Structures of Epic Poetry

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Epic journeys and related scenes – a short introduction

The action of all epic plots unfolds both on the horizontal and the vertical axis of its narrative canvas. While only a small, but diverse group of characters is able to move along the vertical axis,[1] travelling along the horizontal axis is generally restricted to mortal characters and two types of journeys:

1. **pedestrian journeys** in the form of diplomatic missions carried out by messengers or small envoys (e.g. Ilioneus in *Aeneid* 7 or Tydeus in *Thebaid* 2), exploratory missions of new and unfamiliar territory (e.g. Jason and his men exploring Colchis after their arrival in Book 5 of Valerius' *Argonautica*), or scouting missions to gain information about the enemy camp (e.g. Odysseus' and Diomedes' nightly expedition in *Iliad* 10), military marches (e.g. Cato's march through the Libyan desert in *Bellum Ciuile* 9 or Hannibal's crossing of the Pyrenees and the Alps in Book 3 of Silius Italicus' *Punica*), and 'sightseeing' walks in which the newly arrived heroes go on a (guided) tour of the foreign land (e.g. Caesar visiting the ruins of Troy in *Bellum Ciuile* 9 or Jason being guided to Vulcan's cave by Hypsipyle in Book 2 of Valerius' *Argonautica*) in the build-up to or following an audience with the respective rulers.

2. **sea voyages,** which are either also part of a military operation (e.g. Caesar's pursuit of Pompey from Rome to Alexandria in Lucan's *Bellum Ciuile* 3–8) or dangerous heroic missions (e.g. the Argonauts' mission to retrieve the Golden Fleece from Colchis in Apollonius' and Valerius' *Argonautica*, and Aeneas' mission to found a new city for the Trojan refugees in Vergil's *Aeneid*).

Travel narratives are truly pervasive in epic poetry.[2] Most prominent classical epics, except martial epics, like the *Iliad*, contain a prolonged sea voyage of some kind, even if it takes the form of an embedded narrative, as in the case of Hypsipyle's travelogue in Book 5 of Statius' *Thebaid*, or if the journey is part of a battle that reaches a global scale, as in Lucan's *Civil War*. Some epics can even be classified

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1 Divine messengers, for instance, travel freely between Olympus, the earth, and the underworld, epic protagonists are granted premature access to the underworld, and a few select shades are temporarily brought back to the upper world, generally as part of dream visions. See also Khoo in this volume.
2 Cf. also Farell in volume I.

as travel epics in the broad sense of the concept, most notably the archetype of all travel epics, Homer's *Odyssey*, as well as Apollonius Rhodius' and Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*, in which the Argo's voyage is even presented, albeit inconsistently, as the inauguration of navigation.[3] In these three epics the main topic is the sea voyage of the protagonist(s) and the entire narrative is structured by the different stays of the epic heroes at foreign locations, resulting in an episodic macrostructure. The *Odyssey* combines several journeys in different narrative strands which the narrator balances effortlessly, telling not only the travel stories of Odysseus, but also of Telemachus and Menelaus.[4] In Vergil's *Aeneid* only the first half of the epic is dedicated to the heroes' 'Odyssean' wanderings whereas the second half is entirely dominated by 'Iliadic' warfare. While the *Odyssey* can more accurately be classified as a νόστος epic, in which the sole aim of the protagonist is to survive so he can return home and be reunited with his family, in the Argonautic epics as well as in the *Aeneid* the heroes are embarking on the journey as part of a patriotic mission: the Argonauts are tasked with repatriating the Golden Fleece, and Aeneas is urged to found a new city for the Trojan gods, that is to become the urban predecessor of Alba Longa and Rome. As a result of the *Aeneid*'s consistent focus on Aeneas' foundation of a new city and a new dynasty with Lavinia, the daughter of the Latin King, the *Aeneid* is often referred to as a κτίσις-epic or a national epic.[5]

Just as the battlefield serves both as the stage for the epic protagonists to prove their bravery and to gain κλέος,[6] and for the gods to display their power through divine interventions on behalf of their respective protégés, so does the epic journey. Whereas the interference of the gods on the battlefield is often a matter of life and death, their influence during journeys, except in the case when they raise or soothe sea-storms, predominantly concerns the interruption, continuation, or prolongation of the heroes' voyage and, by extension, the epic narrative (see below). They remind the protagonists of their civic duties when they are distracted by a sexual dalliance and provide them with help or additional challenges on the way to their respective destinations – both literally and figuratively: the heroes have to

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3 Valerius also depicts smaller sea voyages in his epic, such as in the case of the Lemnian men who are returning from Thrace in Book 2 or in the form of the Colchian pursuit of the Argonauts after their secretive departure and abduction of Medea in Book 8 of the *Argonautica*. For a more detailed analysis, cf. Zissos (2006).

4 On this narrative technique, cf. de Jong (2001, 589–90).

5 The other epics can, of course, also contain smaller κτίσις-narratives: e.g. the foundation legend of Thera at A.R. 4.1731–64.

6 Cf. Biggs/Blum (2019, 7): "a performance space for heroes, villains, and the wider social and literary communities in which they participate." For a detailed discussion of battle scenes in ancient epic, cf. volume II.1.

overcome a series of dangerous obstacles and they face death on a regular basis. At one or several stage(s) of the journey the heroes' lives are threatened by the sudden occurrence of an epic sea-storm. Both natural and divinely induced sea-storms, the metaphorical 'battle' between the epic heroes and the forces of nature, and other dangers lurking in the sea – most notably the *Symplegades*, Scylla and Charybdis, or the Sirens – constitute an important test for the endurance and leadership qualities of the different protagonists. Whereas the life of the main epic protagonist is always spared from an unheroic death at sea, he generally loses at least one, if not more, or even all of his companions during the voyage, as in the case of the shipwrecked Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. The risk of shipwreck is, however, not the only danger the travelling heroes encounter during their journey. Almost every stop creates new challenges for them: in some cases they are attacked shortly after their arrival, such as by the Laestrygonians in *Odyssey* 10 or by the Earthborn men in Book 1 of Apollonius' *Argonautica*. In other cases, they are challenged to physical contests (e.g. the Argonauts by Amycus at A.R. 2.1–163 and Val. Fl. 4.99–343 or Jason by Aeetes at A.R. 3.396–421 and Val. Fl. 7.26–100), or they are recruited as allies in an internal war (e.g. Valerius' Jason by Aeetes against his brother Perses in Book 5 of the *Argonautica*) or as saviours from dangerous threats such as monsters (e.g. Hercules in Valerius' Hesione episode in Book 2 of the Flavian *Argonautica*), a plague like the Harpies (e.g. the Argonauts in the Phineus episode at A.R. 2.178–536 and Val. Fl. 4.422–636), or even the extinction of an entire people (e.g. the Argonauts on Lemnos after the women's androcide at A.R. 1.559–909 and Val. Fl. 2.72–427). At other times, they become accidentally involved in an unnecessary military conflict (e.g. the Cyzicus nyktomachy in A.R. 1.1026–52 and Val. Fl. 3.14–272) or they are tricked into forming an alliance against their own interests, the Argonauts' ill-advised alliance with Aeetes against Perses in the Colchian-Scythian war in Book 6 of Valerius' *Argonautica* or Caesar's involvement in the battle between Cleopatra and her brother Ptolemy XII Theos Philopator in Book 10 of Lucan's *Bellum Ciuile*). The mere departure of the epic protagonists can also lead to the deaths of their loved ones (e.g. Dido is so distressed by Aeneas' decision to leave that she commits suicide in *Aeneid* 4 and Jason's parents kill themselves to escape Pelias' vengeance in Book 1 of Valerius' *Argonautica* after their son has left them without protection). The most devastating impact of a sea voyage, however, results from the kidnapping of a beautiful foreign princess (e.g. Helen whose abduction is the catalyst for the Trojan War, and thus the prelude to the *Iliad*, or Medea in Apollonius' and Valerius' *Argonautica*). All lengthy sea voyages are also closely linked with a visit to the

world of the dead:[7] Odysseus consults the deceased Theban seer Tiresias in order to receive directions from him for the continuation of his journey in *Odyssey* 11 and Aeneas needs the encouragement of his late father Anchises in *Aeneid* 6 to leave Troy and the past behind, and to focus on his κτίσις-mission instead. In the two Argonautic epics that do not have a fully developed underworld sequence, the dangerous journey itself, during which the Argonauts also pass by the entrance of the underworld, has been interpreted as a substitute κατάβασις.[8]

Both νόστος and κτίσις epics, despite their diametrically opposed direction to and from the heroes' homeland,[9] share a common emphasis on the concepts of 'homecoming'[10] and 'displacement' – both in the cultural and spatial sense of the word. They take the heroes from their home to heretofore unknown areas of the world, at times even mythical places with dangerous monsters and hybrid creatures that do not follow the regular order of the day, or are home to strange habits and rituals.[11] There is, however, a striking difference in the purpose of the protagonists' 'homecoming'. Whereas Odysseus is determined to be reinstated as King of Ithaca, and thus to re-establish the old status quo, Aeneas has to be repeatedly persuaded and spurred on to leave his destroyed home behind because he is destined to found a new 'home'. While the concept of 'home' in the *Odyssey* is inextricably linked to Odysseus' family, in the *Aeneid* it is more closely associated with the instalment of the Trojan household gods: the *Aeneades*' home is where the *Penates* are.[12] The Vergilian journey therefore also addresses important cultural and political questions of individual and national identity. The same applies to the Hellenistic and Flavian *Argonautica*. While the *Aeneid* focuses on the forma-

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7 These scenes generally combine the consulter's journey by sea with his pedestrian journey to the entrance of the underworld. They are also composed as guided tours and, as in the case of Vergil's *Aeneid*, even include a walk through the underworld itself under the guidance of the Sibyl, as well as the return journey on foot back to the hero's camp, usually in the company of the necromancer. Cf. Finkmann and Reitz in this volume.

8 Cf. Hunter (1993, 184), Dräger (2001, 80–4), and Nelis (2001, 228–35).

9 Epic poems generally begin with the outbound journey from the characters' original home to their temporary (*Argonautica* and *Bellum Ciuile*) or final destination (*Aeneid*). While in Vergil's *Aeneid*, Lucan's *Bellum Ciuile*, and Valerius' *Argonautica* the inbound (return) journeys have been entirely omitted, the narration of the *Odyssey* exclusively portrays the protagonist's return journey. Only Apollonius' *Argonautica* depicts the heroes' complete voyage from Thessaly to Colchis and back to Thessaly.

10 Cf. Jacobson (2012, 4): "Home can be represented as a place, a perspective, a language, through which the idea of travel can be explored."

11 On mythical places, cf. Kersten in this volume.

12 For a more detailed discussion of the importance of the *Penates* in the *Aeneid*, cf. Finkmann/Reitz/Walter in this volume.

tion of Roman identity,[13] the two Argonautic epics, especially Apollonius' poem, characterise the Argonauts as pioneers of important milestones for mankind – especially in navigation and trade –, as "'culture-heroes', bringers of civilisation to a primitive east",[14] and agents in Jupiter's 'world plan' (Val. Fl. 1.531–60).[15] They repeatedly discuss the impact of the Argonauts' journey on the culture, landscape, and political power dynamics of the foreign kingdoms they are visiting and, more importantly, its effect on the existing world order. "The act of moving to and from 'home' – both a fixed point of spatial orientation and a transportable set of cultural values – thus represents a physical journey and an intellectual process."[16] Epic journeys have moreover often been interpreted as metaphors for the composition of the poem: with the end of the respective sea voyage the final destination is reached, and so is the end of the poem and, by extension, the creative process.[17] This concept can also be applied to the literary tradition following the *Odyssey*: "through a retrospective lens, Homer becomes 'home' – a point of departure to which later authors, implicitly or explicitly, return in a sort of literary *nostos*."[18]

Another interesting feature that is (almost) exclusive to the context of epic journeys is the incorporation of lengthy travelogues in secondary focalisation. Unlike battle scenes which are generally related by the heterodiegetic primary narrator, epic journeys provide ample opportunities for secondary narration by the travelling protagonists who recount their past adventures from their own perspective or by a bard who sings about 'parallel' adventures from the mythical past. These travel stories serve as entertainment for a generous foreign ruler in the context of a banquet scene or as encouragement and distraction for the army during their long and exhausting journey. The most extensive and influential accounts are Odysseus' *Apologoi* at the court of the Phaeacians, which comprise four books (*Odyssey* 9–12), Aeneas' report of the reasons that have led to the capture of Troy and the first stage of his wanderings from Troy to his arrival at Carthage (*Aeneid* 2–3), and the songs of Demodocus in *Odyssey* 8 and the bard of the Argonauts, Orpheus, prior to and during their journey from Thessaly to Colchis in Books 1 and 4 of Valerius' and Book 1 of Apollonius' *Argonautica*. These narratives thus take the reader on a journey back in time, either as part of the epic plot as in the case

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13 Cf., e.g., Toll (1997) and Syed (2005).

14 Buckley (2010, 434).

15 Cf., e.g., Wacht (1991) and Stover (2012, 27–50).

16 Biggs/Blum (2019, *p*. i).

17 Cf. Davis' (1989, 48) conclusion about Valerius' Argo: "As a ship she also is the symbol of the poet's creative process of composition and its result, the poem itself."

18 Biggs/Blum (2019, 7).

of the protagonists or to past events not covered in the epic narrative and even to events of the mythical past as in the case of the bards.[19]

In the context of travel epics new characters emerge at the forefront of the narrative, especially maritime deities, who form the second largest group of divine agents, next to the Olympian gods, and epic helmsmen, most of whom do not survive the voyage and reappear to demand a proper burial during the protagonist's underworld visit.[20] Just as in battle scenes, the protagonists of epic journeys, i.e. the majority of travellers, are also male. Women only take on a small number of roles in sea voyages: they occur as mothers and wives who have been left behind at home (e.g. Penelope in the *Odyssey* or Alcimede in the Argonautic epics) as "blockers" and "helpers", to use Foley's terms,[21] who delay and/or facilitate the continuation of the journey, most frequently in the form of seductive foreign princesses and sorceresses, or as travel companions who voluntarily embark on the journey together with the male protagonists (e.g. Cornelia in Lucan's *Bellum Ciuile* or Medea in the Argonautic epics), and as a result directly influence the development of the battle (Pompey risks making a detour during his flight to be reunited with Cornelia and in the Argonautic epics the Colchians pursue the Argonauts to take back Medea).

Epic journeys also offer a greater variety of settings, including domestic settings such as palaces or even the privacy of a bedroom as the place of important decision-making among couples (e.g. Homer's Arete and Alcinous) or by foreign princesses who are fearful of their partner's departure (e.g. Vergil's Dido or Apollonius' and Valerius' Medea), or as the setting for emotional farewell (e.g. Lucan's Pompey and Cornelia) and reunion scenes (e.g. Homer's Penelope and Odysseus). Sea voyages similarly provide the background for a greater variety of typical scenes, most of which are highly formalised, ranging from arrivals and greetings, banquets, farewell, departure, reunion, and recognition scenes, sea-storms, and battle scenes (including single and mass combat as well as funeral games), and their associated structural elements, most importantly aetiological and geographical digressions, de- and embarkation sacrifices, farewell gifts, the epic gaze, and catalogues of the involved crew members and foreign warriors.[22] The four overarching categories of time and space, battle scenes, and communication (esp. with the inhabitants of

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19 Cf. also Aeneas' underworld visit in *Aeneid* 6, which Bleisch (1999, 187) describes as a journey both into his own past and through the epic narrative: "Aeneas becomes the prototype of the reader; his journey duplicates that of Vergil's audience, as they re-read and revisit the first half of the epic, moving backwards to the beginning."
20 Cf. also Finkmann and Reitz in this volume.
21 Cf. Foley (2005).
22 For a more detailed discussion of these motifs, cf. Jöne (2017). On epic catalogues, see Reitz/Scheidegger Lämmle/Wesselmann in volume I.

the visited nations, the gods in apparition scenes, and the dead in the underworld) are all of particular importance for sea voyages in ancient epic. The following chapters will focus on the constituent elements of hospitality scenes as well as on sea-storms, which are at the core of all epic journeys. These scenes which are inextricably intertwined with one another are analysed in this volume in the chronological order of their appearance in the hospitality scene with the exception of sea-storms which can occur at different positions during the epic journey.

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