

Where Have All the *Aetia* Gone?: Aetiological Reassignment in Valerius Flaccus's *Argonautica*

The general scholarly consensus is that Valerius Flaccus is not a particularly aetiological poet (e.g., Poortvliet 1991, Zissos 2008). However, while it is true that he does not indulge excessively in Apollonius-style aetia that explain the Argonautic origins of future landmarks and rituals, there is still a noticeably aetiological current running throughout his *Argonautica*. I argue, to begin with, that whereas Apollonius's aetia largely demonstrate how the Argonauts help move the cosmos to its final, civilized form, Valerius's aetia explain the organization of a world that is already complete prior to the Argo's launching. A primary explanation that I offer for Valerius's reimagined aetiological schema is the literary environment of his epic. Just as Apollonius's *Argonautica* was heavily influenced by the later events of Euripides' *Medea*, so Valerius's *Argonautica* is heavily influenced by the later events of Seneca's *Medea*—he is, in essence, writing a belated Roman epic prequel to a belated Roman tragedy. Accordingly, Valerius's Argonauts enact the crime that the chorus of Seneca's *Medea* lays at their feet, the crime of dragging together divinely-imposed boundaries (*Med.* 335–9; Fyfe 1983). Valerius's altered aetiology helps to define a world that is primed to be impacted by the Argonauts' voyage in the same way that Seneca's chorus claims it was.

Approximately halfway through the epic, however, Valerius changes his aetiological approach. Where he had previously used no Apollonian aetia, he suddenly begins to use exclusively Apollonian aetia. This unprecedented aetiological pattern intensifies following Tiphys's death at the (probable) midpoint. The metapoetics of the epic's middle region have been much discussed (Fowler 1997, Zissos 2004), and I suggest that the aetiological shift also falls into the category of metapoetics. In particular, I propose that Tiphys, as the helmsman and guide of what scholars have identified as an ultimately poetic craft (Davis 1989, Stover 2010), has been serving as Valerius's muse during the outward voyage. His death leaves the poet without a guide and, accordingly, without the ability to innovate. Instead, Valerius can only follow the aetiological σήματα previously laid down by Apollonius (Barnes 2003) as the Argonauts make their way to Colchis. At this point, Valerius is finally able to free himself from the intensified Apollonian narrative, invoking a new muse for the new song (*cantus alios*, 5.217) on which he now embarks: the “aetiology” of Seneca's *Medea*'s Medea.

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