

Tamar Tarkhishvili (Tbilisi)

## THE ARGONAUTICA AND ANCIENT MYTHOLOGY IN MEDIEVAL GEORGIA

The development of medieval Georgian Christian literature and translating activities, apart from their main purpose, contributed to general education of Georgian readers as well. Among various issues was also the information from Greek mythology. The format of a conference paper does not allow referring to the numerous sources of medieval Georgia that reflected the awareness of Georgian authors of Greek mythology and antiquity in general. I will dwell only on several facts. I have selected two significant sources for consideration: "Hellenic Tales" and George Hamartolus' "Chronographer".

"Hellenic Tales" represents comments on the works of Gregory of Nazianzus. Such explanation was necessary to comprehend the works as the medieval reader was not familiar with Greek mythology and these questions were also unknown to him. The Georgian version of Nonnos' "Hellenic Tales" was made by Ephraem the Lesser. Nonnos provided comments for the fragments where Gregory of Nazianzus mentioned names from Greek mythology.

Translation of Nonnos' explanations represented one of the most important sources for becoming familiar with ancient mythology in Georgia of that period. Nonnos did not aim at spreading and promoting the names of pagan deities but intended to clarify the essence of the characters and items mentioned in the work of Gregory the Theologian. This work, written from the Christian perspective, to a certain extent threw light on pagan religion. Ephraem the Lesser had perfect knowledge of Greek mythology and philosophy, and required the same of clergy so that they could oppose anti-orthodox opinion more effectively and knowingly. He applied this knowledge for the purpose of strengthening the Christian doctrine and church. As

concerns the full Georgian version of the "Hellenic Tales", it was published by Il. Abuladze.

"Hellenic Tales" includes the following fragment: "The eighteenth story is about ... the sown and sprouted heroes. In Beotia they say that either Cadmus or Jason or some other hero took the Dragon's teeth and sowed them into the ground, from where sprouted armed people, visible above the ground up to their waists, who in such a posture fought each other as well as others."<sup>1</sup>

"Hellenic Tales" offers the traditional version of the story of mythological characters – Jason and Cadmus (Book III). According to Apollonius Rhodius (Book III), Aeetes sets a difficult task for Jason. In order to obtain the Golden Fleece, he must yoke two fire-breathing and brazen-footed bulls to a plough and at a short notice still the ground that requires four-day labor. Then he must sow dragon's teeth in the ploughed soil and beat the armed heroes that will spring out.<sup>2</sup>

As the significant episodes of the Argonauts' adventures are connected with Georgia, and namely with Colchis, the legend, or at least this very episode, could have aroused particular public interest; however, no such tendency can be observed in Georgian literature. The Argonaut episodes and characters are mentioned along with other fragments of Greek mythology only with respect to the context that required clarification for readers. It is noteworthy that in this period of the Middle Ages (the 11<sup>th</sup> century), the contents and ideology of literature were predetermined by the Christian religion and all remaining questions, including those related to paganism, served this purpose. Therefore, as it might have been expected, Ephraem the Lesser made no comments on this episode.

Ephraem the Lesser's translation of the "Hellenic Tales" could have been among important sources about the Greek mythology for literate Georgians of the medieval period. This is evidenced in the works of poets of this period.

One fragment of Shavteli's poem attests that the author was acquainted with the Georgian translation of the "Hellenic Tales". In particular, I mean the usage of Mount Etna as a literary image:

"The abyss of wisdom, the language-rhetorician,<sup>3</sup>  
You are similar to Mount Etna" (7-8).

In the "Hellenic Tales" we read:

---

<sup>1</sup> I. Abuladze, *Hellenic Tales*, *The Bulletin of the History of Language and Material Culture*, X, Tbilisi, 1941.

<sup>2</sup> Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica*, Greek texts with a parallel Georgian version edited, introduced, commented and supplemented with an index by A. Urushadze, Tbilisi, 1970, 197-98.

<sup>3</sup> "Droeba" (a periodical), 13, Tiflis, 1873.

"The fire [of Etneos] is said to be emerging from the forge of Hephaestus on Mount Etna and then it submerges into the field streaming like water" [Fairy Tales, 3. 1].

"... The emergence of the fire of Etneos", "in Sikila there is (a town) called Katana, and above it is a mountain called Etna, on which there is unceasing fire emerging on its own, which is called the Etna fire" (3. 46).

The author of "The History and Laudation of Royalty" ("Istoriani and Azmani Sharavandectani") had good knowledge of Greek-Roman mythology. Apparently, he referred to the "Hellenic Tales" as well as George Hamartolus "Chronograph" to portray Tamar and George III. He used the epithets and names which Nonnos had provided with appropriate notes and comments. When telling us the story of King Tamar, he mentions famous couples from various works: "Similar to Pelope fighting for Hippodamia, daughter of Oenomaus, Pluto fighting for Persephone, Ramin fighting for Vis."<sup>4</sup> He compares George III as a hunter to Artemis (367). When talking about David Soslan he notes, "He, the keen shooter, threw a dagger at Mosimakhos."<sup>5</sup> In K. Kekelidze's opinion, the name of Mosimakhos must have been adopted in the chronicle from George Hamartolus' "Chronograph".<sup>6</sup> The author of "The History and Laudation of Royalty" thinks that David Soslan was an excellent archer, as if trained by Centaurus.<sup>7</sup>

Describes King David Aghmashenebeli as a matchless archer, the historian of the king also notes that Achilles was trained in archery by Centaurus: "Who has seen anyone so victorious in hunting [as David] ... Achilles of the Hellenes is said to have been trained by Centaurus in archery ..., none of them were able to become his equal."<sup>8</sup> It seems that the historian had a profound knowledge of the "Hellenic Tales" and was even guided by it.

"When Achilles was born by Thetis, he was entrusted to Chiron. Chiron was half man and half horse. He took him and seated him on a horse back to front. And thus he tested him and trained him in archery, fed him on milk and bread" [Fairy Tale, 2.4].

Similarly to the historian of David Aghmashenebeli, the author of "The History and Laudation of Royalty" is aware of the image and function of Centaurus in Greek mythology. However, none of them mentions Jason, who was also raised by Centaurus. It is hard to say whether they were not familiar

<sup>4</sup> Kartlis Tskovreba (Georgian Chronicle), the text is identified according to all relevant manuscripts by S. Kauhchishvili, Tbilisi, 1959, 36.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>7</sup> K. Kekelidze, The History of Georgian Literature, vol. II, Tbilisi, 1958, 270.

<sup>8</sup> Kartlis Tskhovreba (Georgian Chronicle), edited by Z. Chichinadze, 369.

with the Argonaut legend or gave preference to Achilles as they sought comparison for the image of the King.

As observed by Pavle Ingorokva, the elements of the "Hellenic Tales" can be traced in the following popular episode of "The Knight in the Panther's Skin":

"Hearing the knight's singing, beats came to listen to him; the sweetness of his voice even prompted stones to come out of water."<sup>9</sup>

An analogical phrase can be found in the "Hellenic Tales", which points to the musical gift of Orpheus:

"Orpheus, who was skilled in the art of music, used to sing so sweetly that even the inanimate were attracted and followed him" (1.17).

According to mythology, as certified by Apollonius Rhodius (and the "Orphic Argonautica"), Orpheus was among the Argonauts even though his connection with the Argonautica and Colchis is not mentioned either in the "Hellenic Tales" or in George Hamartolus' "Chronograph". Only his divine voice and gifts are discussed.

George Hamartolus mentions Thracian Orpheus in the "Chronograph". "Prometheus and Thracian Orpheus were the wisest among the Hellenes."<sup>10</sup>

What accounts for George Hamartolus' mentioning of the Greek pantheon is certainly not his liking for them. He needs to use mythological names in his work to show the readers how false and harmful idolatry is. He basically dwells on Zeus' pederasty and perversity. Aphrodite is connected with adultery and Rhea with insatiability. "The Chronograph" includes traditional descriptions of other gods and goddesses; Poseidon is the patron of sailors, Asclepius – the god of healing, Apollo – of music, Athena – the goddess of wisdom and weaving, Artemis – of hunting, Demeter – the goddess of grain and fertility. Aphrodite is the goddess of love; Athena – of knowledge; Hephaestus is the founder of forging while Hermes is connected with theft.

According to V. Asatiani, George Hamartolus mentions only theft with respect to Hermes and is reticent about the fact that he personified the omnipotent force of nature, was the god of cattle-breeding, taught people to light a fire on an altar, etc.<sup>11</sup> This unambiguously points to the purpose of picturing Greek gods in George Hamartolus' "Chronographer".

The paper accentuates only several medieval sources attesting to the awareness of medieval Georgian scholars of Greek mythology and pantheon. As concerns the Argonaut story, and more precisely, the above-mentioned

---

<sup>9</sup> P. Ingorokva, *The Literary Heritage of the Rustaveli Age*, Tbilisi, 1928, 4, 51.

<sup>10</sup> S. Kaukhchishvili, *The Chronograph of Monk George*, Tiflis, 1920, 68.

<sup>11</sup> V. Asatiani, *Ancient and Byzantine Traditions in Old Georgian Writing*, Tbilisi, 1996, 199.

episode, it is touched upon only in the "Hellenic Tales". So we cannot be certain that medieval Georgian readers were acquainted with this epic plot, or at least with the episode taking place in Colchis. The "Hellenic Tales" could have raised certain interest in pagan epics; however, if we bear in mind that these works were mainly read by the clergy and all questions were treated from the perspective of Christian ideology, this interest may not have been reflected in literary works.