

Ketevan Sikharulidze (Tbilisi)

AN UNKNOWN VERSION OF THE ARGONAUT LEGEND

The surviving Argonautic adventure is a version treated in literary terms. It is based on a folk plot, which must have certainly had versions in oral tradition. This is also attested by the fact that ancient authors sometimes provide different information about particular episodes and characters. These versions are not known, but I believe that one of them can be reconstructed with the help of the painting on a red-figured cylix kept in the Vatican Museum. It features a dragon emitting swallowed Jason. Although this scene is not attested in written records, it should be regarded not as the author's invention, but as the rendering of an episode known to him. Remarkably, painters and sculptors did not interfere with a mythic plot; they normally depicted an important scene of a mythic story, and for this purpose resorted to written records as well as folk patterns. Since some of the scenes could have failed to be reflected in literary works, they could have been cast into oblivion. So, we may often come across artifacts featuring a scene which may not be attested in the surviving mythopoetic tradition. The above-mentioned cylix belongs to such group of artifacts.

In general, the swallowing of a hero by a dragon is a very old and universal plot. It is connected with the semantic of dragon's image, which determined the mythological perception of the initiation ritual. Dragon is a complex image established in consequence of the development and merging of mythological images of snake and fish, as it units in itself their symbols and functions. The body of a dragon represents a combination of snake and big fish (whale/dolphin) (which is exactly rendered in its Georgian name) and has wings. These outer features point to the syncretic nature of dragon and to its links with the earth, water and heaven. Thus it incorporates the knowledge of all the three spheres. Therefore, along with its physical strength, dragon also embodies wisdom. All those who achieve communion with him acquire

special faculties. This motif was later reflected in the myths about snake-eaters, according to which the characters eating the flesh of a snake understood the language of living beings and unanimated things. Owing to such beliefs, snake/dragon was related to sorcery and initiation.

In order to be entitled to the status of a soldier and the king, a hero was to be distinguished by particular strength, omnipotence and an ability to foresee. He could receive these faculties from the dragon by going down into his depths (his bosom). The hero came out from the dragon's belly already transformed. This process was perceived as the communion with the deity through death, which acquired a new semantic of re-birth.

Later, the scope of the initiation ritual was expanded. Every boy, reaching the age of maturity and preparing to enter manhood, took part in it. The rituals were performed in small dragon-shaped structures.¹

Evidently, the swallowing and omitting of a hero by the dragon was an important episode of archaic mythology. It became the foundation for the initiation ritual, and the rudiments of it survived in the ethnographic and folk material of peoples all over the world. The same is believed to be implied in the dialogues between the king and the snake included in the Hittite royal rituals, according to which the king owed its throne and power to the snake of the sea (the dragon).²

This plot can be discerned in the story of Apollo taking control over the oracle at Delphi. Delphi at first belonged to Python created by Gaea the Earth (*πυθιόν* means the bottom of the earth; through this meaning the creature is associated with the primal forces and knowledge). Some sources mention it as Dolphin, to which the oracle owed its name. Apollo killed Python and attempted to seize the oracle, but enraged Earth confused the minds of the priests. They were unable to prophesy until Apollo redeemed his sin. He stayed in the nether world for nine years to achieve catharsis. Evidently, there he came into communion with the nature of Python and, in fact, replaced it. This was physically expressed from time to time. In one of Homeric hymns, Apollo appears as a huge whale (dolphin) before the Cretans on their way to Pylus.³

Later, the changes in mythological-religious beliefs resulted in inverted roles of the characters in the archetypal plot and the classical model of snake-fighter was developed. However, the appearance and accessories of some snake-fighting heroes retained archetypal traits. In Egyptian mythology, Ra, fighting against snake Apop, gets into the body of the beast and comes out

¹ В. Пропп, *Исторические корни волшебной сказки*, Ленинград 1946.

² В. Ардзимба, *Ритуалы и мифы древней Анатолии*, Москва 1982.

³ *Homeric Hymns*, Tbilisi 1982.

from his mouth. Marduk rushed into the body of Thiamath by force and cut his innards from the inside. Consequently, he is called 'Nibim' – 'he who entered' and 'who saw the middle'. In German epos, the body of Siegfried is covered with the reptile membrane, which makes him unbeatable. The hero fighting a dragon wears symbolically a dragon skin, which points that he has been in the beast's bosom.

Saint George also fights against the Dragon and on some icons; his armor resembles fish (dragon) scales. The metal pieces of his armor are arranged in the form of fish or dragon scales. Such ornaments were also made on the Caucasian bronze articles and are called *tevzipkhuri* – 'herringbone'. Such an armor was likewise characteristic of Roman war equipment, but its mythological semantic had long been forgotten.

The fragments of the archetypal plot are also preserved in the Caucasian folklore. The dragon lying in the mountain cavity reared a hero and gave him a chain mail shirt, which made him invulnerable. Besides, the hero's ring featured sacral signs – the sun, the moon and the cross – which probably indicated the hierarchical steps of mystical initiation. The powerful cult of the dragon in the Caucasus is attested not only by the ethnographical and folk material, but also by the abundance of megalithic figures, dragonoids.⁴ Some of them bear on their backs an imprinted image of a fleece, which in the Hattian-Hittite mythology had the function of wealth and protection of royal power. Therefore, a fleece hanging on a tree was specially guarded. Consequently, the dragon of the Argonaut legend guarding the Fleece is rooted in the tradition of the Caucasus and Asia Minor.

If we bear in mind the universal character of the archetypal plot and the Caucasian tradition, Jason could as well have been among the heroes swallowed by the Dragon as he went to Colchis in order to return home in the royal capacity.

I believe that in the unpreserved version of the myth (which in my opinion is one of the earliest) Jason does not seize the Fleece; he obtains it through initiation as the symbol of royal power.

⁴ K. Sikharulidze, Archetypal Plot of Snake-Fighters in Caucasian Folklore, Kartvelian Heritage, VI, Kutaisi 2002 (in Georgian).