

## REVIEW

### NEW WAYS OF READING VALERIUS MAXIMUS

Jeffrey Murray and David Wardle, edd., *Reading by Example: Valerius Maximus and the Historiography of Exempla*. *Historiography of Rome and Its Empire* 11. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022. Pp. xi + 352. Hardback, €114.00. ISBN 978-90-04-49940-9.

Scholarly interest in Valerius Maximus and his work has increased steadily over the last few decades. One of the initiators of this development was undoubtedly W. Martin Bloomer, whose influential study, *Valerius Maximus and the Rhetoric of the New Nobility* (Chapel Hill, 1992), helped breathe new life into the field of Valerian studies. While, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the *Facta et dicta memorabilia* had come to be widely regarded as a haphazardly arranged, rhetorically overblown, and literarily inferior compendium full of moral platitudes, Bloomer's study successfully highlighted Valerius' unique literary and cultural significance, thus giving new impetus to the interpretation of his work and emphasising the value of accepting it as literature in its own right. In 2017, twenty-five years after the publication of Bloomer's study, a conference was held at the University of Cape Town, the aim of which was to provide a platform to discuss the various advances in research since Bloomer and to explore new ways of reading and understanding Valerius' text. The collection of articles discussed here is the impressive result of that conference.

The volume as a whole consists of four major parts. The first part ('Architecture and Order') contains just two papers which offer very different, but extraordinarily thought-provoking perspectives on the overall design of Valerius' work. In an attempt to get a clearer picture of Valerius' underlying periodisation of Roman history and to shine a light on his general perception of monarchy, David Wardle (17–46) makes the rather unconventional decision to rearrange Valerius' *exempla* in chronological order and to discuss the author's portrayal of the different phases of Rome's past. As Wardle's compelling analysis shows, Valerius very clearly distinguishes between the regal period and the Republic; he does not, however, portray the monarchy, a form of government much maligned during the Republic and approached with great caution by Augustus and Tiberius, in a particularly negative light.

In fact, quite the opposite is the case: like the *principes* of Valerius' own time, the kings of old display very specific virtues—above all extraordinary foresight (*providentia*)—which help pave the way for Rome's future glory. Regarding the transition from the Republic to the Principate, Wardle largely agrees with earlier studies which suggest that the *Facta et dicta memorabilia* reveals (and perhaps even promotes) a sense of political continuity. Thus, examining Valerius' use of standard terminology for the Roman state and its leaders as well as of language usually employed to denote distinct periods of history, Wardle concludes that it is almost impossible for Valerius' readership to detect a break between the Republic and the Augustan Principate. As Wardle's illuminating discussion is able to show, Valerius' periodisation of Rome's history—and his representation of the regal period—is well adapted to the political context of the early Principate.

Focusing predominantly on Val. Max. 2.6, a chapter comprised solely of non-Roman material, Sarah Lawrence (47–72) explores the value of external *exempla* for Valerius' literary and moral undertaking. Rather than interpreting the inclusion of foreign exemplars as an attempt to draw a contrast between Rome and her allegedly inferior neighbours, Lawrence suggests that, notwithstanding all their cultural differences, the foreign peoples considered by Valerius share a universal understanding of morality and hold themselves to similarly high moral standards by utilising the power of exemplarity as a way of promoting appropriate forms of behaviour. Particularly intriguing in this context is Lawrence's discussion of the woman of Ceos, who, by making Valerius' friend Sextus Pompeius and his entourage witness the carefully staged spectacle of her own suicide, inevitably turns Rome into an audience for foreign moral exemplarity.

Part 2 of the volume ('Roman History') contains four papers with a more obvious historiographical focus. Adapting T. F. Carney's approach of studying the characterisation of one particular exemplar across the entirety of the *Facta et dicta memorabilia*, the chapter by the late John Atkinson (75–93) scrutinises Valerius' portrayal of the morally rather ambiguous figure of Coriolanus. Based on his analysis of the five *exempla* that feature Coriolanus, Atkinson concludes that by portraying Coriolanus as a virtuous leader and unique warrior who was, however, disparaged and despised by an ungrateful citizenry, Valerius aimed above all to evoke associations with Tiberius. In particular, the general's flight into exile, interpreted as a betrayal of his own people, as well as his close relationship with his influential and dutiful mother are paradigmatically highlighted.

Roman Roth (94–122) examines Valerius' portrayal of Rome's Italian neighbours before the Social War. As he suggests, anecdotes of the allies in the *Facta et dicta memorabilia* primarily serve the purpose of addressing some of the

socio-political concerns of the early Principate, such as questions regarding social boundaries and the consequences of perfidy. For Roth, the *exempla* involving Rome's Italian neighbours are clearly paradigmatic in character, designed to provide Valerius' readership (which Roth perceives as dominated by men from the Italic municipalities) with 'a point of identification with the history and moral fabric of Rome' (113), while simultaneously highlighting Rome's moral leadership within the Empire and warning against the dangers of treachery and civil war.

Focusing on the few *exempla* which deal with the capture of Syracuse, Simon Lentzsch (123–48) explores Valerius' treatment of the morally ambivalent topic of wealth acquired through looting. While earlier historians (such as Polybius, Sallust, and Livy) regarded the sack of Syracuse as the beginning (and cause) of a decline in Roman collective morality, Lentzsch discovers no evidence in Valerius of a decline in morality triggered by the adoption of Greek luxury. Whether this was indeed an attempt by Valerius to protect M. Claudius Marcellus, the conqueror of Syracuse and most distinguished ancestor of Augustus' nephew Marcellus, from blame, as Lentzsch suspects, is difficult to verify. One cannot, however, dismiss the idea that the widespread causal linking of military conquest, plunder, and moral decay would have been difficult to combine with the early imperial self-image, which makes it likely that Valerius was indeed deliberately trying to present conquests not as moral failures but as triumphant successes.

Alain Gowing (149–64) draws attention to the intriguing fact that Valerius makes no mention of Germanicus, a man who, not least according to Tacitus, displayed a whole range of the positive qualities that are praised in the *Facta et dicta memorabilia* (*disciplina militaris, pietas, amicitia*, etc.). In Gowing's eyes, it would have been more than justified if Valerius had counted Germanicus among his *exempla*. His explanation for Germanicus' absence is that Valerius may have wanted to avoid offering morally preferable alternatives to the present *princeps*, especially since Valerius is in any case rather reluctant to list members of the imperial family among his exemplars.

The third part of the volume ('Values') addresses questions which concern the significance of the *Facta et dicta memorabilia* within the larger moral discourse of its time. On the basis of Val. Max. 3.3 (*De patientia*), Rebecca Langlands (167–96) examines Valerius' engagement with Cicero's Stoic-inspired discussion of the virtuous treatment of pain and suffering in the *Tusculan Disputations*. In her eyes, there is a clear relationship between the two works. As Langlands argues, the selection and organisation of Valerius' *exempla* deliberately aims to expose potential problems in Cicero's argumentation on the moral value as well as the meaning and purpose of theoretical-philosophical education. Thus, Valerius clearly seems to be aware of the

problems raised by his material and deliberately uses them in a provocative way to stimulate and empower his readership to reflect independently on issues such as virtue, motivation, and the ultimate good.

George Baroud's contribution (197–232) focuses on Valerius' account of *amicitia* in Val. Max. 4.7. Valerius' deliberately ambivalent compilation of exemplars within this particular chapter is interpreted as an attempt to demonstrate the problematic nature of personal friendships at the time of the early Principate. As Baroud suggests, Valerius portrays *amicitia* as a potentially destructive force, capable of dividing loyalties between a personal friend and the state. It is within this context, Baroud argues, that the reader is encouraged to reflect critically on issues such as loyalty, obligation, and responsibility.

Jeffrey Murray's chapter (233–60) centres around Valerius' lengthy treatment of the vices in Book 9 and scrutinises this passage's significance within the moral discourse of its time. One particular aspect emphasised is the extraordinary visuality of Valerius' negative *exempla*. Like the notorious denunciators (*delatores*) of the Tiberian era, Murray argues, Valerius exposes the sins of others and encourages his readership to respond to them with emotional and physical disgust. With the help of two case studies, Murray demonstrates how Valerius deliberately adapts his source material and uses it for his own purposes. In doing so, Valerius goes to great lengths to avoid any *exempla* which could potentially be interpreted as allusions to vices demonstrated by the emperor himself. Thus, within the *Facta et dicta memorabilia*, the *princeps* is able to appear as the supreme example of virtue and the punisher of vice.

In her contribution (261–84), Emma Brobeck discusses Valerius' relationship to the visual arts as well as his understanding of the ideal of vividness (*enargeia*). Her particular focus is on the few *exempla* in which it is art itself that is central and consequently evaluated in aesthetic and moral terms. As Brobeck suggests, Valerius categorises the arts hierarchically according to their ethical-didactic utility. With regard to the field of the productive arts, she explains that Valerius seems to attribute a significantly higher didactic effectiveness to the word than to the image when it comes to conveying the moral precepts of a story.

Finally, the fourth part of the volume ('Reception and Tradition') reviews Valerius' place within Latin literary tradition and addresses his reception in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Diederik Burgersdijk's contribution (287–315) places the *Facta et dicta memorabilia* in the tradition of biographical writings about famous men (*de viris illustribus*). Comparing Valerius' literary approach to that of Cornelius Nepos, Burgersdijk identifies a number of distinctive parallels between the works of the two authors, leading him to suggest that the *Facta et dicta memorabilia* might best be understood as a representative of a new

sub-species of the biographical genre in Rome. Burgersdijk then traces the reception of Valerius' work in late antique literature and emphasises its particular impact on the biographical tradition, especially the *Historia Augusta*.

In the final chapter of the volume, Kyle Conrau-Lewis (316–42) discusses some of the ways in which Valerius' work was appropriated and reinterpreted by and for a Christian readership during the Middle Ages. Treating the works of the Augustinian monks Giunta de Sancto Geminiano and Conrad von Waldhausen as case studies, Conrau-Lewis illustrates how authors of late medieval indices and commentaries edited and redacted Valerius' text, reconfiguring it into a sourcebook which reflected the specific concerns of Christian preachers and sermon writers.

In summary, the various contributions included in this volume reflect the great diversity of ways to approach and interpret Valerius' text. Unsurprisingly, this diversity of approaches occasionally makes it difficult for the editors to establish a clear thematic link. The division of the volume into four parts is, therefore, logical and sensible. As with many conference volumes, some readers may notice slight differences in scholarly depth between individual contributions. Nevertheless, drawing attention to hitherto neglected aspects of Valerius' work, all chapters in this volume are successful not only in highlighting the enormous sophistication and nuance of the *Facta et dicta memorabilia*, but also in locating the work within the cultural, literary, and intellectual discourse of the early Principate. In demonstrating how, through the deliberate selection, organisation, and adaptation of his material, Valerius pursued his own literary agenda, the volume reviewed here is very much in the tradition of W. Martin Bloomer and will, undoubtedly, offer many important impulses for future research.

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