

Ketevan Nadareishvili (Tbilisi)

### THE MYTH OF APSYRTOS IN THE ANCIENT SOURCES

It is widely acknowledged, that the numerous episodes of Medea's mythic biography present such different stories about Medea's persona, that it seems quite difficult to find the unifying theme tying these stories together. And what is more, we find no unity within a single episode of her mythic life, especially when one is dealing with the big number of narratives from different time periods.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most enthusiastically elaborated episodes by ancient authors of Medea's mythic history is the story of Apsyrtos' murder presenting a big number of different variant versions. However, Apsyrtos's death as J. Bremmer had noticed, received little attention from classical scholars. The scientists analyzing this myth mainly attempted to find out why was Apsyrtos murdered – how did his murder help the Argonauts to escape<sup>2</sup>, or they tried to elucidate the reason, why it was a sister (Medea), who murdered a brother (Apsyrtos) thus trying to study the murder's significance from the point of brother/sister relationship.<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding the importance of this problem in the present essay we aim at studying the other aspect of the issue. In the paper we aim to investigate the elaboration and the development of Apsyrtos' myth in the

---

<sup>1</sup> For very important and multidimensional investigation of Medea see *Medea, Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy and Art*, ed. by Claus J. J. and Johnston S. L., Princeton 1997.

<sup>2</sup> For example Versnel suggested that the dismemberment of Apsyrtos served as a sacrifice to avert danger at sea. Versnel H. S., *Note on the Maschalismos of Apsyrtos, Mnemosyne*, 26, 1973, 62-63. For critical commentary on Versnel see Ginzburg C., *Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, London 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Bremmer J. N., *Why Did Medea Kill Her Brother Apsyrtus in: Medea*, 1997, 83-100.

ancient sources through detailed analyze of those components of the myth, which we considered to be main ones: a) the specifics of the murder; b) the performer of the murder; c) the place of the murder. Our study, we hope, will elucidate the role Medea played in Apsyrtos' murder as well as throw the light on different interpretations of this story in the sources of the various time periods. Besides, this study serves to another goal also. The analyze of various accounts concerning the locale of Apsyrtos' murder and the settling of the Colchians in Adriatic will help to learn more details about the Kartvelian – Aegean relationship and migration processes in the ancient period.

We have to note beforehand, that the numerous versions of this myth are created by varying of the above components of the myth. Therefore these components appear to be the main variables of the myth. In order to make our study more clear to comprehend and at the same time technically more easy for operating with large number of the data, we have used these variables to classify many versions of the myth into the main group variants. The classification of the group variants is to be based on one of these variables. We have chosen the variable – specifics of the murder and based on it created the group variants of the story. Our choice was caused by the fact that this variable seemed to us as the most essential element of the myth, and at the same time it appeared to be most convenient to connect with it other data of the myth in more or less chronological order.

The most important element of this variable – the specifics of Apsyrtos' murder seems to be the status of Apsyrtos in the moment of the murder. In the versions of the myth Apsyrtos sometimes is a boy/young baby taken by Medea/Argonauts when they fled from Colchis by the ship; in other versions his murder (he still is a boy) takes place in the palace in Colchis; and in some versions Apsyrtos appears to be a young man being the commander-in-chief of the pursuing Colchians. The scholars mainly agree that the oldest version of Apsyrtos' myth seems to be the one, in which Apsyrtos is a little child. According to this version, Medea takes her younger brother while flying from Colchis. When the Argonauts are pursued by the Colchians, the boy is killed and cut into pieces, which are scattered over a sea/river/fields in order to delay the pursuit. Their assumption is based, on the one hand, on the fact, that the oldest known variant of the myth – Pherecydes' account presents this very version, and, on the other hand, on the suggestion, that the above version presents the

development of the story's events on the most reasonable way.<sup>4</sup> According to Pherecydes (ca. I half of the V BC) Medea took the baby Apsyrtos from his bed and on Jason's demand brought to the Argonauts. When they were pursued, the baby was killed, dismembered and his limbs were thrown into the river (Pher. FGr Hist 3F 32 a= Schol. Ap. Rh. IV, 223): Φερεκύδης ἐν ἐβδόμῳ/τὴν Μήδειαν φησὶν ἄραι τὸν/Ἄψυρτον ἐκ τῆν κοίτης, Ἰάσονος εἰπόντος αὐτῇ, καὶ/ἐνεγκεῖν πρὸς τοὺς Ἀργοναύτας. Ἐπεὶ ἐδιώχθησαν,/σφάξαι, καὶ μελίσαντας ἐκβαλεῖν εἰς τὸν ποταμόν. The second scholium of *Argonautica*, which cites the other fragment of Pherecydes gives the same information (FGr Hist3F 32b = Schol. Ap. Rh., IV, 228): Φερεκύδης ἐν ἐβδόμῳ//, διωκομένος/ἀναβιβᾶσαι ἐπὶ τὴν ναῦν τὸν/Ἄψυρτον, καὶ μελίσαντας ῥίψαι εἰς ποταμόν. The problem of the interpretation of these fragments lies in defying of the performer of the murder. Some scholars suggest, that the actual killer of Apsyrtos was Medea<sup>5</sup> notwithstanding the fact, that in the text Medea isn't named as a killer, the verbs - σφάξαι - killing and ἐκβαλεῖν - throwing stand in infinitives and the word μελίσαντες - the performers of dismemberment is presented by the participium in the plural (the same plural form of μελίσαντες we see in second scholium). All this can only mean one thing - there was more than one killer. The Argonauts, the Argonauts and Medea, Jason and Medea - all are possible candidates for Apsyrtos' murder, but by no means Medea alone.<sup>6</sup> Especially as the ancient authors themselves, as the scholium to Euripides' *Medea* makes it evident, did not say, that the killer of Medea was only Medea and no one else: "[Apsyrtos ] was killed,

<sup>4</sup> RE, XV, 36 Lesky's article on Medea.

<sup>5</sup> Oxford Classical Dictionary, 1970, 944-45, article *Medea*; DNP article *Medea*, the author the well-known specialist of Argonauts' myth Drager P.; Page D. L., Euripides' *Medea*, Oxford 1936, n. 1334; Bremmer J., in: *Medea*, 1997, 85.

<sup>6</sup> The second group of the scholars, who do not ascribe Apsyrtos' murder to Medea, consider the performers of Apsyrtos' murder among these candidates: the Argonauts - Hardt R., *The Routledge Handbook of Greek Mythology*, based on H. J. Rose's *Handbook of Greek Mythology*, London 2004, 393; Jason participated in the murder - *The Library of Greek Mythology* by Apollodorus, with commentaries by R. Hardt, Oxford 1997, n. 54; Braswell interprets the fragment in the following way: "Medea took the baby Apsyrtos and brought him on Jason's advice to the Argonauts. When they were being pursued, they killed the baby... here can be the Argonauts, together with Jason and Medea". Braswell B. K., *A Commentary on the Fourth Pythian Ode of Pindar*, Berlin 1988, 19; The Argonauts - RE, II, 1, 285, the article *Apsyrtos* by Wernike. According to Dyck, from the surviving reports it can not be made out whether Jason or Medea was the actual killer. Dyck A. R., *On the Way From Colchis to Corinth: Medea in Book IV of the Argonautica*, *Hermes*, 117, 1989, 445-70, 461.

according to some authors by Medea, and according to others by the Argonauts" (Schol. Eur., *Med.*, 167).

Now if we turn to the third variable of the myth – the place of Apsyrtos' murder, we'll see that in our oldest version of above mentioned Pherecydes, the baby was killed in a river, which is identified as Phasis<sup>7</sup>. The further argument for this view is Statius *Thebais*, V, 457 and the scholium on this line: "sua iura cruentum Phasis habent" – "Phasis, colored with blood, has its own rules" (Stat., *Theb.*, V, 457), on which the scholiast comments: "The poet calls Phasis bloody because flying from her father's pursuit Medea scattered over it the pieces of killed brother".

In the later variants of this group seeming rather to be reflections of the early accounts, Apsyrtos still is a boy/baby taken away by the Argonauts, though the other variables of the myth – the place of the murder, as well as actual killer are changed. According to Apollodorus (II BC) Aeetes himself pursued the Argonauts. When Medea had seen the approaching Colchians, she killed her brother, cut him into pieces and then threw the limbs into the depth of the sea. Gathering the pieces Aeetes delays the pursuit, buries Apsyrtos and names the place of the burial *Tomeus* (Apoll. I, 9, 24). Thus, the murdered for Apollodorus is Medea and the deed happens to take place in the western part of the Black Sea, in so called "Scythian shore", near the place, where the town Tomi is situated (mod. Konstanz). Almost identical story we see in Tzetze's scholium on Lycophron's *Alexandra* (Tzet., *Lycoph.*, 175). Zenobius' account follows these versions (Zen., *Cent.*, IV, 192).

Ovid presents the grislier tale of Apsyrtos' murder. In his poem little Apsyrtos is also taken away and killed by Medea, though the locale of the murder is slightly changed. This time Medea slaughters his brother not near Tomi, but in Tomi itself. According to Ovid, After Medea had seen the approaching compatriots, she struck the blow to Apsyrtos standing by her, dismembered him and scattered his limbs over the neighboring fields (Ovid., *Tris.*, II, 9, 21-34). Besides, Medea hangs the hands and the head of her brother over the rock to be clearly seen by the Colchians from the sea. The site of the murder – Tomi takes its name from the brutal act – cutting of the body (τομέω). Apsyrtos' dismembered pieces are also scattered over the fields – "spargere per agros" in another poem of Ovid (Ov., *Her.*, VI, 129 foll.)<sup>8</sup>, but this time the fields are not defined concretely. Even

<sup>7</sup> RE, XV, 35; Hardt, 2004, 393; Dyck, 1989, 461.

<sup>8</sup> The scholars mainly suggest that these fields are to be the fields near Tomi, though Pearson considers, that the fields in Ovid's *Heroides* (VI) are in Colchis: Sophocles'

more vague is the story in Ovid's *Heroides* XII (Medea's letter to Jason), where Medea only mentions her taken by and dismembered brother (Ov., *Her.*, XII, 113 foll.).

In his article *Tomeus* Stephanes of Byzantium also derives the name of the site from the word *τομέω* (cutting of the body) and localizes the town at the western shore of the Black Sea (Step. Byz. s.v. *Τομέυς* (here Apsyrtos' murderers are Jason and Medea)). It is noteworthy, that *Tomeus* is just one of his versions of the place of Apsyrtos' murder. In other articles of his *Ethnica* three other locales of Apsyrtos' death are named also known to us from the ancient sources. Cicero also places the murder of Apsyrtos on the western coast of the Black Sea (Cic., *De Imp. Pomp.*, 22).

The status of Apsyrtus is same in Seneca's *Medea*, though the murder is mentioned to happen in two different places – in the sea and in the fields of Colchis. In the line 133 Apsyrtus' body is scattered over Pontus – "sparsum ponto corpus", whereas in line 452 Medea asks rhetorically: "Where should I go, to Phasis, the Colchians and to the fields, which I stained with my brother's blood?" (Sen., *Med.*, 133; 145 foll.).

The specifics of the murder is not presented altogether in the stories provided by Arrianus' and Procopius of Caesarea. We have no idea was in their accounts Apsyrtos still a boy/baby or he was the commander of the pursuing Colchians. But still we placed these stories in this group as in these stories the place of the deed – second variable of the myth is also the Black Sea area, the area, in which Apsyrtos' murder is localized in this group. But one thing must be mentioned here – unlike the above sources, the terrible deed is performed in the accounts of Arrianus and Procopius at the south-eastern coast of the Black Sea. The etymology of the toponyme *Apsaros* (the scholars locate the place west of Batumi) in Procopius' and Arrianus' stories is also derived from the place of Apsyrtos' murder.

Moreover, Arrianus informs, that in the past the place *Apsaros* was called Apsyrtos (Arrian., *Peripl.*, 7 (6H)) and Procopius of Caesarea notes, that in Apsaros there was shown Apsyrtos' grave (Proc. Caes., *Bell. Goth.*, IV, 2). The murder of Apsyrtos in Arrianus account is ascribed to Medea, while in Procopius' story this act is ascribed to both – to Jason as well as to Medea.

The site *Apsyrtos* (the place was named like this according to the writer in the early period) as the place where Apsyrtos was killed in the Black Sea is known to Stephanes of Byzantium. The toponyme *Apsyrtos* is

---

Fragments, edited with additional notes from the Papers of Jebb R. C. and Headlam W. G. by Pearson A. C., Cambridge 1917, 17.

second version of the author of the locale of Apsyrtos' murder (Step. Byz., s. v. Ἀψυρτίδες).

Connecting the toponyme *Apsaros/Apsyrtos* with the periplus of the Argonauts seems to be old one as already the Ionian tradition – the above discussed account of Pherecydes (Pher. FGr H3F32) suggested that Apsyrtos' murder took place in the Black Sea region.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, in this group variant of the myth, in which Apsyrtus is a little boy/taken away baby the oldest version of the myth or the later reflection of the earlier variant are presented. Apsyrtos' murder here does not exceed the Black Sea area. Apsyrtos is murdered in Phasis or on the western coast of the Black Sea (near Tomi/in Tomi). In the accounts of Arrianus, Procopius of Caesarea and Stephanes of Byzantium, where Apsyrtos' status is not mentioned, the murder takes place on the south-eastern coast of the Black Sea, namely in Apsaros (near Batumi). Outcoming from these data Wilamowitz's suggestion, that in the oldest version of the myth Apsyrtos' murder took place in the Apsyrtian Island in Adriatic, seems unconvincing. Wilamowitz based his theory on the etymology of the Absortes (the name of the inhabitants of the island of Apsyrtides), which he had derived from Absyrtus. According to him as the toponyme's name is derived from the name of the mythological hero, the connection between two entities should have been very old. Thus, the Apsyrtian Island must have been the original locus of Apsyrtus' death and consequently, the version of the myth presenting this story should be regarded as the oldest one.<sup>10</sup> But in the ancient sources the toponyme Apsirtides is connected with the Apsyrtus' myth in various ways and not only as the locale of Apsyrtos' murder. The Apsyrtian island is also the place, where: a) Apsyrtos' corpse was washed up (see below) and b) the place, where the pursuing Colchians settle (RE, II, I, 285). Therefore, the etymology of the Apsyrtides is not connected only with Apsyrtos' murder. And besides, the fact of derivation of the toponyme's name from the name

<sup>9</sup> Journal of the Ancient History (Vestnik Drevnei Istorii), XXIII, 267.

<sup>10</sup> Wilamowitz-Moellendorf U. v., *Hellenistische dichtung in der Zeit des Kallimachos*, vol. II, Berlin 1924, 193 foll. According to Dyck the attempt of Wilamowitz to establish against the oldest literary sources the Apsyrtian island of Istria as the original locus of Apsyrtus' murder is unconvincing as well. Besides, Dyck suggests, that the major island of the group is called Ἀψωρος – 'free of scurvy' (Herodian I, 200, 17 Lentz) and considers this form to be an original one. The name for the island group – Ἀψυρτίδες he explains as a result of folk – etymological crossing of Ἀψωρος and – Ἀψυρτος Dyck, 1989, 461. But see Tomaschek's articles – *Apsoros* and *Apsyrtides*, RE, II, I, 284, who doesn't mention the form Ἀψωρος.

of the mythic hero does not seem to be enough argument for suggesting, that the oldest version should have been the one showing this derivation. Otherwise, the version of the myth, which places Apsyrtos' murder in Apsaros (previous Apsyrtos near Batumi) according to the same logic, should be considered as the oldest version and the toponyme *Apsaros* must also be considered as the original place of Apsyrtos' murder. Especially because in this version the etymology of this toponyme is derived from the name of the mythic hero much more directly as the ancient writers themselves spoke about this derivation (the accounts of Arrianus and Procopius of Caesarea discussed above).

Our suggestion that Apsyrtos' murder in the oldest strata of the myth does not exceed the Black Sea area<sup>11</sup>, does not contradict the fact of the settling of the Colchians in Adriatic, as their settling in Adriatic is not connected directly with Apsyrtos' murder. The Colchians continue to pursue the Argonauts in the Adriatic Sea even after Apsyrtos was murdered. For example, in the later reflections of the myth (that of Apollodorus and Tzetzes, which we had placed in this variant group) Aeetes sends out a large number of the Colchians in search of Argo after he had buried Apsyrtos in Tomis. As the Colchians had not achieved their goal, they did not return back and settled in various places of Adriatic area – some settle in the Ceraunian Mountains, others – in Ilyria, in Apsyrtian Island. One part of the Colchians caught up with the Argonauts at Pheacea and demanded Medea from the local king. But as they neither had nor got what they had demanded, they did not return back and settle in Pheacea (Apoll. I, 9, 24; Tzet., Lycoph., 175).

In the second group of Apsyrtos' myth we placed the versions, in which though Apsyrtos is still a baby/boy, the specifics of the murder is slightly changed – the murder happens in Aeetes' palace or somewhere nearby. Therefore, he is not taken away to the Argo. This variant of the crime, as Lesky had suggested, should have been introduced in this myth by tragedy and supposedly it should have been originated from the demand of the dramatic unity.<sup>12</sup> Up to now the 319 fragment of Sophocles' *Colchian Women* is considered as the oldest version of this variant version. According to the scholars, the tragedy most likely described Jason's deeds

---

<sup>11</sup> See also Kaukhchishvili T., *The Old Greek Sources of Georgia's History*, Tbilisi 1976, 22. "In the oldest version Media kills Apsyrtos in Colchis and scatters his pieces in Phasis, it means, that here we can not speak about the long voyage of the Colchians together with Apsyrtos and their settling in the Apsyrtian island."

<sup>12</sup> RE, XV, 36.

in Colchis and Apsyrtos' murder in the palace of Aeetes. The fragment informs us the following Σοφοκλῆς δε: ἐν Κολχίσι φησι: κατὰ τὸν οἶκον τοῦ Αἰήτου τὸν παῖδα σφαγῆναι (Sop.fr. 319 TGF Nauck<sup>2</sup> = Schol. Ap.Rh.IV, 223) - "Sophocles' in *The Colchian Women* tells, that the child was killed in Aeetes' palace". The motive of the crime is not explained. According to Pearson, the motive of the murder of Apsyrtos in the house must be similar to the motive narrated by Pherecydes, namely the delay of the pursuit, for if the reason had been different, it would have been stated by the ancient scholiasts.<sup>13</sup>

Who had killed Apsyrtos in this version? The name of the murder is not given in Sophocles' above fragment. Here as in Pherecydes' account the verb - σφαγῆναι stands in the form of infinitive.<sup>14</sup>

Euripides' *Medea* is the first tragedy, where Medea is named as the murderer of her brother. Speaking to the chorus, Medea herself admits this: "O, father, O my native city, From you I was parted in shame, having killed my brother" (Eur., *Med.*, 167) Afterwards, towards the end of the tragedy, during Medea's and Jason's last meeting, Jason reminds her the murder of her brother "... you killed your brother at the hearth and stepped aboard the fair-prowed Argo" (Eur., *Med.*, 1334)<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, in Euripidean version Medea not only kills her brother, but performs a sacrireligious deed as murders him in most holly place of the house - at the hearth, what makes her crime more abominable.<sup>16</sup>

According to Euripides' scholiast the poet Callimachus also presented Apsyrtos' murder at the hearth of the palace: παρα: την ἐστίαν. κατὰ τὸν βωμὸν ἄνειλε τὸν Ἄψυρτον - ἢ ἐπὶ τῷ βωμῷ τῆς Ἀρτέμιδος, ὡς Ἀπολλώνιος φησιν, ἢ| ἐποικον ἐν τῇ/ πατρίδι, ὡς Καλλίμαχος - At the

<sup>13</sup> Pearson, 1917, 17. In Pearson's opinion, the Latin authorities, for example Cic., *ND*, 3, and 67: *Ov.*, *Her.*, VI, 129 etc., in most cases were using the source, which placed Apsyrtos' death in Colchis and not in Scythia as in their accounts the murder of Apsyrtos is mentioned "per agros - in fields". Pearson, 1917, 17. Seneca's *Medea* 453 is to be added to this list. Unlike him, the scholars mostly suggest, that the fields in Ovid's *Heroides* VI are the fields not in Colchis, but around Tomis. See Lesky, *RE*, XV, 36.

<sup>14</sup> See Dyck, who in this fragment sees the same ambiguity towards the agents we saw in Pherecydes' story. Therefore, we can not ascribe this deed to Medea, as is the case with some scholars. Dyck, 1989, 461.

<sup>15</sup> Euripides, *Cyclops*, *Alcestis*, *Medea*, Loeb Classical Library, edited and translated by D. Kovacs, I, Harvard 2001.

<sup>16</sup> As Bremmer notes, the hearth of the private houses or cities were sacred centers like altars and symbolized the solidarity of the family and the community, also they were places were suppliants seek for protection... Euripides took some trouble to represent the murder as particularly sacrireligious (*Medea*, 1997, 85).



hearth. At the altar killed Apsyrtos – either killed at the altar of Artemis, as Apollonius tells, or at the hearth in homeland as Callimachus” (Call. fr. 8 Pf = Schol. Eur., *Med.*, 1334). The murder was performed in the Colchian fields (Sen., *Med.*, 452) in Seneca’s above discussed tragedy. Consequently, this group variant of Apsyrtos’ myth presenting also the old version of the story, places Apsyrtos’ murder in Colchis – in Aetes’ palace or in the nearby fields. The pursuing of the fugitive Argonauts by the Colchians are narrated in these stories as well. Sophocles’ lost tragedy *Scythians*, as some scholars consider, worked out the legend of the Argonauts being pursued by the Colchians and seeking refuge among the Pheaceans.<sup>17</sup> Chase of the Argonauts by the Colchians was narrated also by Callimachus, who speaks about the settling of the Colchians in Adriatic (Call. fr. 377; 563 Schn).<sup>18</sup> According to Dyck, Callimachus described also the confrontation of the Argonauts and the Colchians in Corcyra (Call. fr. 12-13 Pf).<sup>19</sup>

Quite a different picture of Apsyrtos’ murder we encounter in those versions of the myth, in which Apsyrtos is an adolescent, himself commands the fleet of the pursuing Colchians. The canonical version of this variant is the epic poem of Apollonius of Rhodes’ *Argonautica*. Apsyrtus, a young man, is sent by Aetes to chase the fled away Argonauts. The Colchians pursue them down the river Ister and block off every exit to the sea. The Argonauts sought refuge on two Brygian isles of Artemis in the Illyrian coast of Adriatic. The Minyae decided “to give her in ward of Leto’s daughter apart from the throng, until some of the kings that dispense justice should utter her doom, whether she must return to her father’s home or follow the chieftains to the land of Hellas”. When Medea had heard this decision, sharp anguish shook her heart. She called Jason, reminded him the oath given to her and offered him the guile to distract Apsyrtos. According to her plan she would send false messages to Apsyrtos and promise to give him back the fleece. To get it he had to come alone in the sanctuary of Artemis to speak to her. Trusting his sister, Apsyrtos indeed came alone to the sanctuary at night. When she began to speak with his sister, Jason lying in ambush jumped upon and killed him treacherously (Ap. Rh. IV, 300). Therefore, the actual killer of Apsyrtos in

---

<sup>17</sup> Urushadze A., *The Ancient Colchis in the Argonauts’ Myth*, Tbilisi 1964, 36. In the interpretation of this tragedy he follows Nauck’s edition - TGF Nauck, 501-505. For the different interpretation of this tragedy see Pearson, 1917, 185-188, who considers that this tragedy presented the murder of Apsyrtos in Scythia, near Tomis.

<sup>18</sup> Gordeziani R., *The Myth of the Argonauts*, Tbilisi 1999, 122; Urushadze A., 1964, 53.

<sup>19</sup> Dyck, 1989, 465.

the poem is Jason, though Medea is main author of this perfidious plot. The locale of the heinous murder is defined concretely – the Illyrian coast of Adriatic. The same version in brief is presented by the scholiast of Euripides' *Medea* (Sch. Eur., *Med.*, 167). Several other authorities consider the Apsyrtian Island as the place, where Apsyrtos' murder took place: Strabo presents Apsyrtos as a pursuer and ascribes the murder of Apsyrtos to Medea (Strab. VII. 5, 5)<sup>20</sup>. Plinius does not mention the name of the murderer. According to him the island took the name from the murder of Apsyrtus, what happened on it (Pl. NH, III, 151). Stephanes of Byzantium follows Plinius' etymology about the island's name (Step. Byz. s. v. *Ἀψυρτίδες*). At the same time he calls Medea the murderer of Apsyrtos. Note, that this version of Stephanes of Byzantium is already his third version concerning the locale of Apsyrtos' murder.

1318 scholium to Lychophon's *Alexandra* also states, that Medea had killed Apsyrtos, who was pursuing the Argonauts (Schol. Lycoph., *Alex.*, 1318). The locus of the murder is not mentioned here. Eudocia's account combines in some extent the variants of I and III groups. Her Apsyrtos like Apollonius' Apsyrtos is a pursuer of the Argonauts and is murdered on the Adriatic island (III group). On the other hand, it is Medea, not Jason who performs the murder, dismembers and scatters the pieces over the sea like it happened in the variant versions of the I group (*Eud.*, 214). In Eudocia's story the pursuing Colchians do not return back and settle on the island.

In Hyginus' version Apsyrtus' status is the same that of a pursuer, but the Apollonian order of the events is changed here. In Apollonius' poem the development of the events are as follow: a) Apsyrtus is killed in the Brygean islands; b) After many incidents the Argonauts reach Pheacean kingdom at Corcyra, where they are caught up by the Colchians demanding the king to give back Medea; c) the wife of the king Alcinous secretly informs the Argonauts the king's judgment; d) Jason and Medea get married. Medea stays with Jason and the Colchians settle temporarily in Pheacea. According to Hyginus Apsyrtus catches up with the Argonauts in Adriatic, in Istria, at Alcinous' court. Apsyrtus is determined to fight for Medea, but the king intervenes (the king in Apollonius' poem was ruling over the inhabitants of Corcyra). They take the king as an arbiter. The king tells his wife about his proposal how to decide the problem of Medea. Arete then secretly informs the king's decision to Jason

---

<sup>20</sup> It is noteworthy, that the name of the island – Apsyrtides firstly appears in Strabo.

and Medea. The wedding of Jason and Medea follows. Medea stays with Jason in accordance with the king's judgment to what both parties announce their agreement. But despite this agreement, Apsyrtus fearing his father continues to pursue the Argonauts. He catches them up second time on the island of Minerva: "When Jason was sacrificing there to Minerva and Apsyrtus came upon him, he was killed by Jason. Medea gave him burial and they departed. The Colchians fearing Aeetes remained there and found a town, which from Apsyrtus' name they called Absoros". As Hyginus comments, this island was located in Histria, opposite Pola (Hyg., XXIII).

The great popularity of Apollonius Rhodes' poem caused much influence of this poem on the subsequent interpretations of this myth. This influence is evident especially in Valerius Flaccus' poem *Argonautica*. Apsyrtus is here the commander-in-chief of the pursuing Colchians, though they catch up with the Argonauts in different from Apollonius' place. The scene is laid in the Black Sea, near Tomis, at the mouth of the river Istros. There on the island called Peuke Jason and Medea celebrate their wedding before the Colchians appear (it should be noted, that wedding of the couple in this poem does not result from the Colchians demand to give up Medea). Apsyrtus and the Colchians arrive on the island after the wedding ceremony is over and demand the Argonauts to give them Medea. The Argonauts in Valerius' poem like Apollonius' heroes are strongly disposed to hand Medea over to the Colchians and require from Jason the same. Jason does not appear to contradict them. Medea foresees her fate and overwhelmed with an immense rage meets vis-a-vis with her husband and drastically blames him in treacherous decision (Val. Flac., VII, 259 foll.).

As the other versions of the group *Orphic Argonautica* also presents Apsyrtos as a pursuer. Aeetes' son catches up with his sister at the mouth of the river Phasis. Apsyrtos is murdered (the agents stand here in Plural form!) and his corpse is thrown into the mouth of the river. The waves of the sea take the corpse and strand it near the Apsyrtian Island, quite far from the place of the murder (*Orph. Arg.*, 1022 foll.). Therefore, in the poem the Apsyrtides is not the place of Apsyrtos' murder, but the place where his corpse is washed ashore.

Two scholia of Apollonius' poem tell that a pursuer Apsyrtos catches up with the Argonauts near one of the mouths of Istrus: "Istrus has three mouths; one of them is called "the beautiful mouth" as Timagetus tells. The poet narrates that Apsyrtus sailed up here" (Schol. Ap. Rh. III, 306; III, 311). A different version of Apsyrtos' murder we see in the scholium of

Euripides' *Medea*: "According to the orator Leon Apsyrtus was poisoned, not murdered" (Schol. Eur., *Med.*, 167). What is remarkable here is the fact, that the name of the poisoner is not given. We do not see here the name of Medea, the famous poisoner.

Therefore, in this group variant, which presents Apsyrtos as an adolescent pursuer, his killer appeared to be different agents: a) in two main versions the killer is Jason (Ap. Rh., *Arg.*; Hyg., *Fab.*, XXIII); b) in the *Orphic Argonautica* the murder is performed by the agents, whose names are not given. Supposedly, the Argonauts are implied here (*Orph. Arg.*, 1010 foll.). Apsyrtus' murderer is not named in Plinius' account as well; c) the murderer is Medea in Strabo's account as well as in Stephanes of Byzantium's article *Ἀψυρτίδες*. Eudocia's somewhat combined version ascribes this deed to Medea as well. It is noteworthy, that in this group version the murder mainly takes place in Adriatic Area (Ap. Rh. – Brygean isles; Hyg., *Fab.*, XXIII – Island of Minerva; Strabo and Stephanes of Byzantium *Ἀψυρτίδες* the Apsyrtian islands). From this group only in one version that of *Orphic Argonautica* Apsyrtos is killed in Colchis.

Therefore, the analyze of the above date revealed, that the ancient sources did not ascribe the murder of Apsyrtos only to one agent – Medea, though Medea is presented as the performer of this deed in large number of the sources. In I group variant a murderer is either not identified or Medea is named as the killer of her brother. Exception from this is one source – the article *Tomeus* of Stephanes of Byzantium, where this deed is performed by both agents – Medea and Jason. The versions of II group variant (here the evidences are much fewer) either ascribe this heinous act to Medea or they do not identify a killer. In III group, in which Apsyrtos himself is a pursuer, the murderer is: a) Jason (in two major versions); b) Medea (in versions presented above); c) the murderers are not identified (*Orph. Arg.*). Chronologically, as we see, Apsyrtos' killer in the earliest strata of the myth (namely, in the accounts of Pherecydes and the fragments of Sophocles) is not named. The first author identifying Medea as her brother's murderer is Euripides. However, Apollonius of Rhodes offers different story of Apsyrtos' murder despite the immense influence Euripides' tragedy had on the subsequent interpretations of the myth. Interesting is the suggestion of Dyck, who considers that Apollonius strived to divide the responsibility of the murder between Jason and Medea, on one hand, and to provide a plausible motive for Medea's action on the other hand. Apsyrtos in the poem is not an innocent boy, but commander-in-chief of the Colchian fleet demanding the Argonauts to

give up Medea in order to take her back to Colchis to face there her father's ire. With the regard that Medea was in great danger, her behavior seemed to be much more understandable though her role is not played down in the poem, as she is the author of the plan by which Jason kills Apsyrtos.<sup>21</sup> Hyginus ascribes the deed to Jason alone and does not utter a word about Medea's participation in it. After the period, when Medea's role in Apsyrtos' murder was somehow smoothed, in the accounts of the later authors, we see Medea as the actual killer of her brother. It is Ovid, who most grisly describes the killing by Medea of the innocent little brother (Ovid, *Trist.*, III, 9).

At the end we would like to make just a brief note. The earliest versions of Medea's mythic biography, especially her Corinthian and Colchian stories present Medea as a performer of the villainous acts in lesser degree. This tendency as we saw is revealed in the discussed myth of Apsyrtos. The contradiction between Greek and Barbarian was not as sharp in the early periods of the Greek history as it turned out to be later, from the period of the Greek-Persian wars. But the development of Medea's image in this context is the subject of a separate article.

---

<sup>21</sup> Dyck, 1989, 445-470