



Sociability and Sense of Belonging: Community Interaction in the Work of Valerius of Bierzo¹

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ABSTRACT

The work of Valerius of Bierzo (c. 630 – c. 695) – along with other documents that can give an account of immediate realities, such as the *Vita Fructuosi*, the monastic rules of the Fructuosan environment, the minutes of Third Council of Braga (675), or the news of other councils that, although assembled in Toledo, could have approached the problems of Gallaecia – offers a picture of a profoundly complex social reality; a society of horizontal and vertical relationships, a world of rigid hierarchies but likewise a world of occasional and more or less reified coexistences that can provide a glimpse of a certain sense of sociability.

The sources under examination have some elements in common, such as a coherent geographical space and a chronological range that spans only two generations; therefore, the understanding of phenomena is not distorted by temporal discordances and dissimilar contextualizations. These sources present a society which is predominantly peasant, but that revolves around nuclei of power – cities, monasteries, episcopal sees, large estates, etc. – by which survival strategies have been designed. In this sense, the texts present a reality that seems to be overlapping a world of legal or doctrinal impositions, a society of undoubted dynamism which probably generates

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its own identification links, its own sense of group belonging. However, these networks are not always easy to identify, and there is no doubt that collective group sentiment can be distorted by representations of prestige.

ESSAY

When historians face the task of tracing the social relationships and the interactions, either individual or in groups, that communities develop, usually they discover that their instruments – their historical methodological and critical literary tools – are limited. Historical analyses of sociability, belonging, identity and self-perception requires the employment of a set of analytical categories borrowed from other disciplines, whether from Sociology, Social Psychology or Anthropology. A problem with this is, first, that historians may not be familiar with the methodologies of these disciplines, but also that the theories and methods of these disciplines may not be consistent with the nature of the historical, especially pre-modern, sources. Since we are forced to elicit history from their testimonies, resorting to the aid of other such disciplines – whose theoretical constructions are built upon modern sources and ideas of sociability, frequently from statistical extrapolations – makes it difficult for pre-modern historians to remain attuned to the specific realities that shaped the horizon of references and prejudices of ancient and medieval authors.

Actively writing until about the year 700, Valerius is, in absolute terms, the last Visigothic writer. Born around the year 630, somewhere in the *territorium* of *Asturica Augusta*, he developed his adult life, on which he left an autobiography,² in the

² All references to the work of Valerius are from Manuel C. Díaz y Díaz, *Valerio del Bierzo: Su persona. Su obra* (León: Centro de Estudios e Investigación San Isidoro, 2006); *Ordo* (*Ordo querimonie prefati discriminis*), 246-77; *Replic.* (*Replicatio semonum conuersione premium*), 280-311; *Resid.* (*Quod of superioribus querimoniis residum sequitur*), 312-23. On the peculiarities of the

current region of Bierzo. His texts provide a complex portrait of peripheral space in the Visigothic kingdom of Toledo in its final decades.³ Valerius was not a great theologian and did not enjoy much public influence, and has not been judged highly as a writer.⁴ This is in contrast to Fructuosus of Braga (d. 665), whom he admired. Fructuosus, who, in parallel, led an ascetic life as a youth, would achieve a reputation as a monastic founder and scholar, later as the metropolitan bishop of Braga, exerted an undeniable religious weight, occasionally political, from his chair. It is possible that Valerius, whose writing reveals a frustrated personality, sometimes even a tormented one,⁵ was not, in any case, on the path that he considered the right one towards virtue and salvation, the life in solitude devoted to God.⁶ In that role, he feels, in his writings, as a privileged outsider.⁷

In fact, most of Valerius's literary production appears as an apologia about his way of life, either as a justification or an exemplary action, convinced that it conveys a legitimate means to attain salvation.⁸ Furthermore, he considers himself entitled to alter any episode of his biography that might reinforce the value of his moralizing and

same autobiographical genre see José Carlos Martín, "La biografía dentro de la autobiografía: el caso de Valerio del Bierzo (siglo VII)," in *Las biografías griegas y latinas como género literario: De la Antigüedad al Renacimiento, Algunas calas*, ed. Vitalino Valcárcel Martínez (Vitoria: Universidad del País Vasco, 2009), 319-42.

³ Pablo C. Díaz, "Percepción del espacio y la naturaleza en Valerio del Bierzo," in *Estudios de Historia Antigua en Homenaje al Prof. Manuel Abilio Rabanal*, ed. Juan Manuel Abascal, Antonio Caballos, Santiago Castellanos and Juan Santos (Seville: Universidad de Sevilla, 2012), 383-98; Céline Martin, "The Asturia of Valerius: Bierzo at the End of the Seventh Century," *Visigothic Symposium 2* (2017-2018): 60-78.

⁴ On objections to this see Jacques Elfassi, "Algunos supuestos vulgarismos que probablemente no existen: consideraciones metodológicas sobre la lengua de Valerio del Bierzo," in *Latin Vulgaire – Latin tardif XI: XI Congreso Internacional sobre el Latín Vulgar y Tardío (Oviedo, 1-5 septiembre de 2014)*, ed. Alfonso García Leal and Clara Elena Prieto Entialgo (New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 2018), 684-91.

⁵ J. A. Díez Manrique, *Valerio del Bierzo: Ascetismo y orgullo* (Santander: Real Academia de Medicina de Cantabria, 2011).

⁶ Andrea Dal Pra de Deus, "A ascese monástica ideal para Valério do Bierzo," *Revista História e Cultura (Franca-SP)* 2/3 (2013): 364-79.

⁷ Patrick Henriët, "Origines du christianisme Ibérique et communauté de parfaits. Valère du Bierzo (VII^e siècle)," in *Estudios de latín medieval hispánico*, ed. José Martínez Gázquez, Óscar de la Cruz Palma and Cándida Ferrero Hernández (Florence: SISMEL-Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2011), 372.

⁸ Roger Collins, "The 'autobiographical' Works of Valerius of Bierzo: Their Structure and Purpose," in *Los visigodos: Historia y civilización, Antigüedad y Cristianismo 3* (Murcia: Universidad de Murcia, 1986), 425-42.

undertaking.⁹ Valerius provides details to show that he is a person beloved by God, even a privileged mediator between divinity and his fellows.¹⁰ This leads him to introduce some episodes in which the anecdotal aspect seems to end in a providential intervention.

However, beyond these anecdotes, Valerius narrates immediate realities that should be understood by his readers, or by those who listen to the story of his life, as the places where his narration is viable and recognizable. His narration brings the reader close to a rural reality that is believable because Valerius does not attempt to explain it; it is the setting of his story and not the story itself. For this reason, the underlying economic relationships and the connecting structures influenced by them, the peasants' manifestations of religiosity that Valerius met with, the mundane character of the rural clergy, the distancing process of the religious authorities or the political comprises are a plausible setting, though these factors could occasionally affect his decisions. Yet, even when Valerius involves himself directly, when he reveals the hate of which he is a victim, the abhorrence towards his detractors or the other way round, the dearness of his occasional pupils, of the faithful who come close looking for his contact, or of the powerful giving him protection, one gets the sense of this

⁹ José Carlos Martín, “¿Valerio en Compludo? Examen crítico de los *Opúsculos autobiográficos* (CPL 1282-1284) y las *Visiones del más allá* (CPL 1277-1279) de Valerio del Bierzo,” *Veleia* 23 (2006): 332.

¹⁰ See Peter Brown, “Arbiters of the Holy: The Christian Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” in *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 55-78. According to Brown, as a replacement of the authority of the secular hierarchy, the holy man stands as an alternative who, occasionally, seems to take on the role of a pre-Christian shaman. This thesis has received extended attention by scholars. See, Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity 1971-1997,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6.3 (1998): 353-76; Claudia Rapp, “Safe-Conducts to Heaven: Holy Men, Mediation and the Role of Writing,” in *Transformations of Late Antiquity: Essays for Peter Brown*, ed. Philip Rousseau and Manolis Papoutsakis (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 187-203. For the case of Valerius see Renan Frighetto, “O modelo de *vir sanctus* segundo o pensamento de Valério do Bierzo,” *Helmantica* 48 (1997): 59-79. Some of his approaches have not been universally accepted. For instance, see Paul Anthony Hayward, “Demystifying the Role of Sanctity in Western Christendom,” in *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown*, ed. James Howard-Johnston and Paul Anthony Hayward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 115-42.

being a realistic story with characters matching their real-life, contemporary social roles.

Valerius received training that would have prepared him for, he says, earthly benefits. He calls these skills *uanis disciplinis*,¹¹ probably in reference to the primary subjects of the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*. This would have been a lay education aimed at an administrative career, although he gives no clue of such training received in Toledo.¹² According to Valerius, when, as an *adulescentulus*, he decided to take the path of a religious life he left his family home. It is possible that he belonged to a Romano-Hispanic family linked to the service of the Crown: when Valerius was an old man, a nephew of his, named John, abandoned his family, his property and the *seruitium regis* to live ascetically by his side. Such a local aristocratic family would have afforded an acceptable economic position.¹³ Indeed, long after having narrated his desire to be converted to God, leaving for the monastery of Compludo and his failed experience in it, when he lived, allegedly out of charity, on the top of a deserted mountain, Valerius seems still to have been attentive to the production of the family properties.¹⁴

The context of the narrative is that Valerius has given instructions by mouth to a boy running away down the mountain to go and tell the administrator (*ministrante*) of one of Valerius's farms to provide from its surplus (*predio*) some quantities of barley to a blind person and to other poor persons.¹⁵ Afraid of being punished for having proclaimed alms aloud and convinced on grounds of vanity that the supplies he had

¹¹ Valer., *Ordo* 1.

¹² Also consider Céline Martin, "The *Asturia of Valerius*," 62, n. 6: "It is quite probable that, while still a member of the lay aristocracy, he spent time in the capital of the realm, Toledo, and may have traveled to other places around the Iberian Peninsula."

¹³ Valer., *Replac.* 24.

¹⁴ Valer., *Ordo* 1-2.

¹⁵ Valer., *Replac.* 4.

donated had burned, he released his administrator and refers to himself now as *subministrante*.¹⁶ Apparently, at this time, Valerius stopped living from his agricultural surplus, but he does not suggest that he ever relinquished his properties and their profit.¹⁷ This is important because, despite the claim throughout his work that he has abandoned all comfort and all guaranteed sources of livelihood, Valerius maintains his position in the secular world out of a sense of social and moral superiority. It is from this perspective that he presents the relationships intertwining around him.

From that stance, Valerius observes the ignorance of Flainus, a priest who attends the oratory devoted to Saint Felix on the top of the mountain, where he settles down after leaving Compludo. Between them, a problem of jealousy and competition soon arises. Valerius lives in the same oratory enclosure and counts on a young cleric helping him during his manual tasks and meal preparation, while he writes and instructs the pupils that climb the mountain to receive their lessons in good weather. Valerius accuses Flainus of being lustful and tags him as *pseudosacerdos* and, before his harassment, runs away to a nearby room where he's the victim of thieves.¹⁸ When the situation with Flainus becomes completely untenable, Valerius is forced to quit the place. This stay in the oratory of Saint Felix has been presented by Valerius like one in the desert, as the replacement of Egypt's or Syria's desert, which he aims to emulate in their ascetic life. Probably during the harsh winters that Valerius describes,

¹⁶ Valer., *Replic.* 5.

¹⁷ Although this character of Valerius as proprietor is not always accepted. See, for instance, Céline Martin, "Valerius et l'ennemi: Grand propriétaires, clercs, cénobites et ermites face au contrôle du sacré dans le Bierzo du VII e siècle," in *Compétition et sacré au haut Moyen Âge: entre médiation et exclusion*, ed. Philippe Depreaux, Francois Bougard and Regine Le Jan (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 73.

¹⁸ Valer., *Ordo* 5-6.

he was in the mountain alone, contemplating the desolation and death of the ‘desert’ landscape, but the rest of the time it seems to be a rather busy place.¹⁹

Valerius relates that as his fame grew Christians of both sexes came to him in large numbers (“diuersa utrumque sexu uulgi caterua confluens”)²⁰ to give him their support but also, especially, “obsequium impendere stipendia uel stipendia ministrare.”²¹ The reference to *stipendium* and *obsequium* leaves no doubt as to the relationship that is being established here: the faithful are paying him for a service and to build a bond of dependency on him in the form of religious submission.²² Valerius replaces Flainus as the mediator between the people and the saint venerated in the sanctuary. To borrow a phrase from Gregory the Great (c. 540-604), Valerius attributes Flainus’s abhorrence to the envy the wicked develop when they are unable to achieve something by themselves. In so doing, Valerius rejects the legitimate Flainus and deprives him of his livelihood. Many rural churches were erected by the faithful who, without the patrimony capable of generating income or a protector willing to keep them, turned for income directly from the offerings that believers provided in exchange for the services of the priest in charge, his solace and prayers.²³ In building the bonds of dependency, Valerius was diverting this offerings-income to himself. Even the contributions of his pupils, which he presents as voluntary ones, could well have been payments for his teaching.²⁴

¹⁹ Valer., *Replac.* 9.

²⁰ See Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 79-101.

²¹ Valer., *Ordo* 5.

²² Philip Rousseau, “Ascetics as Mediators and as Teachers,” in *The Cult of Saints*, ed. Howard-Johnston and Hayward, 41-59.

²³ Council of Mérida (666) 19, in José Vives, *Concilios visigóticos e hispano-romanos* (Madrid-Barcelona: C.S.I.C., 1963), 339. See also Pablo C. Díaz, “La iglesia lusitana en época visigoda: la formación de un patrimonio monumental,” in *Repertorio de Arquitectura Cristiana de Extremadura*, ed. Pedro Mateos and Luis Caballero (Mérida: Instituto de Arqueología de Mérida, 2003), 133-42.

²⁴ José Udaondo Puerto, “El sistema escolar en la Hispania visigoda: el ejemplo de Valerio del Bierzo,” *Helmantica* 54 (2003): 391-445.

This is evident even in the moralizing anecdotes Valerius tells. In one scene, Valerius tells of the “miraculous” healing of Teodora, a woman of a wealthy family who has been attacked by a bull. The misfortune of the lady was caused because she had forgotten to pay Valerius the promised payment for the education of her child,²⁵ instead offering him but a high-quality garment which he considers a *gift*.²⁶ In front of the “diuersa [...] uulgi caterua,” where there is no differentiation beyond that of sexes, Theodora’s family²⁷ is preparing for the grape harvest at the time of the accident. Valerius is familiar with their customs. The family goes to Saint Felix’s oratory in retinue (“uir eius cum omnibus suis”), and the angel appearing before them refers to them as [*boni*] *homines*.²⁸ Back home, already recovered, the lady is described knitting in her room with *filias et ancillas*, in an aristocratic scene of a clearly classical evocation.²⁹ The procession moves along the *puplica strata* at the foot of the mountain, the same one that probably had been used by the boy running towards Valerius’s property. The *multitudinem hominum* pass through the street driving a large number of pairs of oxen.³⁰ If the animals were tied up to the yoke, the road would have been wide enough and they would be doing some carriage work, perhaps related to the grape harvest tasks. This is the same route Teodora’s family would take to *Bergidium*.³¹

²⁵ Santiago Castellanos, “Problemas morales en la protección divina al *hombre santo*: Emiliano y Valerio,” in *L’Etica Cristiana nei secoli III e IV: Eredità e confronti* (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 1996), 611-20.

²⁶ Valer., *Repl. offertionis*. 6-8.

²⁷ Valer., *Repl. 6*.

²⁸ Valer., *Repl. 7*.

²⁹ See Ana Suárez Fernández, “La imagen de la mujer en la obra de Valerio del Bierzo,” *Estudios Medievales Hispánicos* 4 (2015): 139-66.

³⁰ Valer., *Repl. 6*.

³¹ Valer., *Repl. 8*. This could refer to the present Castro Ventosa, in the nearby area of Cacabelos, or to this same location, the Roman *Bergidum Falvium*, that the Itinerary of Antoninus cites as a *mansio* on the road from Astorga to Lugo (see Tomás Mañanes, *El Bierzo prerromano y romano*, [León: C.S.I.C., 1981], 96-103; Inés Díaz Álvarez, “*Bergidum Falvium*, encrucijada viaria [Cacabelos-León],” *Boletín do Museo Provincial de Lugo* 13 [2006-2008]: 69-78). The reference *antequam ad Bergidum uadas* has been related to a local fair. If correct, this would confirm *Bergidum*’s role as a central place in the region and strengthen the idea of a dynamic environment with continual social and economic activity linked closely to Valerius (see Díaz y Díaz, *Valerio del Bierzo*, 287, n. 190).

During his stay on the mountain, Valerius managed to become the center of attention in the communities around him. He performed the role of educator, miracle-worker and probably a spiritual guide, and was able to achieve a social *unanimitas* because, apparently, he provided satisfaction to the needs of varied social groups. However, at some point, Valerius loses this support and the *fidelissimi christiani* looking for his nearness rescue him and take him to another oratory located on a private estate called Ebronanto.³² There, protected by Ricimer, the *dominus* of the *predium*, Valerius is sheltered in a small enclosure which he refers to as *ergastulum*,³³ *habitaculum* and *tugurium*.³⁴ Feeling sick, Ricimer decides to turn that space, linked to some kind of oratory,³⁵ into a church, with Valerius as its priest.³⁶ However, after the sudden death of Ricimer, his heirs choose to appoint a certain Justus, with whom Valerius would have the same type of conflict as that which he had with Flainus. He describes Justus as a drinker, quarrelsome and lustful; with him, Valerius illustrates the ignorant rural clergymen, vulgar and rather little virtuous in their everyday behavior,³⁷ who, Valerius ensures, attempted to murder him, an act which was prevented by some *fratres* (faithful).³⁸ It is possible that Justus was an ill-tempered man and his acts, rather inconsistent with the dignity of his role, deserved disapproval. However, it seems clear that behind the mutual abhorrence there were other factors. Both at the time of his stay in Saint Felix's oratory as in Ebronanto, Valerius stood between the pastoral tasks of the respective priests and the faithful who came to the mass celebrations or to express their devotion. In this, he not only dwelled in the oratories, the basilicas or annexed places, but he also became the focus of Christians' attention.

³² Valer., *Ordo* 7.

³³ Valer., *Ordo* 8.

³⁴ Valer., *Ordo* 10.

³⁵ Valer., *Ordo* 8: *sancta altaria*.

³⁶ Valer., *Ordo* 10.

³⁷ Renan Frighetto, "Um protótipo de pseudo-sacerdos na obra de Valério do Bierzo: o caso de Justus (*Ordo Querimoniae*, 6)," *Arys: Antigüedad: Religiones y Sociedades* 2 (1999): 411-22.

³⁸ Valer., *Ordo* 15.

Valerius vehemently says he was opposed to Justus's appointment as priest: *contra uoluntatem meam, me perneciter resistentem*.³⁹ It seems that he feels entitled to such a stubborn attitude, and claims that Justus has been unfairly ordained. The election of a new priest has left Valerius defenseless, abandoned and alone (*solus, et a nullo capiens consolationis auxilium*), although with the solace of a deacon, perhaps from the same church, who offers him *obsequium* again and who goes on serving the ecclesiastical offices.⁴⁰ Once more Valerius refers to jealousy and envy, in addition to the evil one's intervention, in order to explain Justus's behavior. Yet again, Valerius has interfered with the legitimate priest's activity and, certainly enough, he has undermined his economic interests.⁴¹ When Ricimer attempts to appoint Valerius as a priest, he notes his fear of being corrupted through the gifts of the faithful, of which he would be now depriving Justus.⁴²

Again, Valerius moves between two bodies: on the one hand, the faithful who are looking for his contact, and on the other hand Ricimer's family, whom he defines as *inlustrem uir*.⁴³ It would be a Goth whose position placed him near the king, maybe as part of the *aula regia*; a powerful and rich family, *oppulentissima domus*, Valerius asserts, from whom he has received "refectionis consolationem stipem atque caritatis."⁴⁴ Despite the story of renouncement and resistance to outside attention, Valerius receives, as had happened during his stay on the mountain, a payment in exchange for something. It must be remembered that private churches were not conceived as mere familial chapels; they were the religious core of the estate's dependents, they may even have served as an attraction for other faithful from the

³⁹ Valer., *Ordo* 13.

⁴⁰ Valer., *Ordo* 14.

⁴¹ Valer., *Ordo* 15.

⁴² Valer., *Ordo* 10: *multis opulentie stipendiis*.

⁴³ Valer., *Ordo* 10.

⁴⁴ Valer., *Ordo* 17.

area, and they always stood in a blurred line between a pastoral role and a status as local income collection centers.⁴⁵ It is known that the Ebronanto oratory had, even before the enlargement works undertaken by Ricimer, the advocation (*aula sanctorum*) to a few unmentioned saints, an influence that would have increased the piety of the faithful and, along with it, their alms.⁴⁶ In this setting, the figure of Valerius must be understood as part of the game of privileged relationships between the tutelary saints and the believers, as had happened in Saint Felix's oratory; and, besides that, as a factor of balance between the owners and their dependents.

That special connection of Valerius with the protective family is best understood when, as a result of a sudden order of the king, the house was razed and destroyed, and the heirs arrested and sent into exile.⁴⁷ It is not always easy to synchronize the facts of Valerius's life with the political events of the time, but the described action seems to correspond with the punishment derived from any act of *infidelitas*, probably in the reign of Wamba.⁴⁸ Valerius proclaims that, as a result of this misfortune, he was reduced to misery, deprived of livelihood and all kind of support (*consolatio*). Valerius would have created a close bond with the family, based on a political element in addition to religious and emotional components. At this point, Valerius would have had the support of many followers and been able to play the role of mediator in the context of the Bergidense aristocracy's relationships with other social sectors in their environment. The political disapproval of the monarchy towards his protectors undoubtedly affected his role as mediator. In this setting could

⁴⁵ Pablo C. Díaz, "Iglesia propia y gran propiedad en la autobiografía de Valerio del Bierzo," in *Actas I Congreso Internacional Astorga Romana* (Astorga: Ayuntamiento, 1986), 299-300.

⁴⁶ Valer., *Ordo* 8.

⁴⁷ Valer., *Ordo* 17.

⁴⁸ Maria R. Valverde Castro, "La monarquía visigoda en Valerio del Bierzo," *Edad Media. Revista de Historia* 12 (2011): 281-300.

be understood the endeavor of Isidore, the bishop of Astorga (d. 681), to take Valerius to Toledo.

In his reading, Valerius says that Isidore, whom he describes as *pestilentissimus*, had insinuated to him that it was in his honor to make the move, but Valerius suspects that it would ruin his religious career.⁴⁹ It is plausible that the move to Toledo was a requirement of the court, as part of the process of exiles and repression of factions opposed to his political initiatives. We do not know how Valerius managed to shirk his journey to Toledo, but his imprisonment in Rufiana could have been the result of legislative compliance making the pursuit of lonely and wandering monks mandatory for the bishops, confining them in a monastery, or returning them to the one from which they had escaped.⁵⁰ Rufiana would be, in this sense, the prison where Valerius was sent to. Even the reading of his story could imply that he was already in the monastery when Isidore sought to bring him to the royal city. As time passed, perhaps during the reign of Ervig (680-687), Valerius came to praise genuine kindness, and he lived his last years in the monastery not as a prisoner but as a member of the community.

The narration of this transfer to the monastery of Rufiana is especially ambiguous in the story. On one occasion, Valerius attributes this jump to providence, the *diuina pietas*,⁵¹ although at another point he admits he has been taken by force: *fuissem perductus*.⁵² The confinement in Rufiana should have drastically limited the social role played until now; nevertheless, Valerius does not give up his spiritual leadership in isolation, colliding with the open opposition of the monks, to the point of causing a

⁴⁹ Valer., *Ordo* 21.

⁵⁰ Eighth Council of Toledo (646), 5, in Gonzalo Martínez Díez and Félix Rodríguez, *La Colección Canónica Hispana. V. Concilios hispanos: segunda parte* (Madrid: C.S.I.C., 1992), 352-54.

⁵¹ Valer., *Ordo* 19.

⁵² Valer., *Resid.* 1.

kind of split in the same monastery.⁵³ It is during this forced reclusion in the monastery that he regains the king's confidence (*misericordia regia*), and at the same time receives the support of good Christians proved through gifts, such as the two beasts provided by the *uir inlustrissimus Basilianus*.⁵⁴ In this case, the name seems to belong to an Hispano-Roman, but his treatment involves, once again, someone closely linked to the court. To the angry response of the monks, Valerius states that they are possessed by envy. He is not bashful in his criticisms, using the words – *babigerus* and *brutobardus* – for those who first slander him and then hatch a plan to seek his ruin, a persecution that reaches its narrativic climax when one of them, apparently, kills John, a deacon who helped Valerius in his tasks.⁵⁵

Despite these dramatic events, Valerius achieves, in his later years, a balance in his life with the monks who sheltered him, either those of Rufiana or the monastery founded by his disciple John. He continues to enjoy the support of the local Christians (“mercedis bonorum christianorum”), maintain disciples, and appears reconciled with Aurelius, the new bishop of Astorga (d. p. 693).⁵⁶ At the end of his life, he feels that the king, the bishops and the other Christians have filled him with favor.⁵⁷ Definitely, he seems distant from the world, at least from part of it. In fact, in recalling his perception of the social environment and his place within it, the character Valerius is presented to readers as a man even more distant from immediate realities than he seems to be at first sight. He receives gifts from and moves freely within a high social environment – the characters of his story are noble, owners, abbots and bishops, the ‘good Christians’ who come to his aid, the remote kings, for whose actions he suffers

⁵³ Valer., *Resid.* 2.

⁵⁴ Valer., *Ordo* 23.

⁵⁵ Valer., *Resid.* 3; *Ordo* 25-26. The story must be contrasted with *Replac.* 12-14 & 23 where the death of John appears to be provoked by an *iniquissimo rustico* in a moment in which John lived in a monastery by the same person.

⁵⁶ Valer., *Replac.* 15-16; *Resid.* 3.

⁵⁷ Valer., *Replac.* 25.

misery, but also gets gifts. It is among them that Valerius finds his place, despite his claim to a life of renouncement and solace.

It is true that Valerius attracts other social sectors. The *uulgus*, the undifferentiated community, for instance, looks to him because of his nearness to divinity, and occasionally helps him, although he disregards them socially. When he describes the dance that Justus performs drunk, a suggestive one in which the dancer waves his arms, jumping and singing parts that recall the obscenities in the theater, Valerius calls it a *uulgali ritu*.⁵⁸ The story is great because it connects us to the fun customs of the *multitudine*,⁵⁹ otherwise hardly visible in the sources.⁶⁰ Yet, the *fidelissimi christiani* who rescue Valerius from the mountain to bring him towards Ebronanto could well be the same family of Ricimer who appointed Justus.⁶¹ It seems that Valerius represents for this family a balancing factor, a privileged mediator with the divinity, but at the same time a crucial link with the inhabitants of his surroundings, or his dependents. However, the few times Valerius mentions them, the workers in the environment in which he moves, they are presented in a distant setting, associated with their functional roles but devoid of any individuality. This is the case, for example, of the maids (*ancillae*) in Theodora's house, whose concrete status gets lost after the term; or the craftsmen (*operarii*) hired by the good Christians that protect him, along with another of his disciples, Saturninus, in order to build a church in the limits of Rufiana.⁶² Otherwise, they are pejoratively described, as in the case of the *serui*, remembered next to their *patroni*, in the house of the parents of Rufiana

⁵⁸ Valer., *Ordo* 16.

⁵⁹ Valer., *Replac.* 5.

⁶⁰ Valer., *Replac.* 4.

⁶¹ Valer., *Ordo* 7.

⁶² Valer., *Replac.* 16.

praepositus harassing Valerius;⁶³ even more so in the perception of the *iniquissimo rustico* that would have murdered John.⁶⁴

Beyond his ascetic devotion, Valerius plays a social role as an intermediary, between the Christian community and the divinity, and between different socio-economic sectors. Valerius would identify himself as a social mediator between classes, but he does so immersed within a privileged environment, from a privileged position, and acting in the service of that same social environment sustaining and sheltering him.

⁶³ Valer., *Ordo* 24.

⁶⁴ Valer., *Replic.* 23. A person described as a *rusticum ac plebeium uirum / rusticus* (*Vita Fructuosi* 11) who, by confusing him with a fugitive, attacked Fructuosus while traveling in the Egiditania region (see Manuel C. Díaz y Díaz, *La Vida de San Fructuoso de Braga. Estudio y edición crítica* [Braga: Diário do Minho, 1974], 98).

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