and yet remained always markedly alien (Wissowa 1912, 534-49 remains fundamental). In this paper I argue that, in his epic, Valerius puts the institution of the *XVviri* to work in order to figure his unique contribution to the *Argonautica* tradition. Because he cannot claim to be the first Roman to take up the tale of the Argonauts or to give it Latin form (even in his deployment of *prima* as the epic's first word, Valerius draws attention to his belatedness: cf. Zissos 2008, 71-3), he instead insists that his version possesses a distinctive brand of authority, signalled in the conceit of the quindecimvirate: Valerius writes himself into his epic as a poet

who understands best how to acculturate a Greek literary tradition into the public world of imperial Roman literature. The exploitation of Roman institutions in the asseveration of Greco-Roman originality is far from uncommon in Latin poetry (e.g. Roman law at Hor. *Ep.* 1.19.22; canvassing for office at Hor. *Ep.* 1.19.37-40; the triumph in numerous authors, on which see, i.a., Hardie 1986, 48-51). In the opening of his *Argonautica*, Valerius provides a further instantiation of this literary practice by supplying a new and yet still conspicuously Roman take on the long established *vates* posture: the *vates* as quindecimvir.

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