

THE ARGONAUTICA IN POST-ANCIENT EPOCH

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THE ARGONAUT MYTH IN THE BYZANTINE LITERATURE

The Argonaut myth was well-known in the Byzantine Greek literature, in prose as well as in poetry. The elements of antiquity were still strong in the literature of the 4th-6th centuries. The motifs and themes of the Hellenistic period frequently repeated in poems. Byzantine poets continued to treat ancient myths and legends in their epic works (A. Urushadze, *The Ancient Land of Colchis in the Argonaut Myth*, Tbilisi, 1964, 82).

In the epic poem "Dionysiaca", Nonnos of Panopolis (the 4th-6th cc.) relates a fantastic legend about Dionysus' journey to India aimed to disseminate the culture of vine. Special attention is paid to Phrixus, who is a prominent figure in the story of Jason and the Argonauts. He arrived in Colchis on a flying golden ram. The poet also mentions Circe: "I heard that the exiled lad, who held the reins of the miraculous ram carrying him through the air to the land of Colchis, is still alive" (X, 99-101) (... εἰς χθόνα Κόλχων); "Circe – sister of Aietes, having magic power" (Κίρκη, σύγγονος Αἰήταο πολύθρονος, XIII, 331).

It is worth mentioning that the poet Marianus, known by his metaphrastic works (the 5th-6th cc.), elaborated and extended the "Argonautica" by Apollonius Rhodius (5 608 iambic trimeter).

Clement of Alexandria (the 2nd-3rd cc.), one of the Church fathers, refers to the Argonaut myth in the "Stromata" ("Miscellanies"):

- "Medea, the daughter of Aietes, was the first to use dyes to change the colour of hair" ("Georgica", I, 24).

- "Theseus, a rival of Heracles, lived one generation prior to the Trojan War... There was a period of 63 years from Dionysius to Heracles, Jason and other heroes of the Argonautic expedition. According to Apollonius' "Argonautica", Asclepius and the Dioscuri also accompanied them."

Methodius of Patara writes in his work "Symposium, or on Virginity" (the 3rd - 4th cc.) that the zodiac of Aries (the Ram) was exactly the ram that carried Phrixus and Helle, Athamas' daughter, away from the Scythians.

Among other writers who referred to the Argonaut legend were rhetoricians Libanius (314-393) and Themistius (317-388)¹, the sophist philosopher Eunapius (345-420) and the historian of the Christian Church, Salminius Hermias Sozomenus (400-450).

Procopius of Caesarea regards the Argonauts' expedition as a historical fact and mentions such names as Aietes, Apsyrtus, Jason and Medea. According to Procopius, there was a fortress of Aietes in the ancient land of Colchis, Lazica, near the bank of the river Phasis (Rioni). ... Ταύτην παραρρεῖ τὴν χώραν ποταμός Ρέων ὄνομα...

In the work "On the Reign of Justinian", Agathias Scholasticus (536-582) mentions Jason, the ship "Argo", the city of Apsorunt (derived from the name of Apsyrtus) and talks about the glorious past of the land of Colchis. "The Laz people are a strong and brave tribe, and even dominate over other strong tribes. They are proud of their historical glory and are excessively arrogant, which, probably, is not groundless. Among the tribes subordinated to another state, I can not recall any other tribe thus renowned and splendid owing to the profusion of wealth and the multitude of its subjects, to the abundance and rich harvest as well as to the loveliness of their character and agility" ("Georgica", III).

The kingdom of Aietes is mentioned in the history of Menander Protector (5th c.) – "A Truce between the Byzantines and the Persians": "When the Midians occupied the disputable territory of Colchis, intending to make them subjects of theirs, they failed to achieve anything for a long period, even after so many a struggle ...

Thus, if a man does not recall brazen-footed bulls and giants sprung from the ground, as well as many other wonders and unbelievable stories included in the myth about Aietes, he will be certain that the present state is even better" (Agathia, "Georgica", III, 50-51). So, the fragment refers to the well-known episode of the Argonaut myth.

Stephanus of Byzantium (the 6th c.) offers several remarkable explanations. Here are the notes included in the "Ethnica":

Aia – the capital of Colchis, built by Aietes, 300 stadia away from the sea; with two rivers, Hippius (Ἰππῶς) and Cyaneus (Κυάνεος), which make it a peninsula. In my opinion, it is the opposite, "Aietes" must have been derived from it, Aia Aietes in the same way as Asia Asiate. There is also Aia of

¹ According to Themistius, he was educated in rhetoric in the school of Phasis in Colchis (... not in a quiet and Hellenic environment, but at the edge of Pontus, near Phasis... Oratio, XXVII).

Thessaly, mentioned by Sophocles. About the first he says "sailed to Aia", while about the second he states "There is a certain Aia, the land of the Thessalians". Aia was also a spring in Macedonia, according to Antimachus' "Thebais" ("Georgica", III, 274).

The Amarantes – a Colchian tribe. The Phasis flows from their country (cf. Amiranmta – Amirani Mountain – mentioned in M. Chikovani's work) and that is why the Phasis is referred to as "Amarantio". Cf. the Scholiast: "Amarantos is a town in Pontus." According to Herodianus, they are the hills of Colchis from where the Phasis river flows. "Amarantioi – is a barbarian tribe dwelling above the Colchians, on the land – from this point the springs of the Phasis stream down, or it is a mountain in Colchis, called Amarantion, where the Phasis river has its source" (Apoll. Rh., II, 401; III, 1217; "Georgica", III, 275).

The island of Ares – located in Pontus in the neighborhood of the Colchians, as mentioned by Scymnus (Σκυμνός, the 2nd c. B.C.) in the "Asia".

Apsyrtides – the islands in the Adriatic Sea, called so after Apsyrtus, the son of Aietes, killed by his sister Medea on one of the islands. The inhabitants of these islands were called the Apsyrts. In Euxeinus Pontos, there is a place Apsar, earlier called Apsyrt. Artemidorus (1st c.) mentions in his "Overview" a town and an island called Apsyrt.

Dioscuria – one of the white islands in Libya. ... There is another Dioscuria in Pontus, Sebastopol, previously called Aia according to Nikanor (Nikanor of Alexandria, 2nd c.).

Kytaia – a Colchian town, the birthplace of Medea. There is another one, in Scythia. There is also a town "Kytaion" on Crete.

Phasis – There is a town in the land of the Colchians, on the Phasis river ("Georgica", III, 274-289).

The Chronograph of John Malalas includes the stories about the sorceress Circe, Circe's sister, Calypso, and Odysseus. According to John, Circe and Calypso were the daughters of Atlas and ruled over two islands. Circe was the ruler of Aia and the priestess of Helios. She claimed to be Helios' daughter and treated foreign visitors with food and drinks mixed with mesmerizing drugs. Circe bore Odysseus a son, who afterwards killed his father (FGH, I, Chron. v.p. 117, 17-119, 23, cf. "Odyssey", X, 135).

John Malalas refers to two individuals as the sources for this fragment. They are Sisyphus, to which the tradition ascribes a work called "Troid", and Dictis of Crete. No clear information is available about the latter; however, according to an ancient tradition, he presumably accompanied Cretan King Idomeneus, the son of Deucalion, and at the behest of the king composed in Phoenician "Diaries" describing the war.

The "Chronicles" also describe the battle between Amycus, the King of the Bebrycians and the Argonauts (see Apoll. Rhod., "Argonautica", II, 1-136).

According to Charax of Pergamon, the "History" or "Archeology" by John of Antioch (6th c.) offers rationalistic explanation of the myth of the Golden Fleece maintaining that it was a book written on leather and containing information about how to receive gold through chemistry (διά χημείας).

Besides, similarly to John Malalas, it gives an account of the battle between Amycus, the King of the Bebrycians, and the Argonauts. Byzantine writers (George Cedrenus, Nicephorus Callistus and an anonymous author) frequently included this episode of the story in their works. The same episode was related by Euthymius of Athos (955-1028), who had learned about the Argonaut legend from Byzantine sources (The Account of the Miracles of Archangel Michael by the Patriarch Germanus). The Georgian version includes interpolations. Euthymius, as usual, added to it some new passages, biblical and historical information. What captured my attention about Euthymius' interpolations was the story of the Sosten (Susten) temple located in the vicinity of Chalcedon. The story includes an episode from the Argonaut legend – the Argonauts' encounter with Amycus, the King of the Bebrycians, and the erection of the temple (K. Kekelidze, A. Urushadze).

Especially interesting are the comments and entries about Colchis and the Argonauts included in the Suda (the 10th c):

Aia – land; Aiaia – islands, Aietes – name, also "An Epic about Aietes", Argonauts – sailors of the Argo; The Fleece – A piece of golden-haired leather which Jason found in Colchis; a book written on leather containing information about how to receive gold through chemistry; (The Iberians and Iberia); Circe – a woman who prepared medicines. We call female villains "Circes"; Colchis – Lazeti (the land of the Laz); Kytaiia – a town. Also Kytiisis; Kytaiion – a certain place, Medea – Colchian, the daughter of Aietes, the greatest sorceress of all women. She made Jason invulnerable so that he could yoke the fire-breathing bulls (to a plough) and still the earth. Having acquiring the Golden-Haired Fleece, he carried away Medea as well. The Greeks used to call natural oil Medea's oil (see Nikandros, the 2nd c. B.C., sch. 249, 35). This note is preserved in the work of Nicandros Colophon (the 2nd c. B.C.).

"The Medean or a one-day medicine" – a preparation called Colchian or Barbarian, which barbarians also call oil (νάφθαλας); if applied (to one's body) or put on the clothes worn over, or something else is dipped in it and then is exposed to the sun, all will be destroyed and wiped out as if by fire: because of the burning quality of it.

Apparently, Medea discovered the way to prepare it, and that is why it is called Colchian (medicine)... (The remedy) grows by the Himan river (in ancient sources the name is used to refer to the rivers in Scythia: Dnestr, Kuban, Bug), and by the noon it fades away. This may also account for calling it "one-day") because those who drink it cannot survive a full day..."

Joseph Genesisius (the 10th c.) in his work "Reigns" (Γενεσιού Βασιλείαι) refers to the Argonaut myth to state that the Armenians borrowed their appellation from Armenus, the inhabitant of Armenion, a town in Thessaly (ἐξ' Ἀρμένιου) who took part in the campaign to Colchis together with Jason ("Georgica", IV, 2, 308).

George Cedrenus (the 11th c.) in his "Concise History" tells the story of the Argonauts' expedition and of Heracles' stay in Colchis in the company of the Argonauts.

The work of Eudocia Ἰωνία – "Ionia" – is a historical-mythological dictionary based on different sources.

In Eudocia's work, the Argonaut myth is treated in detail. The following themes are presented as separated articles: Athamas (28); Aietes (37); Alcimede (45); Argos (197); About the Argo (198); Apsyrtus (214); About Phrixus and Helle (342); How many and who the Argonauts were, whom and where they originated from (439); Jason (478 a); Genealogy of Jason (478 B); Circe (537); The Ram (543); Medea (647); Phrixus (954).

The above-mentioned extracts attest that Byzantine authors frequently referred to the episodes of the Argonaut myth, and presented the epic treatment of the events. What captures attention are the characters and place names of the myths commented on in the works of historians and encyclopaedic collections. It is noteworthy that a great deal of information about mythological characters and place names can be found in encyclopedias and the works of historians.

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