CHAPTER 12

Teamwork, Leadership and Group Dynamics in Valerius Flaccus’ Argonautica

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Ancient epic has often been mined by management studies for approaches to leadership: Odysseus and Aeneas stand out as models of more or less successful leadership.\(^1\) However, the Argonautica is the only ancient epic myth that can really be said to be about a team. Odysseus and Aeneas are the men who sum up and stand for their whole epics; even the Iliad is fundamentally centred around Achilles. But Jason is always ‘Jason and the Argonauts’. While Odysseus struggles against his men, and Aeneas suffers on behalf of his men, Jason needs the help of his men to reach the goal of his journey. Valerius Flaccus’ Flavian Argonautica has often been read as a recuperation, a re-epicisation of Apollonius’ Hellenistic poem.\(^2\) His Jason is stronger, more Aeneas-like, more military; but he is still surrounded by a team of heroes who often eclipse him. Castelletti has examined above (pp. 173–91) Jason’s portrayal in Valerius; this chapter addresses the other Argonauts. Who does Valerius choose to make up the team and why? How does he present them? What differences are there from Apollonius? To what extent is Valerius Flaccus’ Argonautica a ‘team epic’? And what is the significance of these questions for a reading of Valerius Flaccus’ epic?\(^3\)

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\(^1\) On the Odyssey and the Aeneid, see Nelson (2008). For a psychological reading of group dynamics in the Argonaut myth, see Usandivaras (1977). The Argonauts are frequently used as an image for entrepreneurial adventuring, and the myth has passed into management studies via the influential Malinowski (1922); see for instance Saxenian (2006).

\(^2\) Hershkowitz (1998b) 105–89; Schenk (1999); more recently Stover (2012a).

\(^3\) Previous contributions on this question include Kleywegt (1991), who goes through the Argonauts character by character and analyses how important they are in the poem, and Dräger (2004), who emphasises the importance of sons of Jupiter and Apollo, and the increased importance of Tiphys, as further evidence of Valerius’ obsession with fate.
The Catalogue of Argonauts

To see how the team is represented, we need to explore briefly who they are and how they are described. Valerius Flaccus’ catalogue comes much later in the first book than that of Apollonius. Jason does not call the Argonauts together: rather he prays to Juno and Pallas, and Juno spreads rumours of the ship and glory to come (Val. Fl. 1.96–9). Hercules and Hylas are first to arrive (107–12), much to Juno’s disgust, so that she turns her eyes away, and we do not see the other Argonauts arrive. Apollonius sets the team at the forefront of his poem: after Phoebus, next come the men who propelled the Argo; the first substantial episode is his catalogue (1.20–233). Valerius begins with Pelias (after the invocation), as Virgil’s Aeneid begins with Juno. He waits for the Argonauts to board the ship before listing them for us, setting them out in their seating positions in the Argo. As well as integrating catalogue and narrative, this has the effect of making Jason more prominent relative to Apollonius’ Jason, although Hercules, too, is singled out as exceptional, beyond (before) and above the standard catalogue and its tropes.

Valerius’ crew is rich in references to the material of other epics: Telamon opens the list, father of the enormous Ajax. Telamon and Peleus are part of Apollonius’ crew, as are Oileus and Menoetius, but Nestor and Tydeus are not. Further, Menoetius is specifically identified as the father of Patroclus, who is left behind with Chiron to play with Achilles (1.407–10), and Oileus as the father of the other Ajax, destroyed by Athena’s thunderbolt (1.372–3). Tydeus, too, is a new addition to the crew, and the father of the Homeric Diomedes; Philoctetes evokes the later parts of the Trojan cycle. In Apollonius the emphasis is on tendentious engagement with the poetic tradition, while in Valerius the frequent allusions to the Trojan War to come build up the epic credentials of the poem. This might be contrasted with Ovid’s Calydonian boar hunt, in which Iliadic heroes and their parents are inserted to heighten the parodic contrast with Iliadic heroism. The Argonauts from Apollonius whom Valerius omits are the more obscure figures, reducing the quotient of Hellenistic learning in favour of familiar literary figures.

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4 The best overall discussion of the catalogue is that of Zissos (2008), general comments at 239–42. See also Reitz (2013).
5 Hershkowitz (1998b) 39–40 on this disruption of audience expectations.
6 Zissos (2008) 262 points out ‘VF’s strategy of “Iliadic prolepsis”’ in connection with the introduction of Tydeus; xlvii discusses the particularly ‘Homeric’ nature of Valerius’ similes, in contrast to Apollonius’ more Hellenistic similes.
7 Horsfall (1979).