

Tea Dularidze (Tbilisi)

**THE ARGONAUTS' VOYAGE
IN THE TRANSITIONAL PERIOD OF GEORGIAN LITERATURE
(THE 18TH-19TH CENTURIES)**

Georgian people were historically well acquainted with ancient culture owing to centuries-old political and cultural contacts with Greece. This is clearly reflected in old Georgian literature. Greek mythology and especially the Argonaut myth, whose episodes and mythological characters are mentioned in many old Georgian written sources, invited particular attention. Ephraim Mtsire's (the 11th century) translation of the *Hellenic Tales* were very popular in medieval Georgia.¹ It was one of the main sources of Greek mythology in Georgian language. The work influenced the original Georgian writing as well.² However, it is noteworthy that Georgian literature of the so-called transitional period offers information about Greek mythology with different ampleness and interpretation. The works of the 18th-19th centuries mention mythological characters and plots unknown to Georgian literature of the previous period. By that time, quite a number of collected works relating Greek myths were available in Georgia. "In the 18th century, closer contacts between Russia and Georgia resulted in the translation from Russian into Georgian of numerous works by ancient authors, many of which included modified redactions of particular plots or motifs from ancient writing."³ A large number of scholarly works were devoted to the study of these issues,

¹ For more information, see Abuladze I., *Hellenic Tales*, The Bulletin of the Institute of History of Language and Material Culture, Tbilisi, 1941 (in Georgian).

² Asatiani V., *Classical and Byzantine Traditions in Georgian Literature*, Tbilisi, 1996, 194 (in Georgian); Kutateladze L., *Lexicographic Works of David and Ioane Bagrationi*, Tbilisi, 1967, 10-13 (in Georgian).

³ Asatiani V., 1996, 234.

including researches by Korneli Kekelidze, Simon Kaukhchishvili, Iia Abuladze, Akaki Urushadze and others, which are no less relevant nowadays.

The study of ancient literature was considered to be especially important in the transitional period. This may be attributed to increasing interest in ancient world on the part of 18th-19th century Europe. Public awareness of ancient Greek mythology and its popularity was largely contributed by the works of distinguished writers and literary men taking interest in the related issues. This tendency is attested by the materials found in manuscripts. Presently, I will dwell on literary activities of Princes David, Ioane and Teimuraz Bagrationi (popularly known as Davit, Ioane and Teimuraz Batonishvili), whose works reflected the phenomenon of Greek myth in a very interesting way. The princes carried on old Georgian literary traditions, which implied close cultural contacts with the Greek world (ancient as well as Byzantine) throughout many centuries.

David Bagrationi (1767-1819) combined public work with literary, translating and scholarly activities. The *Mythology* ascribed to him has survived through many manuscripts including comments on ancient characters and terms. Admittedly, the source for David Bagrationi's *Mythology* was Chulkov's *Concise Mythological Dictionary*.⁴ However, the Georgian text offers elements missing in the Russian source. Studies also revealed that many comments included in the *Mythology* imply references to the *Hellenic Tales*; moreover, the work enables to reconstruct quite a number of illegible fragments from the *Hellenic Tales*.⁵

In the *Mythology*, David Bagrationi comments on Jason's identity and offers the traditional version of the retrieval of Golden Fleece from the Argonaut cycle: "Iason, the son of Iazon, king of Phessaly, whose great feat is that with the help of Medea, the daughter of the Colchian king, he obtained Golden-Fleeced Ram protected by many dragons, and Medea put the dragon to sleep cunningly."⁶ Remarkably, the *Hellenic Tales* mentions Jason on one occasion describing him sowing the dragon's teeth. It says nothing about the obtaining of the Golden Fleece, about Medea and the Colchian king, while the *Mythology* offers brief information from the Argonaut cycle. Presumably, the author referred to the Russian translation of the Greek source.

Ancient mythology is widely commented on in *Kalmasoba or Teaching through Games* by Ioane Bagrationi (1768-1830). The work proved to be a

⁴ Чулков М., Краткий мифологический лексикон, Сб., 1767.

⁵ Asatiani V., 1996, 247.

⁶ Asatiani V., *Antiquity in Old Georgian Literature*, Tbilisi, 1987, 199 (in Georgian).

real encyclopedia⁷ of those times, including huge information about various branches of science such as philosophy, psychology, ethics, logics, law, linguistics, poetics, rhetoric, history, medicine, theology and what is the most relevant for the present paper, about mythology. He was thoroughly acquainted with the Russian sources available in that period. They are clearly reflected in his writings. Presumably, Ioane Bagrationi must have referred to Russian translations of works by Greek philosophers and writers when he treated mythological themes. The author used a Roman version to provide detailed explanation of nearly all deities and relates the stories of the heroes known from Greek mythology including Jason. As the Argonaut legend is connected with Colchis, it is natural that Ioane Bagrationi treated it with particular interest and attempted to present it completely to Georgian readers. *Kalmasoba* provides a detailed description of how the Argonauts started their campaign to ancient Colchis. "He gathered all heroes and they went to Colchis to obtain the Golden Fleece. This campaign is called the Campaign of the Argonauts."⁸ This is one of the comparatively full versions of the Argonaut myth in Georgian literature of the transitional period. The story starts with the information about Jason's origin and identity. Then the author dwells on the tasks which Aietes set for him, on how he managed to accomplish them with Medea's help, and how he finally obtained the Golden Fleece: "Jason went to the Dragon and when he approached it, he gave the Dragon the sleeping drugs and immediately the Dragon fell dead on the ground. Then he took the Golden-Fleeced Ram as the award for his trial and came to his companions filled with joy and everybody congratulated him."⁹ The story told by Ioane Bagrationi accurately and coherently follows Apollonius' *Argonautica*.¹⁰ However, unlike Apollonius, he goes on with the story and tells us about Medea's lot after she left her country together with Jason. Medea married Jason but later on "Jason disliked his wife and wished to marry another woman."¹¹ The *Kalmasoba* describes how Jason's fiancée was burnt by the clothes sent to her by Medea. The Georgian author follows the Euripidean version and tells the readers how Medea, enraged by her

⁷ See Kekelidze K., *History of Georgian Literature*, vol. I, 1960; Baramidze A., *About the Realistic Stream in the 17th-18th c.*, *Georgian Literature, Literary Studies*, vol. 9, Tbilisi, 1955; Jamburia K., *Genre Properties of the Kalmasoba*, Matsne, Series of Language and Literature, 1984, 3 (in Georgian).

⁸ Ioane Batonishvili, *Teaching through Games*, prepared for publication by T. Kakhabrishvili and T. Kikvidze, vol. 1, 1990, 334 (in Georgian).

⁹ Ioane Batonishvili, 1990, 335.

¹⁰ Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica*, translated from Greek, introduced and commented on by A. Urushadze, Tbilisi 1948; Urushadze A., *Ancient Colchis in the Argonaut Legend*, Tbilisi, 1964 (in Georgian).

¹¹ Ioane Batonishvili, 1990, 335.

husband's unfaithfulness, killed her own children.¹² Admittedly, Euripides deliberately changed the myth to present Medea as a truly tragic character.¹³ This is proved by the fact that before the tragedy was composed, none of the sources mentions the episode of child-slaughter. Although many writers attempted to deny this fact, they referred to the Euripidean interpretation as a model as they treated the theme of Medea. It is hard to say whether Ioane Bagrationi shared this version or not but it is true that he presented to the Georgian public the character popular in ancient world and associated with great tragedy. It is beyond doubt that Ioane Bagrationi referred to many Greek sources as he treated the Argonaut myth. He even acquainted readers with Euripides' version, which Georgian writers normally tried to avoid. This remarkable fact seems to be unique in Georgian sources. Despite the fact that Jason tried to take revenge on his wife, Medea who was known for her witchcraft "flew away in a chariot harnessed to two dragons."¹⁴ This is how the Argonaut myth ends in *Kalmasoba*. Remarkably, it offers a lot of important information in connection with the Golden Fleece as well as with other Greek and Roman myths. The fact is that the tendency of taking interest in this theme is clearly reflected in Ioane Bagrationi's works. The author offers a definition of mythology: "Mythology is the art or study of traditional stories about gods and religions of the ancient Greeks and Romans."¹⁵ This was very important for the Georgian community of that period. The representatives of the transitional period carried on the diverse tradition that existed in Georgia throughout centuries and enjoyed original interpretation. As time passed, the interest in ancient world was increasing.

Teimuraz Bagrationi, a well-known scholar of the first half of the 19th century, devoted his work to the treatment of the Argonaut myth. According to Akaki Urushadze, the "History of Iveria" by Teimuraz Bagrationi offers the most comprehensive account of the Argonaut myth.¹⁶ In the opinion of scholars, the author referred to Russian sources. However, one of Teimuraz's manuscripts mentions that the story of "Phrix, Helle and the Golden Fleece" is based on the translated version of an early Greek source: "This story was found and translated into Georgian by Teimuraz, the son of King. It was translated from ancient Greek books and the translation, previously made by

¹² Euripides, *Medea*, translated by B. Bregvadze, introduced and commented by R. Gordeziani, Tbilisi, 1999, 69-71; See K. Nadareishvili's article in the present volume.

¹³ Gordeziani R., Greek Literature. Hellenic Epos, Lyric, Drama, I, Tbilisi, 2002, 397-398; Schadewaldt W., Die griechische Tragödie, Tübinger Vorlesungen, Band 4, Unter Mitwirkung von M. Schadewaldt, hrsg. I. Schudoma, 1996.

¹⁴ Ioane Batonishvili, 1990, 335.

¹⁵ Asatiani V., 1996, 257.

¹⁶ Urushadze A., 1964.

some Georgian, was revised and improved. I believe that the story of Jason and the Myrmidons was translated into Georgian eight hundred years ago" (H – 3723, 245).¹⁷ Apart from this, scholars admit that Teimuraz treated the first part of the Argonaut myth, namely Jason's trip to Colchis at the behest of his uncle, Medea's help, the retrieval of the Golden Fleece and the campaign of Jason and Heracles against Troy, on the basis of *Historia destructionis Troiae* by Guido de Columna. At this point Teimuraz finished his narrative as his only interest lay in the Argonaut theme.

It is truly challenging to compare Teimuraz's story with those by David and Ioane and trace differences. The plot and narrative structure varies in all the three works.¹⁸ David Bagrationi's *Mythology* is more informative and does not aim at giving a detailed account of the Golden Fleece legend. Although Teimuraz Bagrationi frequently refers to Georgian sources, including the *Mythology*, he does not do this when he relates the Argonaut story. Ioane and Teimuraz Bagrationi offer different versions. Teimuraz Bagrationi avoids the episode of childslaughter and presents the traditional ancient story according to which, after Medea learned about Jason's unfaithfulness, she left her children in Corinth and fled to Athens, while her children were skilled by the Corinthians.¹⁹ Teimuraz refers to the version of the myth existing before Euripides, which was repeatedly treated by authors of the later period. In the *History of Iveria* Teimuraz Bagrationi deliberately accentuates the Argonaut myth and tries to give a detailed account of the legend, which he regards as one of the most significant parts of the history of Iveria. So we may assume that Teimuraz Bagrationi deliberately included the traditional version of the Argonaut myth in his history.

Thus the above-mentioned examples attest that the interest in ancient culture did not diminish in the Georgian literature of the so-called transitional period. The presented material is the later response to this interest.

¹⁷ Asatiani V., 1996, 273; Akhobadze L., About the Sources of *Phrix and the Golden-Fleeced Ram* by Teimuraz Batonishvili (Prince Teimuraz), III, Tbilisi, 1973.

¹⁸ Jamburia K., Artistic Structure of the *Kalmasoba*, Criticism, 1983, 4 (in Georgian).

¹⁹ Gordeziani R., The Argonauts. The World of Greek Myths, Tbilisi, 1999, 128-130 (in Georgian).