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THE LAND OF AIETES AND THE ARGO IN THE HOMERIC TRADITION

The theme of the Argonauts' campaign, naturally, holds a modest place in the Homeric epics; anyway, scholars find the data from *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* very important when they discuss certain key issues related to the earliest version of the legend. In the present paper, I will dwell on two aspects: the Homeric perception of the land of Aietes and the understanding of the Argo's role in the Homeric tradition.

When discussing the location of the land of Aietes in the earliest assumed Greek sources, scholars find it highly important to pay due attention to the data from the Homeric epics that reflect the situation prior to the Great Greek colonization. XII, 59-72 of *The Odyssey*, which have been analyzed many times, and especially line 70 Ἄργω πασι μέλουσα / πασιμέλουσα, παρ' Αἰήταο πλέουσα, as well as other data from the poem, lead to several conclusions: a) The mission of the Argo was widely known in the Homeric times. Regardless of how we interpret the epithet of the Argo – as composed of two components πασι μέλουσα 'desired by all'¹ or as a single composite πασιμέλουσα 'famed by many in songs' (allbesungne) or 'related by all' (die alle in den Erzählungen beschäftigt)², it is doubtless that the epithet refers to considerable popularity of the mission. b) The objective of the mission was connected with the land of Aietes. And the name Αἰήτης enables to reconstruct the name of the land itself as Αἶα.³ The same is suggested by Αἰαίη νῆσος that refers to the island of Circe. The name must be interpreted

¹ Such interpretation is presented in the editions by Th. W. Allen and P. von der Mühl.

² For the details in favour of such interpretation cf. P. Dräger, *Argo Pasimelousa*, Stuttgart 1993, 14 ff.

³ For more details see A. Lesky, *Aia*, Wiener Studien 63, 1949, 22-68 = A. Lesky, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bern, München 1966, 26-62 (the present paper refers to this text).

as the island of Αἶα or Αἶάη.⁴ Since Homer does not mention the name Κολχίς, it should be assumed that it entered the Greek tradition after the colonization, replacing the earlier name Αἶα.⁵ c) According to the Homeric epic, the location of Αἶα is connected with the location of Circe's Island, which gave rise to ambiguous interpretations already in ancient sources. Consequently, similarly to Αἶάη of Circe, the land of Aietes must be a certain fabulous spot in the area where Helios was supposed to rise. Some scholars believe that the supposed fabulous spot should by no means refer to the Black Sea basin as Greeks had quite a vague idea of the region before colonization. In this regard, Paul Dräger, who believes that Αἶα must have been located somewhere within Ethiopia, goes so far as to attribute any attempt of relating legendary Αἶα to Colchis solely to the expression of local patriotism on the part of Georgian scholars.⁶ In this respect, we should bear in mind that the identification was suggested by ancient Greek authors, who must have been less likely to suffer local Georgian patriotism.⁷ Likewise categorical is the following statement of the Hittitologist Haas: 'In the earliest tradition, Aia had nothing in common with Colchis. In fact, Aia is the nether land, a mythic land, supposedly located far to the East, on the Black Sea coast.'⁸

Since the Homeric poems are believed to be of almost primary relevance as concerns the discussion of the location of the land of Aietes, let us find out whether *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* offer any implications in this respect. The disputes over the location of Αἶάη νῆσος or Circe's island can hardly be of any help as, whether it reflects or not certain geographic realities, I believe

⁴ For the etymology see A. Lesky, *Aia*, 46 ff.

⁵ Some scholars regard the collocation ἐς Αἶαν τε τὴν Κολχίδα (I, 2), ἐς Αἶαν τὴν Κολχίδα (VII, 193), ἐξ Αἶης τῆς Κολχίδος (VII, 197) attested by Herodotus as a proof in favor of an assumption that in the times of Herodotus there were several theories on the location of Αἶα, which could explain simultaneous use of two formatives Αἶα and Κολχίς by Herodotus. It is difficult to assume that Herodotus, distinguished for his honest account of the information available to him, could have refrained from the discussion of those theories and confined himself solely to allusions through the simultaneous mentioning of the two names. It seems far more realistic to assume that in this way Herodotus distinguished between the land of Aietes of the Heroic Age, Aia-Colchis, and historical west Georgia – simply Colchis. Cf. also P. Гордезиани, Αἶα в древнейших греческих источниках (Античность и современность, Москва 1972, 178 dd. = Λεκτά, 125-143), 131.

⁶ P. Dräger, *Argo Pasimelousa*, 315, Note 75: 'Für die mit quälender Penetranz von dem Georgier Lordkipanidze vertretene Ansicht, Aia / Kolchis sei von Anfang an mit Georgien identisch gewesen, gibt es nur lokalpatriotische, keine wissenschaftliche Begründungen.' Also cf. *Aia*, DNP, I, 1 by the same author.

⁷ See also O. Lordkipanidze, *At the Origins of Ancient Georgian Civilization*, Tbilisi 2002, 148 (in Georgian).

⁸ V. Haas, *Magie und Mythen im Reich der Hethiter. I. Vegetationskulte und Pflanzenmagie*, Berlin, Hamburg, s.a., 283.

that the island obviously goes beyond the limits of actual geography.⁹ Its name must certainly be related to the name of Αἶα, the legendary land of the Golden Fleece; however, this is not sufficient to believe that the island of Circe was located near the land of Aietes. The poem does not refer to contacts with so-called continental Aia, or any other settled land. However, the mythical or unreal nature of Aiaia does not mean that the land of Aietes should be assigned to the same category. In my opinion, it is less likely that generations of poets, who found the importance and popularity of the Argonauts' voyage unquestionable, failed to specify to a certain degree the location of the land of Aietes already at the early stages of the formation of the tradition.

I believe that such indicators and landmarks can be found in the Homeric epics as well.

It has repeatedly been mentioned that the Homeric epic unambiguously names one point of the Argo's voyage, the island of Lemnos. Euneos, the son of Jason and Hypsipyle, is mentioned three times in *The Iliad*. The presentation of the character follows the principle that in fact works as a system in the poem: episodic characters are at first presented in a comparatively ample way, which enables the author to mention them briefly later on, as they again appear in the plot.¹⁰ VII, 467-475 present 'Euneos, the son of Jason, born to him by Hypsipyle', who had sent from Lemnos (ἐκ Λήμνου) ships loaded with wine. XXI, 34-36 present the story of Lycaon, who was sold on the island of Lemnos. The lines mention 'the son of Jason' (υἱὸς Ἰήσονος), without the name. Again, in connection with the story of Lycaon, Chapter 23, lines 740-749 mention 'Euneos the Jasonid' ('Jason's son Euneos') (Ἰησονίδης Εὐνηος), without referring to his mother. The author of the lines should have undoubtedly been aware that the Argonauts, heading for the land of Aietes, stopped at the island of Lemnos.¹¹ It is natural to assume that after leaving Iolcos the Argonauts were to pass the island located north to the Aegean if their destination was the Hellespont. Both

⁹ The undefined location of Circe's island and its metaphorical likeness with the bridge between this world and the nether world is implied in *The Odyssey* itself. Odysseus' words 'My friends, we know not where darkness is, or where the dawn, neither where the sun, who gives light to mortals, goes beneath the earth, or where he rises' (Od., X, 190 ff.) are an impressive description of the location of Aiaia. Cf. N. Marinatos, *Circe and Liminality: Ritual Background and Narrative Structure, Homer's World. Fiction, Tradition, Reality*, ed. Øivind Andersen and Matthew Dickie, Bergen 1995, 133 ff.

¹⁰ Cf. R. Gordeziani, *The Iliad and the Issues of History and Ethnic Genesis of the Aegean Population*, Tbilisi 1970, 42 ff. (in Georgian).

¹¹ Although some researchers believe that these fragments from *The Iliad* can be later insertions, or the phrases may refer not Jason the Argonaut, but to some other Jason, such ideas of 'skeptics' are not shared by the majority of scholars (cf. P. Dräger, *Argo Pasimelousa*, 12 ff.).

ancient and modern scholars believe that the Island of Lemnos was very important to the navigation between the Aegean and the Black Sea.¹² The latest archeological discoveries from Troy revealed that navigations between Aegean and Pontus were undertaken as early as the Bronze Age, and Lemnos and Troy played key roles in this process.¹³

The frequent mentioning of the name the Hellespont is likewise remarkable. As it has repeatedly been mentioned, the name refers not only to a narrow strait, but to a larger area of the North Aegean.¹⁴ *The Iliad* presents the name either without an epithet, or with four epithets. It is noteworthy that none of the epithets makes up a fixed collocation that would repeat unchanged later.

If any of the four epithets of the Hellespont (ἀγάρροος, ἀπείρων, πλατύς, ἰχθυόεις) repeats, it is presented either as a different case form (VII, 86: ἐπὶ πλατεῖ Ἑλλησπόντῳ / XVII, 432: ἐπὶ πλατὺν Ἑλλήσποντον), or in a different position and case (II, 845: Ἑλλήσποντος ἀγάρροος / παρ' ἀγάρροον Ἑλλήσποντον).

This leads to an assumption that by the Homeric times it had not been long that the name had been established in the epic tradition and it had not yet become a steady poetic formula. If we bear in mind that the majority of geographical names of the region were not Greek by origin, the absolutely unambiguous Greek name Ἑλλήσποντος may suggest that it was formed within the Greek tradition. The widely accepted etymology of it is Helle's (Ἑλλης) sea (πόντος), which is shared by almost every scholar after P. Kretschmer.¹⁵ Whether the myth about Phrixus and Helle was initially an independent traditional story or not¹⁶, there is enough ground to suppose that in the mythopoetic tradition it was obviously linked to the story of the Golden-Haired Ram and the voyage of the Argonauts at least in the period of the Dark Ages. Consequently, in the period when the name Ἑλλήσποντος originated, i.e. in the pre-Homeric tradition, it was believed that the golden

¹² A. Archontidou-Argyri, Poliochni and the Islands of the Northeastern Aegean in the Bronze Age, Poliochni on Smoke-Shroud Lemnos, An Early Bronze Age Centre in the North Aegean, Aqhvna 1997, 66: 'Lemnos was the first and last port of call for mariners and merchants from and to the Hellespont, and it naturally received the raw materials – above all metal – that were the cargoes of their ships.'

¹³ Cf. R. Gordeziani, Die Argonautensage im Lichte der neuesten Forschung, Lektav – Ausgewählte Schriften, Tbilisi 2000, 311 ff.

¹⁴ Cf. J. Latacz, Homers Ilias, Gesamtkommentar, Bd. II, 2. Gesang, Fasz. 2: Kommentar, Leipzig 2003, 276 ff.

¹⁵ V. Georgiev, Hellespontos und Bosporos, Linguistique Balkanique, III, 2, Sofia 1961, 19 ff. offers a partly differing etymology, but neither does he go against the opinion that in Greek mythopoetic tradition the name was interpreted as 'the sea of Helle's' from an earlier period.

¹⁶ Cf. R. Gordeziani, Die Argonautensage..., 311 ff.

ram flew over this place as it left Greece and fled to the land of Aietes;¹⁷ and this would be possible only if the ram headed for the Black Sea. *The Iliad* provides quite specific information that the Homeric perception included the Anatolian coast of Pontus. Here are Paphlagonia, presented through a number of geographical indicators (ethnonyms – the Enetoi, toponyms – Cyturus, Sesamus, Cromna, Aegialus, hydronyms – Parthenius, highlands Erithynoi) and Halizones from Alybe, identified with a Colchian tribe of Chalybes as early as the ancient times.¹⁸

Since it has become more or less clear that Homer, or the tradition he referred to, either intentionally or unintentionally, linked the land of Aietes with the Black Sea basin, we could even try to go farther and look for a more specific location of the land. In this regard, it is essential to single out several questions: a) which was the region of Pontus that prior to the Greek colonization corresponded to the ideas and beliefs regarding the fabulous land of Aietes built in the mythopoetic tradition? There may be an unambiguous answer to this question. According to one of the most reliable specialists in ancient Black Sea studies, Mr. Otar Lordkipanidze, ‘before the Greeks settled the Black Sea coasts, i.e. in the 8th-7th centuries B.C., the western and northern coasts of the Black Sea were completely uninhabited. Only the Colchian coast was densely populated.’¹⁹ What is more important, the settlement carried on the traditions rooted in the brilliant Colchian culture of the Bronze Age.²⁰ b) According to ancient sources, which was the particular territory of the Black Sea or of some other region which either Greek or local tradition linked to the land of Aietes and the related events? I believe that the answer is likewise unambiguous. All of the sources providing specific information in this regard locate the destination of the Argonautic expedition on the territory of Colchis. In this case, Greek sources naturally invite primary attention as regardless of whether the tradition reflects or not the possible Mycenaean expedition to the Black Sea region, it is doubtless that this cycle of traditional stories was formed exactly within the Greek mythopoetic tradition. Presumably, the basic geographical indicators, later insistently related to the land of the Golden Fleece, figured in early beliefs on the kingdom of Aietes. It is likewise remarkable that, again according to ancient sources, it was the population of historical Colchis that identified themselves with the descendents of the

¹⁷ In this case it is not relevant which of the versions (that of flying over or sailing by ship) was the initial one.

¹⁸ Cf. J. Latacz, *op. cit.*, 851 ff; R. Gordeziani, *Mediterranea-Kartvelica*, III, *The Etruscans. Conclusive Comments*, Tbilisi 2007 (in Georgian).

¹⁹ O. Lordkipanidze, *At the Origins of Ancient Georgian Civilization*, Tbilisi 2002, 185 (in Georgian).

²⁰ O. Lordkipanidze, *op. cit.*, 124 ff.

powerful land of Aietes, even if predominantly due to the influence of the Greek tradition.²¹ Interestingly, archeological material has revealed the traces of the reflection of the Argonautic events going back to the period before the Greek colonization.²² It is less likely that the land of Aietes and the related events, which in fact had firmly been established in the system of the Heroic Age, could have changed location so summarily and drastically as early as the 8th century, more so that the tendency of changing the setting has not occurred ever since. c) It is certainly important to analyze the lexical formatives (proper names and appellations) found in ancient Greek sources and presumably related to the land of Aietes which in fact neither belong to the group of the so-called speaking Greek words nor have Greek etymology. Relevant studies reveal that almost all of them go back to Kartvelian roots, mainly represented through the forms that must have been found in common Kartvelian language, i.e. in the 2nd millennium B.C. Here belong: Κύταια, Φᾶσις, Πόλα, κῶας, μῶλυ, Ἄψυρτος, Κίρκη, and according to Schmitt-Brandt, even Μήδεια.²³

As a follow-up, it would be natural to touch the point which in modern studies is a priori found settled. What was the name that was used to refer to the land of Aietes in the early Greek mythopoetic or Homeric tradition? After the well-known work by A. Lesky no one questions the name Αἶα. The arguments are clear enough: a. The name Αἰήτης enables to reconstruct the name of the land Αἶα through the typical Greek – (vocal) της suffix and should be understood as ‘a man from Aia’, or ‘Aian’ (‘der Mann von Aia’). b. νῆσος Αἰαίη, the land of Circe mentioned by Homer should be understood as ‘the island owned by Aia’ (‘die zu Aia gehörige Insel’).²⁴

However, what escapes attention is that Αἶα as an independent formative standing for the name of the land of Aietes is attested neither by Homer, nor in any other early source. Only Mimnermus (11/11a W, 11 D, 10 GP) mentions Aia (ἔξ Αἶης), from where Jason took away the ‘great fleece’ (μέγα κῶας), but if we bear in mind that the same fragment mentions as well a ‘city of Aietes’ (Αἰήταο πόλιν), ‘where divine Jason went’ (ἵν’ ᾗχετο θεῖος Ἰήσων), it may appear that Αἶα is a city and not a country. Obviously, the name gradually expanded and was eventually referred to the land of Aietes in general. The process is evident from the Classical Period, when Αἶα was used as either the synonym of Colchis, or the city of Colchis, or even its

²¹ For comparing the sources refer to A. Urushadze, *Ancient Colchis in the Argonaut Legend*, Tbilisi 1964 (in Georgian).

²² Cf. V. Licheli’s article published in the present volume.

²³ For more details cf. R. Gordeziani, *Mediterranea-Kartvelica*, III, 469 ff; L. Chotalishvili’s article in this volume.

²⁴ A. Lesky, *Aia*, 46 ff.

capital.²⁵ This certainly allows supposing that Αἶα was initially the name of the place or the city where Aietes resided and its outskirts. It was this name that the anthroponym Αἰήτης and the name of Circe's island originated from in the Greek tradition. Another supporting argument is that there is no term derived from Αἶα that would function as an ethnonym to refer to the population of the land of Aietes. The only exceptions are Circe and Medea, who Homer and Apollonius Rhodius sometimes refer to as Αἰαίη.²⁶ Naturally, despite the remark by Stephanus of Byzantium²⁷, it is difficult to consider the formative to be the widespread ethnikon derived from Αἶα as it is not normally used to refer to any other person coming from the land of Aietes. And certainly, if Αἶα is synonymous of Κόλχις, there is in fact no synonym for Κόλχοι. In the same way, in collocations τὸ (τὰ) Κόλχων ἔθνος (ἔθνεα), γένος, φύλα, ἄστρα, ἤθεα and so on Κόλχων is never replaced with Αἰαίων or any other ethnonym derived from Αἶα even in clearly mythological contexts. All this leads to the thought that the name of land of Aietes should have been Κόλχις even in the earliest Greek sources. It is common knowledge that the name is found in Eumelos' work, according to whom Aietes 'went to the land of Colchis' (ᾤχετο Κολχίδα γαῖαν).²⁸ At present, I would like to refrain from joining the disputes over the period when Eumelos' *Corinthiaca* was composed, which is traditionally defined as the 8th-7th centuries B.C., although there are attempts in favor of a later period.²⁹ I will only mention that the name corresponding to the version of Eumelos is the one found in the 8th century B.C. Urartian records that refers to one of the well-known state units of west Georgia (Qulḥa). Evidently, the same country is mentioned as 'Kilkhi' (Qilḥi) in the 12th century inscription of Tiglatpileser I.³⁰ If the correspondence between Mycenaean ko-ki-da, ko-ki-de-jo and Κολχίδας, Κολχίδεος- is ultimately attested³¹, we will have enough grounds to suppose that Κόλχις was the name for the land of Aietes as early as the period prior to the colonization. As concerns Αἶα, if it truly reflects any geographical name, in my opinion, it must have resulted from the Greek interpretation of the name of Κύταια, the principle city of Colchis, as a unity

²⁵ For comparing the sources see A. Urushadze, op. cit.

²⁶ Cf. A. Lesky, *Aia*, 46.

²⁷ Cf. A. Lesky, *Aia*, 46.

²⁸ For more details see A. Urushadze, op. cit., 194; G. Huxley, *Greek Epic Poetry from Eumelos to Panyassis*, London 1969, 60 ff.

²⁹ For the review of the issue see A. И. Иванчик, *Накануне Колонизации, Москва-Берлин 2005*, 63.

³⁰ For the review of the existing literature on the issue cf. R. Gordeziani, *Mediterranea-Kartvelica*, III.

³¹ Cf. L. Gordeziani's article published in the present volume.

composed of two components, and its subsequent reduction.³² This may explain the fact that seemingly earlier Αἶα and later Κύταια sometimes are presented in Greek sources as synonymous names for the principle city of Colchis.³³ Κύταια corresponds to the western Georgian place name Kutaisi, which is among the rare place names that can linguistically be reconstructed to the common Kartvelian level, i.e. at least to the first half of the 2nd millennium B.C.³⁴

The Homeric epics are likewise relevant to the interpretation of another aspect of the myth about the Argonauts. In my opinion, the poet either creates himself or reflects the idea formed in the earlier tradition, which I would call the concept of the expedition of the Argo and the Argonauts to the land of Aietes. The above-mentioned abstract from *The Odyssey* is relevant in many ways. After describing the severe nature of the Planctae, Circe says to Odysseus:

‘One seafaring ship alone has passed by those, that Argo famed of all, on her voyage from Aietes, and even her the wave would speedily have dashed there against the great crags, had not Hera sent her through because Jason was dear to her’ (12, 69-72).

The lines are noteworthy in several ways. As Homer relates the story of the expedition, he highlights the Argo, which is either *πάσι μέλουσα* ‘desired of all’ or *πασιμέλουσα* ‘famed by many in songs’. Although the Argo overcame the dangers of the Planctae owing to Hera’s fondness for Jason, none of the lines illustrate personal contribution of Jason as the performer of heroic feats. If we bear in mind that the most distinct protagonist of *The Odyssey* is the son of Laertes, and that his companions managed to overcome the perils of the Planctae solely owing to the courage and skillfulness of their leader, we may conclude that Homer intentionally accentuates the parallels between the routes followed by Odysseus and the Argo; However, if in the first case the primary accent falls on Odysseus, in the second case the attention is concentrated on the Argo and not Jason or any of the Argonauts. Consequently, we may say that the object of glorification, the one ‘famed by many in songs’, is the Argo and not any of the heroes. In my opinion, the tendency of interpreting Jason as an anti-hero, which is also discernible in *The Theogony* of Hesiod (992-1002), Mimnermus (10 PG), and is distinctly shaped following the works of Pindar and Euripides, can be traced already in *The Odyssey*.

³² Cf. R. Gordeziani, *Mediterranea-Kartvelica*, III, 473.

³³ For comparing the sources cf. A. Urushadze, *op. cit.*

³⁴ Cf. R. Gordeziani, *Mediterranea-Kartvelica*, III, 471 ff.

Besides, in my opinion, the significance of Odysseus' roaming in the Homeric epic is different from the significance of the Argonautic expedition. The whole process of Odysseus' roaming after the Trojan War is to a certain extent motivated by the personal desire of the protagonist to return home. His reckless companions doomed themselves to death due to the acts of violence and haughtiness (ἀτασθαλίησι), and neither of Odysseus' ships was allotted to carry the son of Laertes home as they crashed to pieces while the Argo, having a great mission, successfully accomplished it carrying its passengers back safe and bringing into their country the principle target of the mission – the Golden Fleece. That is why the ship is 'desired of all', or 'famed by many in songs'. I believe that it was the Homeric tradition that largely contributed to the development of the image of the Argo into the unfading symbol of a successful naval expedition, and later on, to the formation of such terms as the Argonauts and the Argonautica, which have most comprehensive and diverse senses. Ever since ancient times, the Argo has been a perpetual symbol.