

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

The Date of the Proem of Valerius Flaccus' Argonautica : New Epigraphic Evidence from Naples

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6k06010m>

Journal

Classical Philology, 116(1)

ISSN

0009-837X

Author

MacRae, Duncan E

Publication Date

2021

DOI

10.1086/711845

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

The date of the proem of Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*: New epigraphic evidence from Naples

The date of the *Argonautica* epic by Valerius Flaccus is one of the most persistent problems in the literary history of the early Roman empire.* It is clear that the poem must have been written in the Flavian period: the proem makes specific reference to the sack of Jerusalem in 70 CE and in a work composed during the final years of Flavian dynastic rule, approximately 93 to 95 CE, Quintilian reported that Valerius was deceased.¹ A reference to the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE at *Argonautica* 4.507-11 stands as an agreed *terminus post quem* for the current text, but does not reveal when the poem was being written – such a reference could belong to an early, middle or final phase of the poem's realization. Since an article by the young Ronald Syme in 1929 that provoked the modern debate, scholars have advocated the reign of each Flavian emperor as the likely date of composition, but no consensus has been achieved.²

The purpose of this article is to introduce a new piece of evidence to the debate: a recently excavated inscription from Naples that supports a Domitianic date for the prologue of the epic. One useful development in the scholarly literature on the date question – already suggested by Syme – has been the introduction of skepticism regarding the compositional habits of the author: given our total ignorance about Valerius Flaccus' working practice, we should not rely on either a linear order of composition or a predictable pace.³ For this reason, the argument here is focused on the date of the proem. Even a date later than the eruption of Vesuvius for the opening lines of the poem can only provide a *terminus post quem* for a final version of the text, not a date for the composition of all eight books. Before proceeding to the Neapolitan inscription and its potential contribution to the debate, we should first look to the text of the proem and, in particular, the key elements for determining the likely date of its composition.

Lines 5-18 of the first book read, in Ehlers' conservative Teubner edition⁴:

Phoebe, mone, si Cumaeae mihi conscia vatis 5
stat casta cortina domo, si laurea digna
fronte viret, tuque o pelagi cui maior aperti
fama, Caledonius postquam tua carbasa vexit
Oceanus Phrygios prius indignatus Iulos,
eripe me populis et habenti nubila terrae, 10
sancte pater, veterumque fave veneranda canenti
facta virum: versam proles tua pandit Idumen,
namque potest, Solymo nigrantem pulvere fratrem
spargentemque faces et in omni turre furentem.
ille tibi cultusque deum delubraque genti 15
instituet, cum iam, genitor, lucebis ab omni
parte poli...

11 sancte pater 13 namque potes ω : *transp. Samuelsson*; 12 pandit ω : *pandet Gronovius*; 13
namque potest X^cT: *namque potes* ω ; 15 genti V: *gentis Bon*; *centum Haupt*; 16 iam L: tu S; *om.*
V

Guide me, Apollo, if in my chaste house stands the tripod, aide to the Cumaean
prophetess, if the laurel thrives on my worthy brow, and, you, who had the greater
fame of a welcoming sea, when the Caledonian Ocean bore your sails even

though it had earlier refused this to the Trojan Julii, snatch me from humanity and the land covered in cloud. And, holy father, give favor to my song of the celebrated deeds of ancient heroes: your son relates the destruction of Idumaea – since he is able – and his brother, black with the dust of Jerusalem, throwing torches and raging at every tower. He will found cult to you and temples to the family, when, father, you will shine from every part of the sky...

Arguments for a date of the proem (and poem) have been built from the material provided by these lines. For those who favor a composition date in the reign of Vespasian (69-79 CE), the fact that the passage addresses that emperor most directly is persuasive; the prediction of deification and catasterism is explicable through the conventions of panegyric.⁵ In addition, the *ille* of line 15, which is ambiguous in its antecedent, is identifiable with Titus, designated as next in line in the 70s CE, and so the idea of future cult is based on a reasonable assumption of a projected orderly succession. Finally, supporters of the early dating suggest that a poem by Domitian on his brother's victory would be inappropriate after 81 CE, since the emperor is usually thought to have given up poetry when he took power.⁶ For the supporters of a date during the reign of Titus (79-81 CE), they take *ille* to refer to that emperor and they see in that line a more specific allusion to Titus' actual foundation of the *sodales Flaviales* and a *templum Divi Vespasiani*.⁷ The scholars who have argued that this passage indicates a Domitianic date (81-96 CE) have read *ille* as the younger son and pointed to his construction of a *templum gentis Flaviae*, dedicated in 94 but presumably announced earlier in the reign, as the "unmistakeable" referent of *delubraque genti*.⁸

A recent epigraphic discovery can provide a new argument in favor of Domitian's reign. During construction work for the subway in Naples in 2004, archaeologists found fragments of a very large inscription in Greek that represents the late-first century CE *acta* of the Greek-style athletic festival (*hieros agōn*) that was held in the city, the *Italika Romaia Sebasta Isolympia*. Although a full edition is still awaited, the publications to date on this find by Elena Miranda de Martino and her collaborator Diva Di Nanni Durante provide valuable orientation and part publication of the text.⁹ As Cassius Dio relates, the quadrennial *Sebasta* games at Neapolis were founded in honor of the emperor Augustus on a Greek model; in time, they became part of a pan-imperial circuit of athletic festivals.¹⁰ Both old evidence and the new texts show that the contests held during the *Sebasta* included gymnastic, equestrian and artistic events.¹¹ The new inscriptions record the games for several editions during the reign of Domitian (they were held in 82, 86, 90, and 94 CE during his reign) and give the identity of some of the agonothetes and winners of events.¹² Among the latter, Miranda de Martino reports that there were competitions for writers of encomia in prose (*enkōmiographoi logikoi* or *enkōmiologoi*) and in poetry (*poiētai epous*) in honor of members of both the Julio-Claudian and Flavian houses: Augustus, Livia, Tiberius, Claudius, Britannicus, Vespasian, Titus, Julia (daughter of Titus), Domitian, Domitia (wife of Domitian) and Domitilla (sister of Domitian).¹³

For the dating of Valerius Flaccus' proem, one of the inscribed fragments on these encomiastic contests provides a signal piece of information, that Domitian won a prize for an epic poem in praise of his deceased and deified brother Titus. In an exhibition catalogue in 2014, Di Nanni Durante published the relevant fragment as a photograph and in Italian translation.¹⁴ She also published a Greek text in a footnote of a later article: (sc. ἐνίκα) ποιητὰς ἔπους εἰς τὸν αὐτόν (sc. Θεὸν Τίτον Καῖσαρα)/ αὐτοκράτωρ [[Δομιτιαν(ὸς) Καῖσαρ]] ("Emperor [[Domitian

Caesar]] won the contest for epic poetry in honor of the same man (sc. Divus Titus Caesar)”).¹⁵

The winner’s name is deliberately erased, a marker of *damnatio memoriae*, but the surviving αὐτοκράτωρ and the erasures elsewhere in the *Sebasta* inscription support the obvious restoration of the name of Domitian. In a more recent article, Miranda de Martino has assigned this text to the *acta* for the *Sebasta* of 82 CE.¹⁶ I suggest that this victorious verse encomium is the poem alluded to by Valerius in the passage from his prologue quoted above. Strand once suggested that the poem mentioned there was perhaps a piece performed at a *recitatio*; we now have a more concrete occasion for a poem on Titus.¹⁷

In support of the identification, we can note how the poem alluded to by Valerius fits the norms of competitive encomiastic *epos*. It celebrates Titus the soldier in the guise of an epic hero: the phrase *nigrantem pulvere* alludes, through Horace *Odes* 1.6.14-15 (*pulvere Troico/nigrum*), to the dust of Troy, while the participles *furentem* and *spargentem* suggest an epic *aristeia*, like those of Aeneas (*Aen.* 10.604; *furens*) and Camilla (*Aen.* 11.650: *spargens*), as well as that of Castor in Valerius’ own poem (*Argonautica* 6.229, *spargens*).¹⁸

The form of Roman-period competitive poetry also supports the identification of the two poems. If we can take the inscribed example by the child poet Q. Sulpicius Maximus as representative of agonistic poetry, competitors composed their poems extempore and thus were dependent on the use of rhetorical commonplaces.¹⁹ The eleven-year-old’s entry in the poetic competition at the *Agon Capitolinus* in 94 CE was inscribed on his funerary monument and consists of a speech of Jupiter reproaching Helios for handing over his chariot to Phaethon. An instance of *ēthopoeia*, a speech appropriate to a particular historical or mythological person, the poem draws on standard tropes inculcated by rhetorical education. In the case of Domitian’s poem on the sack of Jerusalem (*versam...Idumen*), the commonplace appears to be the *urbs*

capta, the common emotive description of the destruction of a besieged city. The motif, like the *ēthopoeia* used by Sulpicius, was a standard part of rhetorical education; G. M. Paul has pointed to evidence that it had become so cliché that literary writers often avoided spelling it out.²⁰ The *Troiae Halosis* sung by the character Eumolpus in Petronius' *Satyrica* 89 is both a well-known example of use of the trope for an extempore poem and a satire on hackneyed use of such familiar themes.²¹ Valerius Flaccus describes in his proem, therefore, a poem by Domitian that corresponds both to the epic genre and the use of a type-scene appropriate to an agonistic performance at the *Sebasta*.

If we accept the identification of the poem described by Valerius Flaccus with this victorious poem at the *Sebasta*, the inscription from Naples provides support for a Domitianic date for the preface. The present tense verb *pandit* in line 12 of the transmitted text of Valerius' first book also suggests a reference to an actual poem, in marked contrast to the future tense verbs in line 16, *instituet* and *lucetis*.²² In combination with these latter references to forms of cult to Vespasian and the Flavian *gens*, the reference to this victorious poem would support a date after the games of 82 CE for the present opening of the Valerian poem – and, since that postdates the Vesuvian eruption, provides a *terminus post quem* for the epic as we have it.

One of the persistent challenges for supporters of later dates for the proem has been the resulting *vaticinium ex eventu*, a “predictive” dedication to a now-dead Vespasian, which would be unique in Latin poetry. The Neapolitan inscription, however, if it does record the poem of Domitian, would require such a reading: compared even to the predictions of imperial cult and the temple to the *gens*, specific reference to an occasional poem would be a truly speculative prediction if it were made in the reign of Vespasian. The immediately preceding lines, however, might make the following “prediction” a credible *jeu d'esprit*: Valerius advertises his

membership of the college of *quindecimviri*, which was associated with the consultation and management of the Sibylline books.²³ Sibylline poetry was famous for such historical predictions, including *vaticinia ex eventu* and, in Rome, future cultic institutions.²⁴

The *Sebasta* inscription is not a smoking gun that definitively pins down the chronology of Valerius Flaccus' poem to the early part of the reign of Domitian; nevertheless, it deserves to be considered as a significant new *datum* in the long-running debate on the composition date of the *Argonautica*, particularly in relation to the dedicatory proem. That debate has long revolved around the question of cult for Vespasian; the Neapolitan inscription should open up consideration of the reference to the praise poem for Titus by Domitian. Even if the direct identification of the two poems cannot be proven, advocates of a Vespasianic date for the *Argonautica* prologue should no longer use the presumed retirement of Domitian from poetic composition in 81 CE as a positive argument for their position. In broader historical terms, the possibility that the poem described by Valerius Flaccus was performed by the emperor in a public festival also can sharpen our understanding of the continuing commitment to the memorialization of the Judaeian victory during the reign of the youngest member of the Flavian dynasty.²⁵

Works Cited

Caldelli, Maria Letizia. 1993. *L'Agon Capitolinus: storia e protagonisti dall'istituzione domiziana al IV secolo*. Rome.

Cambier, Guy. 1969. Recherches chronologiques sur l'oeuvre et la vie de Valerius Flaccus. In *Hommages à Marcel Renard*, ed. Jacqueline Bibauw, Vol. 1: 191–228. Brussels.

- Coleman, Kathleen M. 1986. The Emperor Domitian and Literature. *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 2.32.5: 3087–3115.
- Connors, Catherine. 1998. *Petronius the Poet: Verse and Literary Tradition in the Satyricon*. Cambridge.
- Courtney, Edward. ed. 1970. *C. Valeri Flacci Argonauticon Libri Octo*. Leipzig.
- Di Nanni Durante, Diva. 2007-2008. I *Sebasta* di *Neapolis*. Il regolamento e il programma. *Ludica* 13–14: 7–22.
- . 2014. Iscrizioni in marmo: catalogo agonistico. In *Augusto e la Campania: da Ottaviano a Divo Augusto, la mostra*, ed. Teresa E. Cinquantaquattro, Carmela Capaldi and Valeria Sampaolo, 38-39. Milan.
- . 2016. Gli encomi per Augusto e Livia ai *Sebasta* di Napoli. *Maia* 68: 399–411.
- Döpp, Siegmund. 1996. Das Stegreifgedicht des Q. Sulpicius Maximus. *ZPE* 114: 99–114.
- Dräger, Paul. 2003. *C. Valerius Flaccus, Argonautica/ Die Sendung der Argonauten*. Frankfurt am Main.
- Ehlers, Widu-Wolfgang. ed. 1980. *Gai Valeri Flacci Setini Balbi Argonauticon Libros Octo*. Stuttgart.
- . 1985. Valerius-Probleme. *MusHelv* 42: 334–50.
- . 1991. Neuere Arbeiten zur Datierung und Überlieferung der *Argonautica* des Valerius Flaccus. In *Ratis Omnia Vincet: Untersuchungen zu den Argonautica des Valerius Flaccus*, ed. M. Korn and H. J. Tschiedel, 17–34. Hildesheim.
- Fernández Delgado, J. A, and Jesús Ureña Bracero. 1991. *Un testimonio de la educación literaria griega en época romana: IG XIV 2012=Kaibel, EG 618*. Badajoz.

- Getty, Robert J. 1936. The Date of Composition of the *Argonautica* of Valerius Flaccus. *CP* 31: 53–61.
- Hardie, Alex. 1983. *Statius and the Silvae: Poets, Patrons, and Epideixis in the Graeco-Roman World*. Liverpool.
- Jones, Christopher P. 2007. Three New Letters of the Emperor Hadrian. *ZPE* 161: 145–56.
- Kleywegt, A. J. 1986. Praecursoria Valeriana (I). *Mnemosyne* 39: 313–49.
- . 2005. *Valerius Flaccus, Argonautica, Book I: A Commentary*. Leiden.
- Lefèvre, Eckard. 1971. *Das Prooemium der Argonautica des Valerius Flaccus: Ein Beitrag zur Typik epischer Prooemien der römischen Kaiserzeit*. Mainz.
- Liberman, Gauthier. 1997. *Valerius Flaccus: Argonautiques*. Paris.
- Mason, Steve. 2016. *A History of the Jewish War: AD 66-74*. Cambridge.
- Millar, Fergus. 2005. Last Year in Jerusalem: Monuments of the Jewish War in Rome. In *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, ed. Jonathan Edmondson, James Rives, and Steve Mason, 101–28. Oxford.
- Miranda de Martino, Elena. 2007. Neapolis e gli imperatori. Nuovi dati dai cataloghi dei Sebastà. *Oebalus: studi sulla Campania nell'Antichità* 2: 203–15.
- . 2010. Consoli e altri elementi di datazione nei cataloghi agonistici di *Neapolis*. In *Le tribù romane: Atti della XVIe Rencontre sur l'épigraphie (Bari, 8-10 ottobre 2009)*, ed. Miranda Silvestrini, 417–22. Bari.
- . 2013. Ritratti di campioni dai Sebastà di Napoli. *Mediterraneo Antico* 16: 519–36.
- . 2014. Les *Sebasta* de Naples à l'époque de Domitien. Témoignages épigraphiques. *CRAI*: 1165–88.
- . 2016. Augusto e i Sebastà: L'identità greca nell'impero. *Maia* 68: 389–98.

- . 2017. I *Sebasta* dell'82 d.C.: restauro delle lastre e aggiornamenti. *Historika* 7: 253-65.
- Momigliano, Arnaldo. 1950. Panegyricus Messallae and 'Panegyricus Vespasiani': Two References to Britain. *JRS* 40: 39–42.
- Parke, H. W. 1988. *Sibyls and Sibylline Prophecy in Classical Antiquity*. Ed. B. C. McGing. London.
- Paul, G. M. 1982. 'Urbs Capta': Sketch of an Ancient Literary Motif. *Phoenix* 36: 144–55.
- Pernot, Laurent. 1993. *La rhétorique de l'éloge dans le monde gréco-romain*. Paris.
- Scott, Kenneth. 1934. La data di composizione della *Argonautica* di Valerius Flaccus. *RivFil* 62: 474–81.
- Smallwood, E. Mary. 1962. Valerius Flaccus, 'Argonautica' I 5-21. *Mnemosyne* 15: 170–72.
- Spaltenstein, François. 2002. *Commentaire des Argonautica de Valérius Flaccus (livres 1 et 2)*. Brussels.
- Stern, Menahem, ed. 1974. *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*. 3 vols. Jerusalem.
- Stover, Tim. 2008. The Dating of Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*. *Papers of the Langford Latin Seminar* 13: 211–29.
- . 2012. *Epic and Empire in Vespasianic Rome: A New Reading of Valerius Flaccus' Argonautica*. Oxford.
- Strand, Johnny. 1972. *Notes on Valerius Flaccus' Argonautica*. Stockholm.
- Syme, Ronald. 1929. The *Argonautica* of Valerius Flaccus. *CQ* 23: 129–37.
- Tatum, W. Jeffrey. 2016. Why Is Valerius Flaccus a *Quindecimvir*? *CQ* 66: 239–244.
- Taylor, P. Ruth. 1994. Valerius' Flavian *Argonautica*. *CQ* 44: 212–35.
- Ussani Jr., Vincenzo. 1955. *Studio su Valerio Flacco*. Rome.
- Waszink, J. H. 1971. Valerius Flaccus 'Argon.' I 13. *Mnemosyne* 24: 297–99.

Wistrand, Erik. 1956. *Die Chronologie der Punica des Silius Italicus: Beiträge zur Interpretation der flavischen Literatur*. Göteborg.

———. 1973. Review of Eckard Lefèvre, *Das Prooemium der Argonautica des Valerius Flaccus. Ein Beitrag zur Typik epischer Prooemien der römischen Kaiserzeit*. *Gnomon* 45: 497–98.

Zeitlin, Froma I. 1971. Romanus Petronius: A Study of the Troiae Halosis and the Bellum Civile. *Latomus* 30: 56–82.

Zissos, Andrew. 2008. *Valerius Flaccus: Argonautica, Book I*. Oxford.

* I thank Jessica Blum, Nikolaos Papazarkadas and the reader for *Classical Philology* for responses to earlier versions of this article. I owe a special debt to Kathleen Coleman both for her teaching and for indispensable comments on a previous draft. Translations are my own.

¹ Quint. *Inst.* 10.1.90: *multum in Valerio Flacco nuper amisimus*. The temporal implication of *nuper* (“recently”) does not help with determining a date: it can refer to an event several years earlier.

² Syme 1929. The debate has been summarized several times: see, most recently, Stover 2008, which is incorporated into his later monograph, Stover 2012.

³ See, especially, the arguments on this point advanced by Ehlers 1991, 19 and Stover 2008, 215–16. Syme 1929 notes the problem of arguments from Valerius’ working method.

⁴ The select apparatus gives readings reported by Courtney 1970, Ehlers 1980, and Zissos 2008. I follow the *sigla* used by Ehlers.

⁵ For this view: Wistrand 1956, 24–28 and 1973; Cambier 1969; Strand 1972, 23–38; Kleywegt 1986, 319–23 and 2005, 19–20; Taylor 1994, 213–16; Spaltenstein 2002, 32–3; Dräger 2003, 558–

59; Stover 2008; Zissos 2008, xv-xvi. Lefèvre 1971, 16-32 is supportive of the Vespasianic date, but offers an unlikely interpretation of *ille* to refer to Domitian as builder of poetic temples.

⁶ The ancient support for such a position chiefly comes from Suet. *Dom. 2.2: simulavit et ipse mire modestiam in primisque poeticae studium, tam insuetum antea sibi quam postea spretum et abiectum, recitavitque etiam publice*, though note the caution against an overly literal reading of this sentence in Coleman 1986, 3088 n. 5. On Domitian's poetry as a bar to a late date for Valerius, see especially the more recent comments by Stover 2008, 220-21 and Zissos 2008, 87.

⁷ For this view: Getty 1936; Ussani Jr. 1955; Stern 1974, 502-5; Ehlers 1985 and 1991, 19-22. Smallwood 1962 added another argument for a date in the reign of Titus, suggesting that the adjective *Caledonius* was a hint at the Scottish successes of Agricola in 80 C.E., but Momigliano 1950, 41-42 had already argued that the adjective in Flavian literature did not require a specific reference to the land north of the Forth-Clyde isthmus.

⁸ For this view: Syme 1929, who sees the mention of the future temple as "an unmistakable reference" (136); Scott 1934; Liberman 1997, xviii-xxiv. The word *gentis* found in a humanist manuscript for the end of line 15 may strengthen the case that Valerius refers to the name (not just the concept) of the temple to the *gens Flavia*, if it does indeed represent the archetype.

⁹ Miranda de Martino 2007; 2010; 2013; 2014; 2016; 2017 and Di Nanni Durante 2007-2008; 2014; 2016.

¹⁰ The pan-imperial circuit is best attested by a set of letters by Hadrian to the artists of Dionysus (from Alexandria Troas): *SEG* 56.1359 (l.64 for the *Sebasta*). See, on this text, Jones 2007, with corrections to the *editio princeps* and an English translation.

¹¹ The most important “old” piece of evidence is the inscribed regulations for the *Sebasta* found at Olympia: *IVO* 56. See also the full account of what was then known about the *Sebasta* in Caldelli 1993, 28-37.

¹² Miranda de Martino 2010 discusses the Domitianic date and reports that around 170 winners are found in the dossier.

¹³ These names are reported by Miranda de Martino 2007, 210 and 2014, 1185-86. Di Nanni Durante 2016 gives closer study to the encomiastic competitions and collects evidence for the agonistic practice throughout the empire; see also the earlier study of this phenomenon by Pernot 1993, 84-92. Statius, in *Silv.* 5.3.112-113, implies his father won prizes in this section of the festival: see Hardie 1983, 6-7.

¹⁴ Di Nanni Durante 2014; the relevant lines are Col.1 1.27-28.

¹⁵ Di Nanni Durante 2016, 404 n. 32 provides this Greek text; I have inserted a missing τόν, visible in the photograph.

¹⁶ Miranda de Martino 2017: 255.

¹⁷ Strand 1972, 38. Waszink 1971, 299 suggests an in-progress *Panegyricus Titi* and Coleman 1986, 3090-91 a Flavian-centered historical epic, though neither propose an occasion.

¹⁸ Note Hardie 1983, 89 on the rise of “epideictic praise in the epic style” after the first century BCE.

¹⁹ See Hardie 1983, 83-84 for the suggestion that extempore verse and rhetorical formalism was characteristic of these imperial-period competitive poems. Q. Sulpicius Maximus’ inscription is *IG* 14.2012; on the poem, see Fernández Delgado and Ureña Bracero 1991 and Döpp 1996.

Kathleen Coleman, to whom I owe my knowledge of this monument, is to publish a study of Maximus’ monument with the University of Michigan Press.

²⁰ Paul 1982; the commonplace is included in rhetorical handbooks, see, e.g., *Rhet. Her.* 4.39.51.

²¹ On this poem, see Zeitlin 1971, 58-67 and Connors 1998, 84-99. Like Valerius Flaccus, Petronius uses the verb *pandere* for Eumolpus' composition.

²² The proposed emendation of *pandit* to *pandet* (see, e.g., Strand 1972, 37) aims at removing this implication and smoothing the temporality of the passage to match a presumed Vespasianic date.

²³ See Tatum 2016 for a recent study of the poetic (vatic) connotations of Valerius self-advertisement as *quindecimvir*.

²⁴ See, especially, Parke 1988 for images of the Sibyl's prophecies in antiquity. *Vaticinia ex eventu* are found in the Jewish and Christian *Sibylline Oracles*; cultic institutions were prescribed in the Roman Sibylline Books.

²⁵ Flavian memorialization of the Judaeen War has been the subject of recent study by Millar 2005 and Mason 2016, 4-43.