Phasis 13-14, 2010-2011

Manana Pkhakadze, Raul Chagunava (Tbilisi)

MEDEA AND *THE DESCRIPTION OF MEGRELIA* BY ARCANGELO LAMBERTI

Interesting notes about Medea, daughter of Colchian King Aeëtes, can be found in one of the most important cycles in Greek mythology – the Argonauts. Medea and her actions attract a lot of attention in the myths, but there is little information about Colchis. The shortcoming was corrected to a certain extent only in the 17th century by Italian author Arcangelo Lamberti, who published a book entitled *The Description of Megrelia* in Naples in 1654 after 19 years of his missionary activities in Megrelia.[1] It was the first fundamental work on Colchis or Megrelia. We will consider it in connection with Greek myths below.

Numerous versions found in Greek and Latin sources present conflicting information about Medea. They depict the daughter of the Colchian king in different manner.[2] Despite such varying approaches, the professional activities and qualification of Medea raise no doubts. In this regard, she is presented as a reasonable, knowledgeable, and creative person, whom Greek authors viewed at the origins of cosmetics and pharmacy. Despite their legendary content, all myths reflect certain elements of reality and it is not ruled out that this kind of legends comprise real information reflecting Medea's professional activities and the cosmetic and pharmaceutical practices in ancient Colchis in general.

---

1 Don Arcangelo Lamberti, *The Description of Megrelia,* Tbilisi 1991 *(in Georgian).*

2 Parmeniscus (Schol. Euripid., *Med.*, 9), Pausanias (II, 3, 6-11), and Aelianus (*Ποικίλη ἱστορία*, V, 21) believed that Medea did not kill her children. However, Euripides presented her as the killer of the children, which has had a stronger impact on the literature in the future.

From ancient times, Greek myths link Medea to the origins of cosmetics. This becomes obvious from the following note by Greek author Palaephatus II, who lived in the 6th-4th centuries BC: "Medea was the first to discover a flower that could change white hair to black".[3] Clement of Alexandria (2nd-3rd centuries) confirms the information: "Medea was the first to discover hair dye".[4]

The sources make it clear that together with dying hair, she also knew the art of making hair grey. Diodorus of Sicily wrote in this connection: "Medea made her hair grey using certain means".[5] In this case, "certain means" presumably implies using a chemical method for making hair colourless. To be more specific, this chemical method may be based on the use of a weak sulphuric acid (H_2SO_3), which is obtained from the interaction between sulphur gas (SO_2) and water. It is known that this weak acid either dissolves colouring matters or produces a colourless admixture interacting with brown hair pigment melanin.

This method was known in Georgia from ancient times. As a joke, fellow drinkers at a feast would use it to make their sleeping friend's beard colourless. This practice was described in a well-known book by a Muslim chemist from Tbilisi, Hubaysh al-Tiflisi (died in 1230). The book is entitled *Description of Trades* and has a chapter devoted to this method.[6]

As a priestess, Medea also had procedures for turning her body white. Roman author Dracontius of the 5th century wrote almost unequivocally that she used precisely weak sulphuric acid for this purpose: "The Colchian priestess sprayed water on herself and wafted pure sulphur and torches, cleaning her body".[7] Sulphur and torches are mentioned together, which implies burning sulphur, and wafting implies interaction between sulphur gas and the body sprayed with water, which leads to the emergence of weak sulphuric acid. The latter interacts with skin melanin, creating a colourless compound, which makes melanin-coloured skin turn white.

---

[3] Μήδεια πρώτη τοιοῦτον ἄνθος εὗρε δυνάμενον καὶ τὰς λευκὰς τρίχας ποιῆσαι μελαίνας, XLIII, Mythographi Graeci III, 2, Palephatus, *Περὶ ἀπίστων*, ed. N. Festa, Lipsiae 1902.

[4] Μήδεια τε ἡ Αἰήτου ἡ Κολχὶ πρώτη βαφὴν τριχων ἐπενόησεν, I, XVI, 76. Clemens Alexandrinus, ed. O. Stahlin, L. Fruchtel, U. Treu, vol. 2, Berlin 1960.

[5] Εαυτῆς δὲ τὰς μὲν τρίχας δύναμεσί τισι χρίσασαν ποιῆσαι πολιάς, 51, Diodori *Bibliotheca historica*, IV-V, rec. C. Th. Fisher, 1904-1906.

[6] Абу-Л-Фадл Хубаиш-Тифлиси, *Описание ремесел*, Москва 1976, 138.

[7] Colchis se spargit aquis, et sulphure puro cum taedis fumans purgabat membra sacerdos, Medea, 391-392, Blossius Aemilius Dracontius, ed. F. Vollmer, 1905.

Medea was also believed to be the inventor of hot baths. Information about this can be found in Greek literature from ancient times. Simonides of Ceos (556-467/6 BC) figuratively uses the word "boil", depicting Medea's role in introducing hot baths in the following manner: "Medea made Jason young again by boiling him".[8] Euripides (485/80-406) repeated this information by Simonides, adding for his part about Jason's father Aeson that Medea "immediately transformed Aeson into a handsome young man, removing his old age through her smart mind and numerous herbs boiled in golden cauldrons".[9]

The quoted passage contains no precise indication to what made the old man become young again – herbs boiled in cauldrons or the use of cauldrons as baths. The author seems to imply the latter, as commentators of Euripides also understood the passage in this manner. Eudocia (11th century) noted specially that "Medea excelled all medicine makers", which gave rise to the myth that she "boiled" old people, "turning them young". The female author wrote that reality was different: she returned youthful appearance to old people's grey hair with dye made of herbs. The use of hot baths served the same purpose. Eudocia explained that the baths even led to certain misunderstandings. "Medea also invented hot baths, but she would not let those willing to take a bath for everyone to see, because she did not want any healers to learn. The action was called boiling. Of course, hot baths made people feel more relieved and healthy. It was because of this that those, who saw cauldrons, firewood and fire prepared for a bath, thought that people were boiled".[10] Given the quoted explanation by Eudocia, there is no doubt that "boiling" implied taking a hot bath. The author's opinion on turning people younger through the use of cosmetics is also interesting. She noted that this was possible thanks to a number of actions, in particular the dying of hair and hot baths.

---

[8] Φασὶν ὡς ἡ Μήδεια ἀψήσασα τό Ἰάσονα νέον ποιήσειε, fr. 376, Poaetae Melici Graeci, ed. D. L. Page, Oxford 1962.

[9] Ἀιπίκα δ' Αἴσονα Θῆκε φίλον κόρον ἡβώοντα γῆρας ἀποξύσασ' εί δυίησι πραπίδεσσι φάρμακα πόλλ' ἕψουσ' ἐπὶ χρισείοισι λέβησιν, ΥΠΟΘΕΣΙΣ ΜΗΔΕΙΑΣ, Schol. Eur., *Med.*, 167; Euripidis fabulae, vol. I-II, ed. J. Diggle, Oxford 1981-1994.

[10] Πυρίαν οὖν πρώτη Μήδεια ἐξεῦρεν, ἐπυρία δὲ τοὺς βουλομένος οὐκ ἐν τῷ προφανεῖ, ἵνα μὴ τις μάϑῃ τῶν ἰατρῶν. ὄνομα δὲ ἦν τῷ πράγματι παρέψησις. οἱ γοῦν ἄνϑροποι ταῖς πυριάσεσιν ἐγίνοντο κουφότεροι καὶ ὑγιεινότεροι, ἐκ δὴ τούτοι ὀρῶντες τὴν παρασκευήν, λέβητας καὶ ξύλα καὶ πῦρ, ἐνόμισαν, ὡς ἕψει τοὺς ἀνϑρώπους, fr. 647, Eudociae Augustae Violarium. Recensuit et emendabat, fontium testimonia subscripsit Ioannes Flach. Praefatio Villoisoni, Lipsiae 1880.

Old Greek authors linked not only cosmetics, but also the origins of pharmacy to Medea. Poet Pindar, who lived in the 6th-5th century BC, described Medea as a "connoisseur of all medicines" (παμφάρμακου), describing how she "mixed an ointment of oil and herbs able to ease strong headache".[11] According to Diodorus of Sicily (1st century BC), Medea "learned the nature of all medicines from her mother and sister"[12] and her skills became evident, when she cured wounded fighters "with roots and some herbs in just a few days".[13]

Medea was so renowned in pharmacy that according to Dionysius of Byzantium (1st-2nd centuries), a bay was called "Pharmacy" to mark her pharmaceutical activities.[14] Medea retained the name of a skilful pharmacist also in the Greek (Byzantine) literature of the later period. Female author Eudocia of the 11th century referred to her as a "skilful maker of medicines", noting that "Medea excelled all medicine makers".[15]

It was probably due to Medea's popularity in Greek mythology that she was believed to have introduced a lot of novelties in practice. The so-called highly inflammable "Colchian medicine" was regarded as one of such novelties. According to Nicander (2nd century BC), Colchians called this medicine "oil" (νάμφαν). It is now difficult to clarify whether the word had the same meaning as now at that time, but the fact that this "Colchian medicine" was as inflammable as oil becomes clear from the explanations of Nicander: "If they knead their body or drench the clothes they wear or something else with it and stand under the sun, they will be destroyed like being engulfed by fire".[16]

---

[11] Σὺν δ' ἐλαίῳ φαρμακώσαις' ἀντίτομα στερεᾶν ὀδῦναν δῶκε χρίεσθαι, *ΠΙΘΙΟΝΙΚΑΙ* IV, 203-250, Pindari Carmina aim Fragmentis, ed. Bruno Snell, H. Maehler, Pars prior, *Epinicia,* Pars II, Leipzig1964.

[12] Μαθεῖν παρά τε τῆς μητρὸς καὶ τῆς ἀδελφῆς ἁπάσας τὰς τῶν φαρμάκων δυνάμεις, IV, 46, 1, Diodori bibliotheca historica, ed. F. Vogel, K. T. Fisher, vol.1-5, Leipzig 1888-1906.

[13] Ὑπὸ τῆς Μηδείας ἐν ὀλίγαις ἡμέραις ῥίζαις καὶ βοτάνεις, IV, 48, 5, Diodori *bibliotheca historica*, ed. F. Vogel, K. T. Fisher, vol. 1-5, Leipzig 1888-1906.

[14] Inde statim succedit sinus nuncupatus Pharmacias a Medea Colchide, quae in hoc loco reposuit pharmacoru arculas, 68, ΔΙΟΝΙΣΙΟΣ ΒΥΖΑΝΤΙΟΣ, *ΑΝΑΠΑΟΥΣ ΒΟΣΠΟΡΟ* (1, 370-371).

[15] Πάντας τοὺς φαρμακουργοὺς ὑπερηκόντισεν ἡ Μήδεια, fr. 647, Eudociae Augustae Violarium. Recensuit et emendabat, fontium testimonia subscripsit IOannes Flach. Praefatio Villoisoni, Lipsiae 1880.

[16] Ὑπὸ οἱ χριόμενοι ἢ ἱμάτιον ἀληλιμμένον ὑπ' ἀυτοῦ φοροῦντες ἢ ἄλλο τι ἐὰν ἔναντι ἡλίου στῶσιν, ὡς ὑπὸ πυρὸς κατεσθίονται δαπανώμενοι, 249, Nicandrea, rec. et em. O. Schneider, Leipzig 1856.

In the opinion of Plutarch (1st-2nd century), the crown and veil, which Medea sent to Glaucus according to the tragedy *Medea* by Euripides (485-406 BC), was probably anointed with this oil – or, as Plutarch termed it, "Medea's poison".[17] According to the tragic playwright, "when Glaucus put them on, he died".[18] Plutarch writes that Glaucus died because of the self-inflammation of oil, providing the following explanation: "Neither the things themselves nor the fire could kindle of their own accord: they imperceptibly attracted and caught a flame which happened to be brought near them".[19] The use of oil by Medea was also discussed in Greek literature of later periods. One of such examples is Byzantine lexicographer Souidas (10th-11th century), who said that "Greeks call oil Medea's oil".[20]

Medea is universally regarded as a magician in Greek mythology. In this regard it is interesting what one Roman scholiast wrote about the daughter of the Colchian king: "Medea, who Greek stories say was the supreme magician".[21] However, if we look into the information about her in sources, we will find that this attitude is due to her pharmaceutical activities. Medea was believed to be the inventor of many medicines, which, as authors believed, was characteristic only of people with magician's skills. It is indeed noteworthy that sources provide information not only about a big number of medicines made by Medea, but also the diversity of their use. Pindar, Euripides, Apollonius of Rhodes, Diodorus of Sicily and other authors mention therapeutic medicines that relieve pain,[22] heal wounds,[23] ease mental problems,[24] have a sedative effect,[25]

---

17 Plutarchi, *Vitae Parallelae*, recogn. Gl. Lindskog et K. Ziegler, Leipzig 1968, vol. 2, 2, *ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΣ*, XXXV.

18 Οἷς ἐκείνη χρησαμένη διαφθείρεται, *ΥΠΟΘΕΣΙΣ ΜΗΔΕΙΑΣ*, Euripidis fabulae, vol. I-II, ed. J. Diggle, Oxford 1981-1994.

19 Οὐ γὰρ ἐξ αὐῶν ἐκείνων οὐδὲ ἀπ' αὐτομάτου λάμψαι το πῦρ, ἀλλὰ φλογὸς ἐγγύ θεν παρατεθείσης οξεῖαν ὁλκὴν καὶ χυναφὴν ἄδηλον αἰσθήσει γενέσθαι, XXXV, Plutarchi, *Vitae Parallelae*, iterum recogn. C. Sintensis, Lipsiae I-1873, II-1874.

20 Ὅτι οἱ Ἕλληνες τὴν νάφθαν καλοῦσι Μηδείας ἔλαιον, Suidae Lexicon, ed. Ada Adler, I-V, Lipsiae 1928-1938.

21 Quam summam veneficam fuisse historiae Graecorum tradunt, *Od.,* II, 13, 8, Horatii Scholiaste Pomponius Porphyrio commentum in Horatium Flaccum, ed. Holder, Insbruck 1894.

22 *ΠΙΘΙΟΝΙΚΑΙ*, IV, 203-250**,** Pindari Carmina aim Fragmentis, ed. Bruno Snell, H. Maehler, Pars prior, *Epinicia,* Pars II, Leipzig 1964.

23 IV, 48, 5, Diodori *bibliotheca historica*, ed. F. Vogel, K. T. Fisher, vol. 1-5, Leipzig 1888-1906.

24 Diodori, *Biblioptheca historica* IV-V, rec. Curt Theod, Fisher, 1904-1906, IV, 55.

25 *Apollodori bibliotheca*, ed. R. Wagner, Leipzig 1894, I, 9, 23.

heal burns,[26] and so forth. They also mention drugs dangerous for humans and able to poison them,[27] to cause stench,[28] to ignite,[29] and so forth.

Medea was also believed to have invented special boxes for keeping medicines. Georgian historians of medicine think that this can be regarded as "an indication of the widespread nature of medical practice and medicine-making". Drawing this conclusion, they refer to Apollonius of Rhodes (295-215), who wrote: "Medea leaped to her feet and rushed to a casket wherein lay many drugs, some for healing and others for killing".[30] It should also be mentioned that Dionysius of Byzantium mentions Medea's casket in connection of the aforementioned bay called "Pharmacy". Here is the short passage in full: "The Bay of Pharmacy is called so after Medea of Colchis, who left caskets with curative drugs in this place".[31] It is obvious that caskets are used here for boxes, which means that Medea used them not only for keeping drugs, but also for transporting them and they were a kind of portative pharmacy.

The work by Arcangelo Lamberti, which we mentioned at the beginning, is somewhat reminiscent of Greek myths. It makes clear in a number of cases that real things were also depicted in myths. One of the clear examples is the author's opinion on the Golden Fleece, which is mentioned in myths in connection with Medea. Lamberti regards the Golden Fleece as real and this becomes clear, when he writes that "there was a lot of gold and silver in these countries previously and this is confirmed by the legend of the Golden Fleece". Lamberti knew no concrete facts of much gold and silver found in Megrelia, but he wrote that this had an explanation too. He explained in this connection: "Although it is believed that there are both gold and silver ores high in the Caucasus mountains, they are concealing this from fear of Turks. Megrelians are afraid that Turks may decide to conquer Colchis out of greed for gold".[32]

---

[26] Ibid.

[27] ΥΠΟΘΕΣΙΣ ΜΗΔΕΙΑΣ, Schol. Eur. *Med.*, 167, Euripidis fabulae, vol. I-II, ed. J. Diggle, Oxford 1981-1994; Diodori *bibliotheca historica*, ed. F. Vogel, K. T. Fisher, vol. 1-5, Leipzig 1888-1906, IV, 48, 3.

[28] Die Uberlieferung der Scholien zu Apollonios von Rhodos von Dr. Carl Wendel, Berlin 1932, I, 615.

[29] ΣΧΟΛΙΑ ΕΙΣ ΝΙΚΑΝΔΡΟΝ ΕΙΣ ΑΛΕΞΙΦΑΡΜΑΚΑ, Nicandrea, rec. et em. O. Schneider, Leipzig 1856, 249.

[30] Saakashvili M., Gelashvili A., History of Georgian Medicine, Tbilisi 1956 *(in Georgian)*.

[31] Inde statim succedit sinus nuncupatus Pharmacias a Medea Colchide, quae in hoc loco reposuit pharmacorum arculas, ΔΙΟΝΥΣΙΟΣ ΒΥΖΑΝΤΙΟΣ, ΑΝΑΠΛΟΥΣ ΒΟΣΠΟΡΟΥ, ΓΤΜ, vol. 2, Paris 1861, 68.

[32] Don Arcangelo Lamberti, 1991, 29.

Gold and silver "high in the Caucasus mountains" implies small portions of gold found in many rivers of Svaneti. Not only Strabo and other authors, but also modern ethnographic and archaeological studies confirm this.[33] Although Lamberti is inaccurate identifying river gold with gold ore, his explanation of the essence of the Golden Fleece is correct. He is also quite right explaining the reasons for keeping secret the locations where gold could be discovered. That was dictated by the need of ensuring the country's security.

Medea's particular talent for pharmacy becomes somehow understandable taking into account the fact that almost the whole population of Megrelia was involved in similar activities many centuries later. Here is Lamberti's description: "What all of the local people want most is to learn how to make a drug. Therefore, they are trying to make a doctor prepare a medicine before their eyes. When they learn how to make a medicine, they immediately teach everyone around them. Those, who are more curious, have already learnt how to make a lot of medicines and written it down in their own language in a book called *Karabadini*".[34] Some expressions in the passage ("all of the local people", "teach everyone around them", "have already learnt how to make a lot of medicines") unambiguously point to the fact that pharmaceutical activities were effectively common among the population of Megrelia in the 17th century.

It is noteworthy that myths mostly featured women (Medea, Circe, Hecate) as being involved in pharmacy and treatment in ancient Colchis, and Lamberti wrote that it was women who were mostly active in these fields in Megrelia of the 17th century too. The following passage by the Italian author is quite eloquent in this regard: "There are women in Megrelia, who take delight in taking care of sick people. As soon as someone falls ill, one of these women comes and starts nursing the person, establishing an order for taking food and preparing several medicines. They lavishly use herbs to make medicines both for internal and external use".[35] The cited fragment is noteworthy for the extraordinary attention and care sick people received from Megrelian women free of charge and at their own initiative. Lamberti also wrote that women were quite skilful in pharmacy, which enabled these voluntary healers to use medicines they made of "numerous" herbs.

---

[33] Лордкипанидзе О., Наследие древней Грузии, Тбилиси 1989; Bochorishvili L., Goldsmithery in Svaneti, Georgian Academy of Sciences, VII, 5, 1946 *(in Georgian)*.

[34] Don Arcangelo Lamberti, 91.

[35] Ibid., 31.

There is no doubt that Lamberti's remarks on such intensive pharmaceutical activities of the local people are very unusual, as written sources mention no other region or country, where folk pharmacy was at such a level. Correspondingly, it is not unexpected that the remote ancestor of these medicine-makers – Medea – was regarded in Greek myths as a skilful pharmacist and pioneer in the field.

It is also worth mentioning that Lamberti provides other pieces of information that point to the uninterrupted tradition of Medea's creative legacy. We discussed above two Greek sources that said that Medea used caskets for drugs. Based on information by Apollonius of Rhodes, Georgian historians of medicine assume that Medea's mother and sister (Hecate and Circe) also had caskets like those of Medea. Given this, they conclude: "We assume that special caskets for medicines were used not only in one case".[36]

Lamberti showed convincingly that the use of caskets for drugs was not indeed confined to isolated cases. The information he provided makes it clear that the use of caskets for medicines introduced by Medea became a tradition in the following centuries and continued even to the 17th century. The Italian author mentioned caskets for drugs for the first time in connection with the pharmaceutical activities of the ruler of Megrelia Levan II Dadiani (1611-1657). He wrote that Prince Levan, whose pharmaceutical skills were at a professional level, "has studied many herbs and bulbs of plants used for seasoning and treatment and can make a lot of ointments and medicines for internal use. He has caskets full of such medicines and he is carrying them wherever he goes, giving them to everyone, who needs them".[37]

The quoted fragment mentions caskets for medicines, which, as Greek authors wrote, were introduced by Levan Dadiani's remote ancestor Medea. Given the fact that Prince Levan visited about 70 of his palaces throughout his principality at least for a few days every year,[38] it follows that he carried caskets with drugs all over Megrelia every year, which points to the fact that the aforementioned caskets were typical portable pharmacies. The need for medicines kept in these caskets was high among the population everywhere, which becomes clear from the following passage from Lamberti's work: "They asked for these medicines in such a

[36] Saakashvili M., Gelashvili A., 32.
[37] Don Arcangelo Lamberti, 29.
[38] Don Giuseppe Giudice di Milano, 55, 86.

manner that one would think Galena herself was to distribute them".[39] Taking this into account, it is difficult to point to any other portable pharmacy, which would be used to serve people on such a vast territory and in such an intensive manner.

Other pieces of information provided by Lamberti make it clear that these were not isolated cases of the use of the prince's portable pharmacy in the shape of caskets in Megrelia. He wrote that other Megrelian noblemen also had such caskets: "Every nobleman in Odishi [Megrelia] has a kind of casket, in which they keep various pills, drinks, and rose water".[40] Correspondingly, it is out of question that these were isolated cases. Given the fact that the number of noblemen in Megrelia reached 150 at that time,[41] it will become clear that the overall number of caskets for medicines was much higher than mentioned.

Against the background of the information provided by Apollonius of Rhodes and Dionysius of Byzantium, data provided by Arcangelo Lamberti confirm that Euhemerists were right when they argued that there are grains of truth in every myth or legend. The practice of using caskets for medicines was widespread in Megrelia of the 17th century, which enables to assume that the same was also practiced in ancient Colchis.

Given the materials considered above, we can conclude that *The Description of Megrelia* by Arcangelo Lamberti is yet another written source, which makes information on Medea's pharmaceutical activities found in old Greek myths seem quite realistic in some cases. His data make it clear that effectively the entire population of Megrelia of the 17th century had a special approach to pharmaceutical activities, which shows that the centuries old tradition in this field rooted in ancient Colchis was viable. It seems realistic that the skilled "medicine-maker", whom Greek myths of archaic period depicted as the pioneer of pharmacy, was from that country. It should also be stressed that caskets for medicines introduced by Medea were widely used many centuries later – in Colchis of Lamberti's times.

---

39 Don Arcangelo Lamberti, 29.
40 Ibid., 91.
41 Don Giuseppe Giudice di Milano, 85.