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The Myth of the Argonauts in the Context of East-West Relations

At the beginning of *The Histories* by Herodotus where it is discussed how the Persian historians understood the stages of creation of the West/East confrontation, the expedition of Argonauts is absolutely clearly outlined as one of the most significant factors of this confrontation.¹ However, the Legend of Argonauts explicitly suggests the following: despite the fact that the West/East Colchians are implied within the Western opposition in the confrontation, the images connected with Colchis represent the rather significant figures who played a rather important role in terms of relations between Europe and Asia. We could have provided a number of facts that Aeëtes was mentioned by Eumelus of Corinth as the native of Corinth who departed to Colchis after transfer of the kingdom to Bunos (Eumelos F 3 PEG, cf. Pind., *Ol.*, 13, 53); Several sources connect Medea with Corinth; When the last king of Corinthians died without a heir, Medea was called from Iolcos and granted governance, therefore, we can realize the kidnap of Medea as the return to homeland to a certain extent (Eumelos F 5 PEG); one sister of Aeëtes, Pasiphae, is the wife of Minos. The residence of the other sister, Circe, is assumed to be near Italy from the period of Hesiod and Medea is assumed to be the person whose heir, Medos (the son of Egeus, according to some sources) had the role of a

¹ Confrontation of Hellens and Barbarians is carried out in several stages in the works of Herodotus: Phoenicians came to Argos and kidnapped the daughter of the king Inakos, Io (I. 1). Hellens, assumably, Cretans, kidnapped the daughter of the king, Europe, in Tyros in Phoenicia; Hellens kidnapped the daughter of Aeetes in Aeaea-Colchis (I. 2). In the second generation, Alexander, the son of Priamos kidnapped Helena (I. 3).

certain connector between these two opposing parties after return to Asia with his mother.

Despite the fact that several details of the legend underwent several transformations since the period of Homer until the Late Ancient era, it may be said that it fully maintained its function in the context of understanding of the European/Asian confrontation by the ancient community.

It is interesting to observe how and in which direction this main motive was developed at the primary stages of processing of the Legend of Argonauts, simultaneously with the gradual expansion of the concepts – Europe and Asia, which new artistic, political and ideological aspects it covered in this process.

The fact that Caucasus had long-standing and multilateral relations with the Aegean world as early as in the Mycenaean epoch is proved by many ancient sources. Part of sources suggests resettlement of separate tribes or persons from Aegeis to Colchis. According to Eumelus of Corinth, as already mentioned above, Aeëtes arrived to Colchis from Corinth;² Later, Phrixus of Orchomenos escaped to Colchis to avoid the potential threat from his stepmother; Herodotus tells us about the origin of Colchians – he considers Colchians to be the part of army of the Egyptian king, Sesostris (Her., 2, 103-106); According to some ancient sources, even Iberians and Albanians are descendants of Thessalians, partially – of Jason (Strab., IX. II. 12), while Caucasian Achaeans were Orchomenos colonists who resettled here after defeat of Troy; The Aegean wave of migrants is associated with the Caucasian Heniochs and even Chalybes, while Macrones are associated with Pelasgians in a number of sources.

The most significant part of the ancient sources is dedicated to the relations of the Aegean world with Colchis. According to these data, a strong association of Colchian tribes had already existed on the territory of the Western Georgia as early as in the Mycenaean epoch. Colchis and

² When Helios divided his land between his sons, Aloeus got the land in Arcadia, Aeetes got Ephyra (Corinthos). He voluntarily gave the power to the son of Hermes, Bunos and went to Colchis under condition that if he or one of his heirs (son or grandson) would return, he would regain the power (Eumelos F 3 PEG). As the last king of Corinthians died without a heir, they called Medea from Iolkos and gave her the power, on the basis of which Jason became the king of Corinthos (Eumelos F 5 PEG). Therefore, kidnap of Medea by Greeks means her return to the homeland to a certain extent. However, Medea did not stay in Corinthos for a long time. Secretly from Jason, Medea brought her child to the Temple of Hera, hoping that he would become immortal (Neophron and Euripides must have taken the motive of child-killing from here). After disappointment, Medea gave the power to Sisyphus and left Corinthos [towards Colchis], when Jason returned to Iolkos (Eumelos F 5 PEG).

famous Colchian heroes are included in the Greek mythology system and are used in the genealogical lists. The Greek heroes arrive to Colchis and on the contrary, Colchian heroes depart from Asia to various directions. In this regard, it can be said, that relations of Asia and Europe were reflected in the legend of the Argonauts in reliefic manner.

The Legend of Argonauts has a longstanding history of processing. Here I will focus my attention on the four main stages of processing of the legend (pre-Homeric, Pindar, Apollonius of Rhodes, Valerius Flaccus).

The core of Legend of Argonauts must have been processed in literary terms before Homer. Anyway, existence of the folkloric version of this legend in the Mycenaean epoch is hypothetical.³ Assumably, the informational core of Legend on Argonauts was epically processed entirely in the epoch of Homer.⁴ This is suggested by the data provided in the Homeric epos. Considering these data, Homer is familiarized with all three elements of the legend: road to the country of Aeëtes, things that happened in Aeaea, return section. Several facts certify that Homer had a clear idea of location of Aeaea in the Black Sea Region: 1. the term “Hellespont”, literally “Sea of Helle”, is known to Homer; 2. He is acquainted with the episode of Lemnos, which means that the Argonauts were moving in the direction of the Black Sea; 3. He places Cymeria near the Circe’s Island, and this island is not too far from Aeaea.

Pindar, who appears to be the systematician of this legend, conveys the stories of the Argonaut campaign in a rather laconic manner, starting from gathering the army by Jason and finished by return to Iolkos. Even though Pindar is interested in this legend in the context of foundation of the town Cyrene, it can be said that the author’s position regarding the issue interesting for us is still outlined: in his works, Medea represents an important figure who makes a prediction on establishment of Cyrene to the seventeenth generation. Medea is mentioned as the queen of Colchians and as the one having immortal lips: πᾶϊς ἀπέπνευσε ἄθανάτου στόματος, δέσποινα Κόλχων (*Pyth.*, IV, 11). Medea’s immortality is specially emphasized in Pindar’s works, which is clearly juxtaposed by half-divinity of Jason’s companions: ἡμιθέοισιν Ἰάσονος αἰχματῶ ναύταις (*Pyth.*, IV, 12). Medea is also mentioned as an alien virgin (ξείνας) known for her wizardry: πῦρ δὲ νιν οὐκ ἔδλοι παμφαρμάκου ξείνας ἐφετραῖς (*Pyth.*, IV, 233).

³ Dräger P., *Argo Pasimelusa: der Argonautenmythos in der griechischen und römischen Literatur* Serientitel: *Palingenesia* 43, Stuttgart 1993, 18.

⁴ Urushadze A., *Ancient Kolchis in the Myth of the Argonauts*, Tbilisi 1964, 15.

As mentioned above, confrontation of Europe and Asia stems from the Greco-Persian wars, in the late 6th century and the early 5th century. From this time onward these terms have been used to denominate the two parts of the universe and sometimes as generalized verbal symbols expressing the Greek and Oriental lifestyle.⁵

Naturally, the universe of Argonautics gradually covered more regions in line with geographic expansion. Accordingly, understanding of concepts: Europe/Asia was expanded. It is difficult to admit that the creators of the first epic works at the level of mythopoetic thinking seriously thought about how the Argonauts might have come from Colchis to Libya or Adriatics. Only strengthening of aspiration to usage of elements of rational origins, scientific thinking forced the writers to look at the route of the Argonaut expedition from the viewpoint of scientific logics to a certain extent. Accordingly, search for arguments which would allow to accommodate the conditional geography of the early Argonautics to the geographic notions of Hellenes of post-Homeric period began.

In parallel to geographic expansion in the Hellenic epoch, knowledge about these two continents is increased and specified. While Asia and Europe are the daughters of Atlant and Thetis in Hesiod's works (*Theog.*, 357-359), they are understood as continents in the works of Apollonius of Rhodes. He uses the term "Asia" in two forms: Ἀσις (I, 444; I, 777) and Ἀσίη (IV, 261-293).⁶ In the famous speech of Argos, Apollonius of Rhodes tells the story of settlement of Asia by Sesostris. As for the term Ἐὐρώπη, it is mentioned as the continent only in the speech of Argos and in the other three cases it is personified (I, 181; IV, 1643; III, 1179). In the works of Hellenistic epicist, despite the fact that confrontation of the sophisticated Hellenic world and the Barbarian Colchian world is rather prominently outlined, which is confirmed by the tradition of Colchians according to which they used to hang the deceased men wrapped in skin on trees, it can be said that the Hellenic/Barbarian confrontation is not felt in the works of Apollonius of Rhodes as strongly as in the works of Herodotus. Unlike Homer, the poet of Hellenistic epoch can not avoid the geographic reality. Reflection of the so-called scientific-etymological interest as widely as possible places him within the context of the Hellenistic literature.

⁵ Gordesiani R., Die Gegenüberstellung Europa Asien vom Altertum bis zur Gegenwart, Logos Abhandlungen, Tbilisi 1997.

⁶ Ἀσις form is found in the prophecy of Idmon (I, 444) and where Lycos tells the Argonauts about Heracles (II, 777); As for the form Ἀσίη, it is confirmed in the speech of Argos (IV, 261-293).

After Pompey's campaign in Iberia and Colchis in 65 AD, the Roman vision of the Caucasus and the Caucasian people significantly increased. The interest towards the Oriental countries and especially, the Eastern Black Sea coast was reflected in the works of Valerius Flaccus to a certain extent. The borders of Europe and Asia are particularly clearly felt in his works (*Arg.*, 4. 720). The fact that Flaccus demonstrates a great interest in topography of the geographic borders between the West and the East is clear when the Argonauts travel to Hellespont and reach the Black Sea. The crossroad of Europe and Asia is specially described. Attention is focused on several factors: this is a high-water region. Even the simple list is impressive: seven-arm delta of Istros, Tanais, Tyras, Yellow Hipanis, Novas, Meotis Bay. The water is less salty; everything freezes in winter due to terrible frosts.⁷ Here is the crossroad of Europe and Asia (*Arg.*, 4. 727-728).

It is absolutely clear that the poem can not be considered independently from the epoch of its creation, as a poetic work out of time and space. Rather, Flaccus a number of times suggests the realities and orientirs which are rather far from the century of heroes and the legendary epoch of Argonauts. Civil wars, eruption of Vesuvius leaves its trace on the poem of Flaccus. He enthusiastically describes the arrogance of tyrants, fear of subjects, pride of those doomed to death, the feeling of exemption from the pressure created as a result of death of the ruthless tyrant.

In this regard, the poem of Valerius Flaccus fundamentally differs from the poem of Apollonius of Rhodes in which there are no such references to his contemporary or preceding historic persons or events. Therefore, it can be said, that the poem of Valerius Flaccus is much more ideologized than the poem of Apollonius of Rhodes. Apart from the above factors, this is also expressed by the rather important role of religion in this poem and the Jupiter-oriented ideology. Accordingly, we can say that Valerius Flaccus absolutely consciously actualizes the traditional mythological information and in fact, puts the topic of Argonauts in the service of interests of the Roman Empire. As it appears the poem reflects the increased interest towards the Oriental countries and the Eastern Black Sea coast region which became particularly important after Mithridatic wars and Pompey's campaigns.

As for the Hellenic/Barbarian confrontation, we think that this confrontation is removed in the works of Valerius Flaccus as the tradition of wrapping the deceased in skin and hanging them on the tree, as

⁷ Cf. Strab., XI, 1, 5.

described by Apollonius is replaced by another form of burial here. We find data on the tradition of the northern neighbours of Colchians in the works of Flaccus, according to which, Yazigs severely executed the feeble old people. The exhausted elders were killed by the young descendants. In the poem, Flaccus specially emphasizes the circumstance that this custom is unacceptable for Colchians and they noticeably differ from their neighbours. The contrast between the lifestyle and customs of Colchians and the North Caucasians is clearly felt throughout the poem. Colchians are much more sophisticated than their Caucasian neighbours.

It is noteworthy that Hellenic/Barbarian confrontation is so irrelevant in his works, that he presents not Hellenes and Colchians, but the regions of Caucasus as the confronting parties. Flaccus inserts an absolutely new episode in the poem to convey the domestic Caucasian relations, including the confrontations. The Book 6 and significant part of the Book 7 of *The Argonautica* is dedicated to the battles between Colchians and Scythians. It is noteworthy that Hellenes appear to be allies of Colchians in this war.

To conclude, we can say, that attitude of the Hellenic tradition to the events beyond Hellas used to change essentially over the time: while sources of the geometric epoch and antiquity which are mainly characterized by mythopoetic thinking used to convey this or that event without a comment, quasi-historical information is gradually introduced in the archaic period together with mythopoetic one simultaneously with starting the Greek colonization, which does not go beyond the mythopoetic borders. Hellenic/Barbarian opposition is formed in the classical epoch and though interest towards purely historical and geographic information is increased in this epoch, but the universe is seen from the viewpoint of this opposition. The outer world is interesting so far as it is connected with Hellas. Starting from the Hellenic epoch, the Hellenic/Barbarian confrontation loses its importance together with formation of the World Empire of Alexander of Macedon and certainly, interest towards events and facts is increased in this large world. Information increasingly acquires scientific value even when it is conveyed by mythological covering. This tendency is essentially continued in the epoch of Roman dominance and together with purely historic information, additional figures and images created by imagination of writers occupy more place.⁸

Accordingly, if we observe the main stages of processing of the Legend of Argonauts, we will receive the following picture: if for the Greek, the

⁸ See the article of Gordeziani R., К восприятию Кавказа в античных источниках, Лектá, Tbilisi 2000, 262-267.

main confronting parties in this legend are Greeks and not Greeks as Asian Colchians, for the writer of the Hellenic epoch the quest of Argonauts is too close to the cosmopolitan perception of the world state formed by Alexander of Macedon in the Hellenic World, while the interests of Roman Empire and aspiration towards detalization of these interests in the region mentioned in his policy are clearly observed in the works of Valerius Flaccus.