

## Two-part harmony: Nautical concord and strife in Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*

The voyage of the Argo was the most famous event of seafaring in ancient myth or history, the subject of song and story. Valerius Flaccus wrote his epic version of the *Argonautica* during the Flavian period (69–96 AD), under the Roman emperors Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian. All Flavian epic revolves around themes of mostly-mythological civil war and fratricide, which scholars connect with the civil wars preceding the accession of the Flavian emperors; the Flavian period itself may also have provoked an interest in these themes. In keeping with this tendency, Valerius' epic emphasizes civil war and fraternal interactions far more strongly than do other versions of the Argonautic legend on which he draws. I propose that he was aided in this by the language in which he is writing.

The Latin word for oar, *remus*, and its near-homophony with the name of Romulus' ill-fated brother, Remus, help to imbue the ships of Latin literature with the potential for evoking specters of fratricide and civil war. (Romulus had killed Remus for making fun of the newly-plowed dirt wall surrounding the nascent city of Rome.) Mostly, ancient authors seem not to have played with this available pun, but Propertius certainly did in his poem on the Battle of Actium (Welch 2005, 101ff). I argue that Valerius tacitly revives this pun in his *Argonautica*. Orpheus (the crew's coxswain) is expressly exempt from “plowing” the sea (1.471), and through his music he teaches the oars not to fight amongst themselves (1.470–2). Additionally, the shipwright, Argus, must constantly ensure that the Argo's hull retains its impermeable integrity against the sea (1.477–80). Without these two, the rowers of the Argo, their oars, and the ship herself would be at perpetual risk of strife and schism. Valerius subtly connects these dangerous aspects of the ship with Romulus and Remus by including multiple pairs of brothers among the Argonauts and having the Argonauts inscribe their names on their oars, with the side-effect of highlighting the name “*remus*” itself. The result is a subtle allusion to Rome's own origins in civil war, resonating with themes of civil war and fratricide that are present throughout the epic.

In tandem with these recurrent themes, Valerius shapes his epic around the opposition between strife and concord, focusing particularly on the positive and negative interactions of fraternal pairs. The unceasing strife of the identical Clashing Rocks, which the Argo is destined to end, occupies the epic's center. The Argo herself, as the locus of Argonautic confraternity, represents both strife and concord in the paintings on the two sides of her hull (the marriage of Peleus and Thetis [1.130–9] versus the battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs [1.140–8]). Her crew is evenly divided and rows equally (1.354–5, 1.494), but Argus and Orpheus are employed to prevent the ship's inherent internal strife. As the epic progresses, the tensions of this perpetually repressed disharmony become increasingly strained. Ultimately, the Argo bursts through the Clashing Rocks and herself appears to burst apart, thus reenacting the strife of the rocks to which she has just put a stop. I suggest that the opposed but exchangeable states of strife and concord in which the Argo is implicated present a series of optional readings of Rome's own apparent harmony in the period of history in which Valerius is writing.

Welch, T. S. (2005) *The Elegiac Cityscape: Propertius and the Meaning of Roman Monuments*. Columbus, Ohio.