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Aeëtes in Old Greek Sources

The legend of *Argonauts* has been familiar for the Greek literature since the Homer's time. It was mentioned by writers and poets of all genres – some in detail, some generally. It survives in various forms, among which details vary, but a main line is unchangeable – Jason's trip to Colchis and taking away of the Golden Fleece with the help of Medea.

Grounding on old Greek sources, I tried to focus my attention on one of the characters of the legend – Aeëtes – a legendary king of Colchis. To this end I have distinguished the following aspects: 1. Origin of Aeëtes; 2. Nature of Aeëtes; 3. The essence of the instructions given to Jason.

It is considered that Phrixus is the first Helenians sailor who set foot and settled on the land of Colchis. It is confirmed by Strabo in his *Geography* (2, 39).¹ It is obvious that Phrixus' arriving in Colchis with a golden ram and Aeëtes' kindly hosting and making related by marriage reflects those ancient contacts which existed between the Greek colonists and Colchian population – hereinafter formation of a new ethnic group by mixing of Helenians sailors with local inhabitants. This fact points to peaceful cohabitation that is likely to be between Helenians and Colchians on the coast of Colchis in a certain period.² It is noteworthy, that some versions of the legend of Argonauts clearly point to the kinship of Argonauts of Thessaly and Aeëtes.

¹ The *Geography* of Strabo with an English translation by H. L. Jones, London: William Heineman LTD, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons 1927, 32.

² Greek colonization in Colchis should have had another character. It should have been emporium – a trade factor that existed within the limits of the Colchian cities. See Lordkipanidze O., *Ancient World and Ancient Colchis*, Tbilisi 1966, 32, 63-64 (in Georgian); Mikeladze T., *Studies from the History of Colchis and Ancient Inhabitants of the South-Eastern Black Sea Region*, Tbilisi 1974, 97-98 (in Georgian).

If we consider the old Greek data, by origin Aeëtes is from Corinth. Medea's father Aeëtes and Aloeus are children of Helios. According to information of the poet of the 8th c. BC, an author of the poem *Corinthiaca*, Eumelos of Corinth, that has been preserved in Pindar's scholiums, "Helios divided the country he ruled and gave Arcadia to Aloeus, and Corinth - to Aeëtes. Aeëtes did not like his domain and gave to Bounos - Hermes' son and obliged him to protect it for his offspring. He himself went to Scythian Colchis, settled and became the king."³ It is confirmed by: Lykophron of Chalcis, Pausanias, scholiums of Euripides, Stefan of Byzantium, and Eudokia.⁴

Thus, the first traveler from Thessaly is not Phrixus but Aeëtes. Greek sources say nothing why Aeëtes has disapproved his kingdom Corinth. If we consider that the colonization movements of Helenians took place due to lack of soil, the population density or capturing the wealth of the Black Sea region countries,⁵ then it is clear that one of the reasons of abandonment of Corinth by Aeëtes might have been like this. The fact that Aeëtes reserved the right either himself or his posterity to return to Corinth, points to the close contacts existed between Greeks of Thessaly and the peoples who were residing in the east Black Sea Region countries. This is confirmed by Phrixus' arrival and settlement in Colchis.

How is Aeëtes referred in the Greek sources? In Homer's *Odyssey* (X, 37) Circe is an own sister of ferocious Aeëtes αὐτοκασιγνήτη ὀλοόφρονος Αἰήταο.⁶ According to Diodorus Siculus, Aeëtes was brutal - ὀμότητι. The reason for this was that he himself was brutal and besides it, under the remonstrating of his wife Hecate, he kept the tradition of killing of foreigners. In addition, Aeëtes was soothsaid that he would die when foreigners arrived in his country and took away the Golden Fleece. So he ordered to sacrifice all foreigners in order to widespread rumors about the brutality of Colchis inhabitants (Κόλχων ἀγριότητος) everywhere as a result of what not a single foreigner would not dare to set foot in his country" (*Historical Library*, IV, 46, 47).⁷ Thus, a reason of Aeëtes' brutality was that he was afraid of coming true of soothsaid and taking away the golden fleece by foreigners by what his would die. This fact was suppor-

³ Urushadze A., *Ancient Colchis in the Legend of Argonauts*, Tbilisi 1964, 22, 217 (in Georgian).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22, 122, 201, 239, 296, 482.

⁵ Mikeladze T., 94-95.

⁶ Homer, *Odyssey*, v. I, Books 1-12, translated by A. T. Murray, Revised by George E. Dimock, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press 1919.

⁷ Urushadze A., 389, 391.

ted by the tradition established by the Goddess Hecate – to sacrifice foreigners to her. It is clear that in old times the trip to Colchis of brave and courageous Helenians sailors was linked to great dangers. In addition, they had a vague understanding on customs and habits of the Colchis inhabitants.⁸ It is possible that human sacrificing might have existed in ancient Colchis. Maybe killing of an infant Apsirtus by Medea (according to one version) indicated to this. It is noteworthy, that according to one Svan tradition, in order to bring good luck of high yield, at the New Year night they used to bring an infant round a hearth and pierce with a wooden awl and the more a child cried the more the ritual participants enjoyed.⁹ Possibly, this ritual preserved a reflection of ancient version of the myth – killing of an infant Apsirtus by Hecate's priest Medea.

According to some sources, appearance of Aeëtes emphasizes his brutality. He is strong and tall with broad shoulders. Thus he is pictured according to Philostratus (IV): "You see Aeëtes on a four-horse chariot. He is gigantic and I think, armed to the teeth with giant's weapon, for a large size of a weapon inaccessible for an ordinary people, makes us think so. His face is full of brutality $\theta\upsilon\mu\omicron\upsilon\ \delta\grave{\epsilon}\ \tau\omicron\ \pi\rho\acute{o}\sigma\omega\pi\omicron\nu$ as if this very moment he will send out sparks from his eyes. In his right hand he holds a flambeau and threatens to Argo and its sailors to burn."¹⁰ According to Apollonius of Rhodes, Aeëtes is compared with Ares and Poseidon. In addition, he is powerful and has booming voice (II, 1205-1206).¹¹ The second reason of brutality of the Colchis king is the fact that he is surrounded by numerous unkindly disposed to him belligerent tribes to whom he fights permanently.¹² The king does not allow himself to slacken. He is always in battle-readiness. Maybe an epithet of Aeëtes and Minos $\omicron\lambda\omicron\omicron\phi\rho\omega\nu$ still does not mean either 'horrible' or 'brutal' but indicates to wisdom and means 'very rational'.¹³ It is noteworthy that in order to conceive completely Aeëtes, we should not forget that he is the king of the country where foreign guests are met respectfully, with hospitality generously (*Argonautica*, III, 270-300), i. e. he is the hospitable king, but he became brutal for Argonauts as he does not concede the gold fleece to the

⁸ Tsereteli A., *Greece*, I, Tbilisi 1966, 141 (in Georgian).

⁹ Surguladze I., *Towards the History of Agrarian Traditions and Concepts in Georgia*, Georgian Ethnographic Materials, XX, Tbilisi 1978, 87.

¹⁰ Urushadze A., 452-453.

¹¹ Apollonii Rhodii, *Argonautica*, recognovit brevique adnotatione critica instruxit Hermann Fränkel, Oxford, Classical Texts, MCMLXI.

¹² *Ibid.*, III, 1205.

¹³ Вейсман А., *Греческо-русский словарь*, Москва 1991.

Helenians easily, that is his found. He does not possibility to enfeeble the richest and most powerful country of Colchis where brooks of wine, milk, fragrant oil and water are coming burbling (*Argonautica*, II, 220), the kingdom that is created by him and strengthening of which was contributed by Phrixus' arrival with a golden ram. Certainly, neither Phrixus' arrival in Colchis and his relating by marriage was accidental. It is a reflection of peaceful cohabitation of Greeks and local inhabitants on the territory of Colchis; though a colonization process was not always painless. Unquestionably, there were struggles between them, as well.¹⁴ It is obvious that thanks to Greek colonists, Colchis strengthened economically; arriving of Phrixus gave a new strength to the kingdom founded by Aeëtes. Due to it Argonauts claimed that they had right to demand a share from the innumerable wealth that was in Colchis. From this a new stage of relation, confrontation between Helenians and Colchians begins. A reason of foreign-hating of Aeëtes is the fact that it was claimed valuable treasure, Golden Fleece that is not a symbol not only of wealth, but according to Apollonius of Rhodes, it is associated with royal power and glory. Aeëtes is sure that Helenians sailors want to deprive him of royal scepter and honor (III, 372). Aeëtes protects the right, name and glory of his kingdom and due to it he is irritated by the claims of Argonauts who have come with impudent and treacherous intent (III, 375-376). Just due to it he is brutal (ἀπηνής) Argonauts know this. They have a little chance that the Colchian king will concede without fighting the Golden Fleece which they call σφέτερον κτήρας. It is paradox but the sons of Phrixus secretly from mother, according to father's will, are intending a trip to Orchomen to bring father's wealth in Colchis. Aeëtes does not approve this trip but he does not prevent, for he thinks that the fear of losing the kingdom Colchis will be realized by the sons of Phrixus (III, 601-602). And indeed, they help Argonauts to obtain the fleece (II, 1093-1094). The sons of Phrixus think that if Aeëtes willingly concedes the fleece to Argonauts, it will be a gift for them - δώτινης (III, 352). Aeëtes has a reason of doubt and distrust in foreigners. Argonauts have long discussed if the king does not concede them the fleece, how they can obtain it. They are not convinced either of their righteousness or victory. Aeëtes does not directly refuse, for they are his grandchildren's relatives - Cretheus - an offspring of who is Jason and Athamas and father of Phrixus, are brothers

¹⁴ Lomouri N., *Greek Colonization of Colchian Coastal Region*, Tbilisi 1962, 55 (in Georgian).

(III, 340-366). The king lays down the conditions: if they fulfill his tasks, only then he will give them the fleece, for he cannot give it a weak one: "May not be a brave man concedes something to weak one" (III, 437-438). Thus he proves his demands: the king is sure that Argonauts won't be able to fulfill these tasks, they won't be able to subdue the fire-thrower bulls with cooper hooves, to plough with their help, to defeat the warriors arisen from dragon's teeth and to make a vigilant dragon fall asleep. Why cannot long-danger experienced brave Argonauts fulfill the tasks given by Aeëtes? The very simple reason is that they do not know those rules without which it is impossible to fulfill the difficult tasks given by Aeëtes. The first task is of two parts: to subdue the fire-thrower bulls with cooper hooves indisputable implies well-skilling in metallurgy; also straight and deep ploughed land¹⁵ demands skilling in agricultural activities. The fact that these two fields were developed in ancient Colchis state is confirmed by archeological data, as well.¹⁶ Jason manages to fulfill the tasks with the help of Medea. Apollonius of Rhodes directly links Jason's fighting against fire-thrower bulls to a blacksmith's job (III, 1285-1301). A leader of Argonauts covers him with a shield and rescues him from the fire of bulls, and then he strokes the horns with hands and beats at cooper hooves and side strongly with a spear. It is clear that this detail reminds the processing of metal softened in a fire. The second task - fighting against the armed warriors arisen from dragon's teeth, is the most difficult one. It is clear, that this episode of the legend reflects defensive fighting of Colchians from permanent aggression and attacks of neighbor tribes. Jason had to know the nature of these peoples, fighting rules by what Aeëtes managed to defense their attacks. By Medea's persuasion, Jason throws a large stone secretly among warriors, covers himself with a shield and waits until enraged warriors attack and kill each other (III, 1365-1375). The detail of throwing of stones among warriors by Jason secretly - βάλλον ἄφ'αίης λίθους - is mentioned by Apollodorus in *Library* (I, 9).

It should be assumed that throwing of a large rock (stones) secretly among warriors symbolically means to make enmity between neighbor tribes of Colchians and to use this method during attacking them. As

¹⁵ Pindar, *Olympian Odes, Pythian Odes, I*, translated by William H. Race, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press 1997.

¹⁶ "The basis of the Colchis Kingdom was agriculture and metallurgy. The first was based on great agricultural traditions, in particular, on cultivation of endemic and centuries-old approved species of cereal crops and irrigation and drainage system, the second - also on metallurgical tradition and a rich base of ore-bearing." - Mikeladze T., 160.

Aeëtes says, for him it is his daily activity and calls it - the testing of courageousness and strength in dangerous affairs (III, 407). Lost-in-thought Jason addresses Aeëtes: "You have bound me by law" (μᾶλα τοί με δίκη περιπολλὸν ἔργεις (III, 427)). It is considered that this episode in the text is vague.¹⁷ I believe that δίκη *habit* means. Without considering the habits and customs existing in Colchis, Jason understands that he can do nothing, he will be unable to defeat armed warriors without knowing the nature, habits of neighbor tribes of Colchis and rules of fighting against them.

As regards taking away the fleece from a dragon, Jason manages it again with the help of Medea. After making a dragon to fall asleep, it is not difficult to remove the fleece from an oak tree. Snatching of the fleece - strength of the Colchis kingdom, was possible when, with the help of Hecate, Aeëtes's daughter made a dragon to drowse. It can be symbolically explained as weakening of vigilance of Colchians. Aeëtes took all precautions: if Jason would be able to subdue the bulls and to plough, he would be unable to rescue himself from armed warriors and if a miracle happened and he might have survived, he would not be able to escape from an eye-unclosed dragon. Just due to it Aeëtes was ὀλοόφρων, *brutal* or if the term is understood otherwise, he was very *wise*. If Aeëtes' feature could have been only brutality he would have immediately killed the golden-fleece-wisher Helenians sailors as he intended firstly and would not have offered hospitality. Tradition of hospitality was still strong for the king that appeared to be fatal for him. The most important was the weakening of vigilance of Colchians which Argonauts could manage with the help of Medea. A dragon was a guard of Colchian sacredness, i. e. a security guarantee of the county. Only Medea, who was unsuspected for Aeëtes, can neutralize it. A major mistake of Aeëtes was the fact that he was not looking for danger there where it was necessary to.

Thus, according to ancient Greek sources Aeëtes is represented as a symbol of power of the Colchis kingdom: proud, haughty, and powerful. He is hospitable and at the same time brutal. It should be emphasized that these two features are not mutually exclusive. He can distinguish an enemy from a friend. He meets any guest with respectfully, but he is pitiless towards foreigners who come with bad intent.

¹⁷ Fränkel H., *Noten zu den Argonautika des Apollonio*, München MCMLXVIII, 352-353.