INTRODUCTION

1 THE POET: LIFE AND TIMES

Valerius Flaccus (VF) is mentioned by name only once in ancient literature, in Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* (10.1.90): *multum in Valerio Flacco nuper amisimus* – 'We have recently suffered a great loss in Valerius Flaccus.' Because this is part of a survey of epic poets, 'Valerius Flaccus' must refer to the poet whose name is given in the manuscript tradition of the epic *Argonautica*. The poet's death was apparently a 'recent' event (a flexible term) when Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* was published, for which a date of around 95 CE (prior to the death of the emperor Domitian on 18 September 96 CE) is generally assumed. This gives a *terminus ante quem* for VF's death, complemented by a *terminus post quem*, since the last conclusively datable reference in the poem is to the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE (4.507–9).[1]

Further details about VF's life have to be inferred from the epic (his only known work) and its transmission.[2] The manuscripts of the *Argonautica* give the poet's name as Gaius Valerius Flaccus; sometimes Setinus Balbus or Balbus Setinus is added, but the status of these additional items is uncertain. The epic's proem mentions a 'a tripod sharing in the knowledge of the Cumaean prophetess' in the poet's home (1.5–6): this remark, along with the poem's interest in religious rituals (3.362–458, 8.239–42), has led to the assumption that VF was a *quindecimuir sacris faciundis*, one of the priests in charge of the Sibylline books. However, the details given should not be taken too literally, and the persona adopted by the poet should not be confused with his biography: this presentation could have been chosen to highlight inspiration by Apollo.[3]

From the notice in Quintilian and allusions to the emperors Vespasian, Titus and Domitian in the proem (1.5–21) it is clear that VF was active during the Flavian period (see Intro. 2.2). The Flavian age presents the unique situation within classical Roman literature that epics by three poets published in that time survive: VF's *Argonautica*, Statius' *Thebaid* and *Achilleid*, Silius Italicus' *Punica*. VF's poem is thought to be the earliest, and no clear references to the other Flavian epics have been found in the text. On the other hand, Statius has many allusions to the Argonautic myth and to VF's language and motifs, most notably the engagement with VF's

[1] For literature on VF see Works cited; for works on book 3 see 1–461, 481–740nn. On the change in attitude towards Flavian epic over the last few decades see Delz 1995.
[2] See e.g. Ehlers 1991: 17–18, Zissos 2008: xiii–xvii.
[3] For doubts on a literal interpretation see Wagner 1805: 7, Newman 1986: 221 n. 70, Barchiesi 2001b: 326–7.

Lemnos episode in *Thebaid* 5. Silius Italicus, besides reflections of VF's language, refers to the Cyzicus episode (Sil. 12.398–400; see 160n.) and has a divine prophecy on the Flavian emperors taking up motifs from VF's proem (Sil. 3.593–629).[4]

Contemporary writers seem to have known VF's work, or at least parts thereof, perhaps through recitations. If in an epigram in which he talks about the Argo (7.19) Martial makes a metaliterary statement, contrasting small-scale poetry such as this epigram with large-scale epic poetry, he may have VF in mind.[5] Such a connection need not imply strong criticism of VF in particular; his work could be used as a foil to bring out characteristics of Martial's own work. It would, however, show that VF was seen as a paradigmatic representative of a specific type of poetry.[6]

2 THE POEM

2.1 *The myth and earlier literary versions*

The myth of the Argonauts is the story of Jason and his men ('the Argonauts') as they travel from Iolcos (in Thessaly) to Colchis to retrieve the Golden Fleece, which they manage with Medea's help.[7] The ship Argo already appears in Homer as something well known (Hom. *Od.* 12.70 Ἀργὼ πᾶσι μέλουσα).[8] Elements of the myth are mentioned in Hesiod (Hes. *Theog.* 992–1002, F 40, 155–7, 241, 263 M.-W.). A more detailed treatment was probably given in two archaic epics (only surviving in fragments), Eumelus' *Corinthiaca* (pp. 96–101 Davies = 108–12 Bernabé) and an anonymous *Naupactica* (pp. 145–9 Davies = 123–6 Bernabé); (likely) references can be found in archaic poets such as Mimnermus (F 11 West), Stesichorus (F 178–80 *PMG* = *PMGF*), Ibycus (F 291–2, 301 *PMG* = *PMGF*)

[4] On the possible allusion to VF at Stat. *Theb.* 3.499–567 see Stover 2009. Smolenaars (1996; on VF and Statius see already Smolenaars 1991) discusses an example of Statius' (*Theb.* 7.632–9) and Silius Italicus' (7.667–79) building on a scene in VF (6.256–64). For linguistic parallels between VF and Silius Italicus see Ripoll 1999.

[5] On the epigram's potential connection to VF see Zissos 2004a.

[6] On the reception of VF see Zissos 2006a. Schenkl (1871: 35–8) noted that, apart from Statius and Silius Italicus, only Claudian and Claudius Marius Victor show knowledge of VF and there are no obvious references in later poets, commentators or grammarians.

[7] On the development of the myth of Jason and Medea see e.g. Moreau 1994; on Medea see also Clauss and Johnston 1997; on Medea in Roman literature see Boyle 2012; on the Argonautic myth see Dräger 1993, 1996; on versions of the Argonautic myth before AR see Dognini 2003.

[8] In both Greek and Roman literature the Argo is often presented as the 'first ship', even if other ships are mentioned in the same story or ships exist in myths set at earlier points in time (see Bär 2012, with further references).

and Simonides (F 548 *PMG* = 270 Poltera). The earliest clearly attested presentation of the Argonautic story on its own is a piece by Epimenides in the sixth century BCE (F 57a–9 Bernabé). The first account to have survived in full is provided in Pindar's *Pythian Ode* 4 (462 BCE; *Pyth.* 4.70–262). The story became popular with dramatic poets of the fifth and fourth centuries; of these only Euripides' tragedy *Medea* (431 BCE), which describes the later stages of the story in Corinth, is extant. In the Hellenistic period several poets treat episodes from the Argonautic myth, in particular Theocritus (*Id.* 13: Hylas, *Id.* 22: Dioscuri). The entire Argonautic enterprise, from the start of the journey until the return to Colchis, is narrated in Apollonius Rhodius' (AR) epic *Argonautica* (third century BCE).

Besides, there were prose accounts, for instance in works by Pherecydes of Athens (fifth century BCE; *FGrH / BNJ* 3 F 26–32, 105–13), Herodorus (*c.* 400 BCE; *FGrH / BNJ* 31 F 38–55), Dionysius Scytobrachion (early third century BCE; *FGrH / BNJ* 32 F 6, 14) and Demaratus (*FGrH / BNJ* 42 F 2); information from various versions is preserved in Diodorus Siculus (first century BCE; Diod. Sic. 4.40–56), in the *Bibliotheke* transmitted under Apollodorus' name (*c.* first century CE) and in the scholia to AR.

In Rome early dramatic poets from the late third century BCE onwards took up the myth: three of them produced tragedies (preserved in fragments) on different sections (Ennius, *Medea* (*exul*); Pacuvius, *Medus*; Accius, *Medea siue Argonautae*). In the late Republican period Varro Atacinus wrote an Argonautic epic (*Argonautae*), of which only fragments survive (F 1–10 *FPL*^{4}). This seems to have been the first complete poetic treatment in Rome and followed AR rather closely; a story of travelling to Colchis and exploring new countries might have been of interest in the late Republic at a time of developing Roman involvement in the east.[9] The Neoteric poet Catullus refers to the Argonauts in the frame narrative of poem 64 (the so-called Peleus epyllion), the earliest presentation of the Argonautic story in a completely extant text in Latin. In the imperial period Ovid and Seneca (like other dramatists) composed Medea tragedies (of which only Seneca's survives); Ovid also presents Medea in other literary genres (Ov. *Her.* 6, 12, *Met.* 7.1–424): those versions focus on the relationship between Jason and Medea in the story's later stages. The Flavian satirist Juvenal (Juv. 1.7–11) and the epigrammatist Martial (5.53) indicate that in their time the Argonautic myth was a popular and hackneyed topic (see also Intro. 2.6).

[9] Thus Braund 1993. On VF and Varro see Feletti 1998.

2.2 *Date of composition and length*

Apart from the vague indication of the time of VF's death (see Intro. 1) there is no external evidence for the poem's date of composition. It can only be narrowed down by inferences from references in the text to contemporary Roman affairs. Since elements such as the proem or similes are detachable from the main narrative and nothing is known about the order of composition, these details may provide indications of a *terminus post quem* for individual passages, but cannot determine a precise date for the period over which the entire poem was written.

That the proem (1.5–21) alludes to the Flavian emperors (without naming them) Vespasian (69–79 CE), Titus (79–81 CE) and Domitian (81–96 CE) confirms the dating to the Flavian period indicated by Quintilian.[10] The question of whether the emperor under whom the proem was written may be identified has found different answers.[11] VF mentions Vespasian's involvement in expeditions to Britain in the forties CE (1.7–9; cf. Sil. 3.598) and the conquest of Jerusalem by his son Titus in 70 CE (1.12–14; cf. Sil. 3.600, 605–6), which give a *terminus post quem* for the proem. When VF goes on to talk about the future deification of Vespasian (d. 24 June 79 CE), he seems to be writing under this emperor, with the expectation that Vespasian will be honoured after his death and the dynasty will continue. If the hyperbolic mention of the founding of temples (1.15–16) has a more specific point of reference, it might be an allusion to the *Templum gentis Flauiae* (Suet. *Dom.* 5, 17.3, Stat. *Silu.* 4.3.18–19, 5.1.240–1): its construction was started by Domitian after he came to power, though it was planned earlier; the date of completion (between *c.* 89 and 96 CE) is unknown.[12] Of the two similes referring to mount Vesuvius in southern Italy (3.208–11, 4.507–9), the first seems to allude to an earthquake in 62/63 CE or the volcano's regular activity (see 208–9n.), while the second is generally taken to evoke the eruption in 79 CE.

[10] References to the Flavian emperors do not imply particular connections between epic characters and the emperors: Taylor (1994) argues that VF intends to create a symbolic connection between the voyage of the Argo and the regime of Vespasian and a typological connection between the mythological characters and certain historical and contemporary figures (*contra* Ehlers 1998: 155 and n. 21). Toohey (1993) interprets Jason not as the prototype of a specific emperor, but as a generic imperial prototype. In Shey's (1968: 264–87) view the poem indicates that Vespasian, like Jason, will succeed eventually, but there will be hard work along the way.

[11] The meaning of the proem as well as the date of this passage and the poem as a whole have been much debated: for a variety of views and arguments see e.g. Syme 1929, Scott 1934, Getty 1936, 1940, Ussani 1955, Smallwood 1962, Brugnoli 1964, Cambier 1969, Lefèvre 1971, Ehlers 1985: 334–9, 1991: 19–22, 1998: 147–8, Davis 1989, Toohey 1993, López Moreda 1996: 23–7, Río Torres-Murciano 2005, Stover 2008, 2012b: 7–26, 62–76, Zissos 2008: *ad loc.*, Galli 2013, Penwill 2013.

[12] The setting *ante eventum* for Vespasian's apotheosis has also been interpreted as a ploy, implying a later dating: the poet writes under Vespasian's successors, but talks about Vespasian as if he were still alive (see e.g. Liberman 1997: xviii–xxiv, with further references).

Further allusions to conditions in contemporary Rome have been identified,[13] but they are too vague to narrow down the date of composition. For instance, beyond the use of Roman terminology and references to Roman institutions, especially in similes, there are veiled comments on the future of Rome (1.558–60, 2.571–3). The ubiquity of tyrants (esp. Pelias, Aeetes, Laomedon), critical remarks on rulers (e.g. 4.158), the presentation of aristocratic reactions to tyrants, the role of politically motivated suicide and the presence of civil war are often seen as implicit comments on Rome in the second half of the first century CE. That the Argonautic voyage is an aristocratic enterprise of a group ordered about by tyrants rather than a heroic exploit by individuals could also be a reflection of social and political circumstances.[14]

The consensus now is that the poem was probably started at some point in the seventies CE. Some think that it was mostly finished by 79 CE (with the poet's death occurring soon afterwards),[15] while others suggest that composition continued into the early nineties CE, based on the interpretation of Quintilian's notice, the reading of the proem and references to the Sarmatians in book 6 (6.231–8).[16] Allusions to the *Argonautica* in roughly contemporary epic poets (see Intro. 1) suggest that at least parts of the work were known before the nineties CE, but individual books might have been recited or circulated separately prior to completion and publication of the entire poem. Overall, the earlier dating appears more likely.

While VF's Greek model for the plot, AR's Hellenistic epic *Argonautica*, consists of four extremely long books, VF spreads the story over eight shorter books (of the ordinary length of a Roman epic book). His narrative stops at line 467 of book 8 in the middle of a speech. Since this can hardly be the intended ending, it raises the questions of how much is missing and of whether the poem is unfinished or the remainder has been lost in transmission.

[13] See e.g. Boyle in Boyle and Sullivan 1991: 274, Zissos 2003, 2005: 511–13, 2009: 351–2, Mahé-Simon 2011 (with further references). Serpa's (1979) reading, namely that VF's epic was written by an unimportant person at court, for a homogenous, fairly educated class and for easy consumption, hence spreading unproblematic ideologies, does not seem to take the epic's complex texture into account.

[14] On civil war, tyranny and suicide see McGuire 1997; on the depiction of power relations see Zissos 2003, 2009. Stover (2012b) sees the poem reflecting the restorative ideals of Vespasianic Rome, in contrast to the more pessimistic readings of many other scholars.

[15] For a dating to 71–79 CE see e.g. Ehlers 1985: 334–9, 1991: 19–22, 1998: 147–8 (more cautiously), Stover 2008, 2012b.

[16] For a late dating (*c.* 78–95 CE) see e.g. Syme 1929, mainly on the basis of references to the Sarmatians, which has been shown not to be a decisive point (e.g. Strand 1972: 23–5).

As for the intended length, there is now a broad consensus that the epic was meant to consist of eight books, double the number of books in AR, while keeping almost the same number of verses. Since the return journey narrated in book 8 is described in a more concise way than in AR, the remainder of the journey, the return home and the Argo's catasterism (as suggested in the proem) could be fitted into the 300 lines or so that would be missing. That the poem was to consist of eight books (rather than ten or twelve, as some scholars have suggested) is indicated not only by the narrative scope, but also by the 'proem in the middle' at the beginning of book 5, which divides the poem into two halves.[17]

The question of whether the poem was ever finished is more difficult to answer.[18] It has been assumed that, if the poet was unable to complete the epic, he would not have had the chance to revise the entire poem, noticeable by doublings, contradictions or unpolished lines. Scholars have identified possible instances:[19] examples in book 3 include the introduction of narrative threads not taken up (3.483–508), references to oracles and predictions not mentioned before (3.299–303, 352–6, 617–22) or a version of the story not matching an earlier prophecy (3.521–64 versus 1.218–20). However, other, literary reasons may be adduced to explain these narrative structures, for instance the aim to mention details where they have the greatest effect or to highlight the version chosen by alluding to other variants initially (see 299–302, 332–61, 521–64, 618nn.). Moreover, it seems methodologically problematic to infer from a possible lack of final polishing in parts that the entire poem was never completed (details about the composition process of Virgil's *Aeneid* in the biographical tradition show that these two stages do not have to go together).[20]

[17] On the length of the poem and the 'second proem' see esp. Schetter 1959, Adamietz 1976a: 107–13, Ehlers 1971/2: 109, 1998: 148–9. But see Hershkowitz 1998a: 4–13, who again considers twelve books as a possibility (see already Schenkl 1871: 10–11) on the basis of intertextual connections, and Soubiran 2002: 32–3, who again suggests ten books in view of the 'coefficient de dilatation' in relation to AR. Because there is a marked break in what is likely to be the middle of the poem, while the actual end is missing, the sections at the end of book 4 and the beginning of book 5 have been called 'terminal middle' (Zissos 2004b).

[18] For an overview of this question see Zissos 2008: xxvi–xxvii, who reports and agrees with the majority opinion that the work was unfinished (see already Schenkl 1871: 11–35); but see Jachmann 1935: 239–40, Ehlers 1971/2: 107, 1980: v, 1998: 149, Delz 1995: 154, who argue for a mechanical loss.

[19] See most recently Poortvliet 1991b, and the bibliography at Zissos 2008: xxvii n. 82. Jachmann (1935: 228–40) explains the doublings as the work of a later interpolator.

[20] On the basis of his study of VF's metrical conventions, Kösters (1893: 96) concludes that book 2 is the most sophisticated metrically and that with respect to metrical polish the order of books appears as follows: 2, 6, 5, 3, 1, 4, 7, 8. Even though one may question details, these observations could suggest that there was

Looking beyond the poem's internal shape, scholars have observed that Statius frequently alludes to the Argonautic myth, but never to the return voyage, the portion missing in VF;[21] if Statius' references are intertextual links, this could mean that Statius did not have access to the final section of VF's narrative. Yet this issue is linked to the question of dating and the method of dissemination.

The two branches of the transmission assumed nowadays (see Intro. 4) break off at different points. For *C* (and δ, a fragment presumably of *C*) a mechanical loss is obvious (stopping at 8.105), since γ shows that more text exists. However, it is impossible to establish whether earlier stages of the branch represented by *C* also continued until 8.467 or included more text. For the manuscript from which *L* (based on γ) was copied it is clear that (at least when it was copied) it did not include more text, since the extant copy (*L*) has blank pages at the end.[22]

Since many arguments are not decisive, it is hard to determine conclusively whether the epic's text existed in full at some point (at whichever level of polishing) and whether a final revision is lacking throughout. If the final section of the epic ever existed, it was lost at an early stage and left no trace in the transmission or later literature.[23]

2.3 *Contents and structure*

VF's (eight-book) epic can be divided into two halves, each introduced by a proem (1.1–21, 5.217–23). VF keeps the main structure and the key elements of the Argonautic myth, presented in broadly chronological order, but leaves out episodes and parts of episodes[24] and adds others, particularly the battle in Colchis narrated in book 6. The itinerary and the time spent on each section of the journey are not always clear, since VF focuses on the Argonauts' feelings and experiences and foregrounds the impact of their enterprise.[25]

not a linear composition process. However, the use of elisions appears to become progressively less careful throughout the epic (see Kösters 1893: 48).

[21] See Summers 1894: 4–5. [22] See Schmidt 1976: esp. 249.

[23] Schmit-Neuerburg (2001) suggests that a grammarian may have attempted to complete VF's unfinished poem (from 8.458 onwards), because of the style of the last few lines and their contradiction to earlier passages, and that he may also have written other spurious lines of probably ancient origin in the extant epic.

[24] E.g. the selection of a leader for the expedition (AR 1.329–62), the battle with the earth-born men (AR 1.942–52, 989–1011), the appearance of Apollo on the island of Thynias (AR 2.669–719), the confrontation with the Stymphalian birds (AR 2.1030–89) or the encounter with the sons of Phrixus on the island of Ares (AR 2.1093–230).

[25] For an attempt to identify the stages of the journey with inferred times see Liberman 1997: LI–LVIII; for a comparative table of the itineraries in AR and VF see Shreeves 1978: 17–24.

By giving the Argonautic journey a world-historical function (1.531–60; see Intro. 2.4), he turns the myth into a story about the opening of the seas and its worldwide consequences. Both this leading idea and backward and forward references and connections between episodes endow VF's poem with a tightly knit narrative structure.

The poem's first half describes the journey from Iolcos to Colchis, punctuated by 'episodes', i.e. the Argonauts' adventures at various stops. Usually, there is a narrative pause at the end of a book. However, as in the case of the 'postponed' second proem, the most marked breaks do not coincide with beginnings and ends of books but are placed slightly earlier or later, ensuring a consistent flow of the narrative. For instance, the narrative of the events in Cyzicus begins at the end of book 2 and continues until the middle of book 3 (2.627–3.461), while the story of Hylas starts in the middle of book 3 and ends after the beginning of book 4 (3.481–4.81). At the same time book divisions mark differences in setting and atmosphere: book 2 ends with the harmonious dinner at the Argonauts' first stay on Cyzicus; book 3 begins with their departure followed by their disastrous return; book 3 ends with Hercules' desperation in Mysia; book 4 opens with Hylas' dream appearance and a divine scene resolving the situation.[26]

The second half of the poem has a different structure since the events described take place in Colchis, followed by the concisely sketched return journey.[27] Here each book focuses on different sections of the action: the remainder of book 5 after the Argonauts' arrival gives the background to the situation in Colchis; book 6 shows the Argonauts' involvement in the battle between king Aeetes and his brother and the kindling of Medea's love; book 7 is concerned with Jason's fight against the fire-breathing bulls and earth-born men and, correspondingly, Medea's support; book 8 narrates the capture of the Golden Fleece and the start of the Argonauts' return journey with Medea and the Golden Fleece, while they are pursued by the Colchians. The books are again linked, since the opening of each presents the emotional reaction of a character (Mars in book 6 and Medea in books 7 and 8) to events in the preceding one.

The main narrative, arranged in chronological order, is supplemented by a number of flashbacks; these explain the prehistory to situations the Argonauts encounter, through information provided by the narrator or stories told by characters or a combination of the two (e.g. Lemnos,

[26] Lüthje 1971 finds a unity of individual books based on their atmosphere, while Adamietz 1976b maintains that the journey to Colchis is presented as a continuum. Both characteristics apply.

[27] On the poem's narrative structure in its two halves and its relationship to the epic tradition see Cecchin 1980.

Cyzicus, Bebrycia). The background to the Argonautic voyage is given by insertions into the main plot (Pelias' initial speech, Orpheus' song, Helle's apparition with the subsequent visit to Phrixus' tomb, Phrixus' dream appearance).[28] The close links between the insets and the main narrative contribute to the poem's thematic economy.[29] Additionally, prophecies by seers, comments by the narrator and descriptions of works of art foreshadow the future of the characters within the epic narrative and beyond.

2.4 *Unity and themes*

In the proem's first section (1.1–4) VF describes the epic's topic as the seas traversed by sons of gods for the first time and the fate-delivering ship surpassing all obstacles to reach the river Phasis (in Colchis) and eventually to find a place in the sky. The prominent initial word *prima* (1.1) announces an event of world-historical significance; in the tradition of Roman poetry (e.g. Cat. 64.1–18, Lucr. 1.1000–5, Hor. *Carm.* 1.3, Sen. *Med.* 301–79) the first voyage across the open sea marks a pivotal moment, and in VF it is a movement away from the Saturnian age (1.498–502).[30] Neither the Golden Fleece (as in AR) nor Jason (or Medea) is mentioned in the proem. Thus the introduction does not focus on a specific motif or a single individual as in the Homeric epics or Virgil's *Aeneid*. This is one of the reasons why some scholars have thought that the poem lacks unity and falls into two disjointed parts, the journey and the confrontation in Colchis.[31]

Yet it can be shown that the concept of opening the seas by the first voyage from Greece to Asia is a governing idea for the entire poem.[32] The poem's guiding principle is not only given in the proem; it is expanded

[28] On the story of Phrixus and Helle see Zissos 2004c.

[29] In AR, for instance, Orpheus' song before departure narrates the creation of the world (AR 1.494–512).

[30] See e.g. Davis 1989, Feeney 1991: 330, Zissos 2005: 504.

[31] Mehmel (1934) in particular observed that the world of the epic did not make sense and there were no unifying themes (taken up by Kurfess 1955; modified by Franchet d'Espèrey 1998). Barnes (1981: 370) still thinks that 'the main theme of the poem, if it is to be defined, must be defined in rather general terms'. According to Spaltenstein (1991, 1998, commentary *passim*) VF's epic is an assemblage of conventional scenes, influenced by the epic tradition, and the poet's power of invention and imagination is weak. Spaltenstein does not see any unity or governing idea, with VF not being an original thinker. In response to the view initiated by Mehmel, several scholars have pointed out the poem's careful narrative and thematic structure (e.g. Kröner 1968, Venini 1971b, Adamietz 1976a). Newman (1986: 220–6) sees the poem's unity in recurrent language and images.

[32] See also Ferenczi 1996: 44; contrast Lefèvre 1998: 230–2. Zissos (2005: 511, 2008: xxxi) comments that 'The "proem in the middle" inaugurates a profound transformation of the narrative.'

upon in Jupiter's address to the other gods in book 1 (1.531–60),[33] a section added to the story by VF, on the model of Virgil's Jupiter in *Aeneid* 1 (1.257–96). The speech of VF's Jupiter, often called 'plan of the world', demonstrates that making the seas navigable will enable contact between peoples previously separated, followed by military confrontations and changes of hegemony, first from Asia to Greece and then to another nation.[34] Hence the events in Colchis, with the resulting enmity, are the necessary second step in the process determined by Jupiter: this clash will eventually, though not immediately, lead to a change of power (8.395–9). That such an outlook may seem negative, especially when compared with the expectation voiced by Jason, namely that open sea routes will lead to interaction (*commercia*) between peoples (1.245–7),[35] does not imply a lack of purpose.

Thereby the mythical narrative acquires a historical dimension within a global development, addressing questions of hegemony in the world.[36] At the same time historical references are vague: for instance, the nation taking over from the Greeks is not identified, although these must be the Romans (cf. 2.571–3, also 2.242–6). Moreover, Jupiter announces that the last empire will have *longissima . . . regna* (1.559–60) rather than promising a (Virgilian) everlasting rule.

The openness is even greater with respect to specific historical events and individuals: the Argonautic myth, in combination with the address to the emperor in the proem (1.7–9), may suggest a link to expeditions to Britain under Claudius in the forties CE, in which Vespasian participated.[37] The ancient sources vary as regards the extent of Vespasian's contribution: in official near-contemporary propaganda Claudius claims to have opened

[33] Franchet d'Espèrey (1998: 219–20) finds that the addition of a supernatural background to the primary cause of sending the Argonauts across the sea to gain the Golden Fleece compromises the epic's coherence.

[34] On 'Jupiter's plan of the world' see e.g. Alfonsi 1970: 125–31, Adamietz 1976a: 21–4, Schubert 1984: 31–44, Wacht 1991a, Río Torres-Murciano 2010, 2011: 193–241, Stover 2012b: 27–50. Some scholars have found that the ideas expressed in Jupiter's speech are not taken up (e.g. Burck 1979: 232, Billerbeck 1986a: 3130); still, they provide the background to the entire narrative. Tschiedel (2002: 109) finds another reference at 5.308; but this is more likely a general statement about divine power.

[35] This is Jason's view (see Ferenczi 1996: 45) rather than an insight into actual divine plans (see Adamietz 1976b: 460). According to Ehlers (1998: 151, 156) the result of the enterprise is positive, even if it is not positive for each individual.

[36] See Burck 1971: 94–5; Zissos 2005: 504.

[37] Cf. Sil. 1.597–8, Suet. *Claud.* 17, *Vesp.* 4.1–2, Tac. *Agr.* 13.3, Joseph. *BJ* 3.4–5, Cass. Dio 60.20.3. If there is a historical reference, it is more likely to this major event rather than to arrangements for the administration of Britannia by officials in 70–71 CE (Tac. *Agr.* 8.1–2, 17.1), particularly in view of Silius Italicus' allusion (1.597–8 *hinc pater ignotam donabit uincere Thylen | inque Caledonios primus trahet agmina lucos*).