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**FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF SOME DETAILS
FROM THE ARGONAUT LEGEND ACCORDING TO
THE ARGONAUTICA BY APOLLONIUS RHODIUS**

Admittedly, the Argonaut legend reflects ancient contacts of Hellenic sailors and Colchian tribes. They are evidenced by the myths about Aeetes' leaving Corinth and residing in Aea-Colchis, Phrixus' fleeing to the land of Aeetes, and Jason's voyage to Colchis to retrieve the Golden Fleece. This legend, treated by ancient authors, was transformed as the time passed.

Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica* is the most extensive account of the Argonaut legend. The author referred to numerous sources and offered a lot of noteworthy information regarding particular episodes of the legend, the settlement of Colchian tribes and their customs and habits.¹ The *Argonautica* presents a logical and coherent account of the Argonauts' preparations for the perilous voyage, of the voyage itself, the arrival of the heroes in the land of Aeetes, Aea-Colchis (Κυτταῖς²), the obtaining of the Golden Fleece and their way back. I would like to dwell only on some of the details: 1. The main

¹ See A. Urushadze, *Ancient Colchis in the Argonaut Legend*, Tbilisi 1964 (in Georgian). The Greek text of Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*, together with the Georgian version of it, was published, introduced, commented on and supplemented with an index by A. Urushadze, Tbilisi 1970.

² It is obvious that Kutaia is connected with Kutaisi. Bearing in mind the Kartvelian etymology of kut- stem, the place-name can be interpreted as 'a settlement on a vacant area between the mountains' – R. Gordeziani, *The Pre-Greek and the Kartvelian*, Tbilisi 1985, 174 (in Georgian). Remarkably, according to Apollonius' *Argonautica*, the Argonauts sailed to the Plain of Ares, located opposite the city, to accomplish Aeetes' tasks. The Colchians stood on the Caucasian hill to watch them, while Aeetes was walking along the river bank to witness the accomplishment of the tasks (III, 1274-1275). So, the place described by Apollonius Rhodius exactly corresponds to the geographical name Kutaia – 'the site between the mountains'.

objective of the Argonauts' voyage to Colchis; 2. The motivation that underlies Jason's claims for the Golden Fleece; 3. The cause of Aetes' rage; 4. The complexity of Aetes' tasks.

Jason went to Colchis not of his own, but at the behest of his uncle, Pelias, who was reluctant to hand down the royal throne to the legal successor, Jason. He was sure that Jason would be killed either during the journey or in the land of Aetes (I, 15-17; I, 202-206; I, 446-447). As an argument in favour of the voyage, Pelias referred to Zeus' will to retrieve Phrixus' ram to Hellas (I, 1193-1195; III, 338-339).

Why did Jason obey Pelias, who certainly did not favour him? Why did the courageous heroes from different parts of Hellas, including sons of Pelias, choose to go together with Jason? The Golden Fleece was only a favourable occasion for the true motivation – the aspiration of the heroes to earn fame, and at the same time to see the legendary Aea and King Aetes (185-189). This very purpose compelled Augers, the son of Helios, to join the Argonauts (172-274).

Jason's companions are brave men, experienced either in navigation or in warfare (II, 869-875), or in both (I), and this voyage made them even more experienced and renowned. It is arguable whether the obtaining of the Golden Fleece was a heroic feat or not as ancient written sources reflect different appreciations of this fact. Apollonius Rhodius states in the beginning of the *Argonautica* that he is going to recall 'the famous deeds of men of old' (παλαιγενέων κλέα φωτῶν), who sailed into Pontus to obtain the Golden Fleece at Pelias' behest (I, 1-4).

It is not clear what exactly is implied in Apollonius' words: whether the heroic feat refers to the obtaining of the Golden Fleece or to undertaking the hazardous voyage to Colchis – probably to the distant voyage.

The obtaining of the Fleece was not the dream of the Argonauts; it was rather a proof to attest to their feats.

Although the Argonauts encountered numerous dangers, they courageously went on their way to Colchis. They believed that gods would not abandon them. The prophecy of Phineus encouraged them to hope that they would succeed in overcoming the perils of the sea. However, Phineus said nothing about the ways of obtaining the Fleece, as gods are reluctant to give humans a detailed account of their decisions (II, 178-182).

Jason and his men hoped to obtain the Fleece either freely or by force. Jason had envisaged from the very start these alternative ways of acquiring the Golden Ram. He believed that the leader of the Argonauts was to decide what to do – νείκεα συνηθείας τε μετὰ ξείνοισι βαλέσθαι (I, 340) – seek an agreement with strangers or fight them.

Every Hellene knew that if Aeetes did not let the Argonauts have the Fleece, they would immediately set his palace to fire (I, 244-245). With this belief people saw off the heroes.

This plan was acceptable for all the Argonauts. When Argos, the son of Phrixus, told Jason and his men that dangers awaited those in pursue of the Golden Fleece, Peleus declared proudly and threateningly that if Aeetes refused to give the Fleece to the heroes, hardened in the war, for friendship's sake (φιλότητι), the king would find it extremely difficult to resist them in fight (II, 1220-1225).

However, the Argonauts gave up the aggression as they came to Colchis. Aeneas, one of the sailors, advises Jason to think it out how to behave with Aeetes: address him courteously, with 'soft words' (μειλιχίη), or find some other way to achieve their goal (II, 1277-1280). Jason is of the same opinion. He does not intend to start fighting even if Aeetes refuses to give away the Golden Fleece. 'And when I meet him I will first make trial with words to see if he will be willing to give up the golden fleece for friendship's sake or not, φιλότητι δέρος χρύσειον ὀπάσσαι (III, 180), but trusting to his might will set at naught our quest. For so, learning his forwardness first from himself, we will consider whether we shall meet him in battle, or some other plan shall avail us, if we refrain from the war-cry. And let us not merely by force, before putting words to the test, deprive him of his own possession – σφέτερον κτέρας. But first it is better to go to him and win his favour by speech. Oftentimes, I ween, does speech accomplish at need what prowess could hardly catty through, smoothing the path in manner befitting. And he once welcomed noble – ἀμυμόνα – Phrixus, a fugitive from his stepmother's wiles and the sacrifice prepared by his father' (III, 179-191).³

Why do the Argonauts assume that Aeetes may willingly give away the Fleece, and if there is such a chance, why do they doubt that the king may refuse? Whose property is the Fleece, Colchian or Greek?

Why does not Jason intend to demand the Fleece categorically? He directly states that the Golden Fleece is Aeetes' possession 'σφέτερον κτέρας' (III, 186). Consequently, the Argonauts consider it to be somebody else's possession, not their own ὀθνείον κτέρας (III, 389). Aeetes also thinks that the Argonauts are trying to seize a strange (i.e. his) property ὀθνείοις κτεάτεσσιν (III, 591). Neither does Jason say that the Hellenes have any claims regarding the Fleece. According to Argus, the son of Phrixus, if Aeetes gives the Fleece away of his own will, it will be a gift for the Argonauts δωτίνης (III, 352).

³ Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica*, translated by R. C. Seaton, Loeb Classical Library, London, William Heinemann LTD, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press MCMLXVII.

Aeetes once took pity on fugitive Phrixus Φρίξος ἀλύξας (I, 291), and now Jason is a 'suppliant' – ἰκετής (III, 987). However, the king finds them altogether different. According to Aeetes, Phrixus was chivalrous μελιχίη and pious θεουδέη (III, 586), and besides, he received the fugitive at Zeus' request. The king offered him a shelter and gave him his daughter in marriage. So, his progeny settled in Colchis. Phrixus gave the king the Fleece as the sign of his gratefulness – Aeetes had not asked him to do so (III, 148). Moreover, he asked his sons before his death to go to his fatherland and fetch the fortune of Athamas ((II, 1093-1094); II, 1153). Paradoxically enough, the sons of Phrixus first recovered the fortune of their father and later helped the Argonauts obtain the Fleece.

To accomplish Peleas' order, the Argonauts asked Aeetes to give them the property which rightfully belonged to the king. The Hellenes did not even attempt to present the hospitable king with gifts. They offered gifts (including a sacred robe, which Hypsipyle had given to Jason, IV, 421-435) to Apsyrtus only after he overtook the Argo.

According to Pelias, Zeus was enraged as he requires that the Hellenes retrieve the Fleece and redeem (ποιός) the grave sin (ἄτλητον ἄγος) of Phrixus (III, 336-338). What is implied in the phrase 'the grave sin' of Phrixus? He should not have fled from the wrath of his mother-in-law; or perhaps, the phrase refers to Athamas' sin to Phrixus, as it was Hermes who made the Ram golden, and upon whose advice Phrixus sacrificed it to Zeus (III, 1140-1145). Why does Pelias demand the Ram back? According to an early version of the myth, Phrixus sacrificed himself because hunger threatened the country. And the Ram, which was later sacrificed to Zeus, was the substitution for Phrixus.⁴ So, Pelias' behest to retrieve the Ram certainly had grounds if we suppose that Phrixus, prepared for the sacrifice, had fled the country or had been taken away by the Ram. However, the king of

⁴ Evidently, this episode reflects a human offering ritual against draught. Phrixus represents the so-called lad-to-offer, who is to sacrifice himself of his own will for common benefit. According to Pherecydes, the Scholiast on Pindar (the 4th century B.C.), the Fourth Pythian Ode of Pindar (228) implies that Phrixus allowed to be sacrificed on his own free will after the loss of crops. See *The World of Greek Myths, The Argonauts*, narrated and commented on by R. Gordeziani, Logos, Tbilisi 1999, 56-57 (in Georgian).

According to J. Frezer, the Phrixus myth reflects an ancient custom when the king sacrificed himself in the time of a disaster, mostly hunger. Sometimes, the king sacrificed his child. So, Athamas was substituted by Phrixus, and later by Melicertes and Learchus born by Ino, who Athamas killed in madness. Д. Д. Фрезер, *Золотая ветвь*, Москва 1986, 276-278.

According to one of the assumptions, Peleas wished to retrieve Phrixus' Ram (i.e. Phrixus' soul) because the Colchian tradition of handing dead male bodies on trees was unacceptable for him (i.e. for the Hellenes). And the description of this rite by Apollonius Rhodius is believed to be motivated by his attempt to justify Peleas. See П. Грейвс, *Мифы Древней Греции*, Москва 1992, 449.

Colchis was sure that Pelias' demand was a slander against gods (III, 381). Neither did Jason find Phrixus guilty. He called him 'noble' – ἀμυμόνα (III, 190). Aeetes was not going to give up the Fleece as he identified it with the royal power (III, 596-597). The king of Colchis was sure that through taking away the Fleece, the Argonauts intended to seize his royal scepter and power σκῆπτρα δὲ καὶ τιμὴν βασιλῆϊδα (III, 375-376).

Aeetes has enough grounds for such doubts. Once father Helios prophesied that Aeetes should expect evil from his own progeny (III, 594-595). The sons of Phrixus are Jason's relatives as Cretheus, who was the grandfather of Jason, and Athamas, father of Phrixus, were brothers (III, 340-366). Therefore, Aeetes can not categorically turn down the request of the men who are relatives of his son-in-law and his grandchildren. It seems that the Argonauts are demanding tribute from Aeetes, which the king understands as the threat to his power and independence. Aeetes became furious with the sons of Phrixus, first, because they agreed to act as mediators for the Argonauts; besides, they told the king of Colchis with delight the stories about the Argonauts' courageous voyage and described the splendid Argo as the ship which Colchians had never had. Neither did Jason's offer to support him in the fight against the Sauromatae flatter the king. Aeetes defends his rights, and the name and power of his land. If Colchis truly owes its power to the Hellenes (as the Golden Ram of Phrixus is obviously the symbol of wealth and strength), they have to prove this through their courage and gallantry instead of acting as impudent men, felons – λοβητηῆρας (III, 372), who came to Colchis with a malicious intention αὐτοῖσι δόλοισι (III, 373). So, Aeetes agrees to let Jason take away the Fleece if the latter accomplishes his tasks; otherwise, the brave are not supposed to give up anything to the weak (III, 401-421); all should treat the unbeatable hero (Aeetes) with reverence and fear (III, 437-438).

Undoubtedly, Aeetes is sure that Jason will fail to accomplish the tasks – to yoke the fire-breathing bulls to a plough, till a field, sow dragon's teeth and kill the armed men who will spring from the ground. Jason also finds the task too difficult to undertake and astounded with the mischief ἀμηχανέων hesitates for a while whether to make a promise or not (III, 422-425).

Other Argonauts, likewise perturbed and desperate from the hard lot and hopeless situation, dare not break the silence:

...πάντεσσι δι' ἀνήνυτος εἶσατ' ἄεθλος
 δὴν δι' ἄνεψο γαί' ἀναυδοὶ ἐς ἀλλήλους ὀρώωντο
 ἄτη ἀμηξανίη τε κατηφέες...

III, 502-503.

Peleus also finds the task impossible to implement (III, 504). Why did the Argonauts become so intimidated? What is the reason for their fear and hesitation?⁵ The Argonauts are afraid neither of the distant and hazardous voyage, nor of the war, but they have no idea of the rules of the games which Aetes sets for them.

The Argonauts knew nothing about tillage or metalwork; therefore, they were frightened at the necessity to subdue the fire-breathing bulls (III, 1284-1319). Apollonius Rhodius clearly compares the struggle of Jason with the fire-breathing bulls with the activities of smiths (III, 1285-1301). Protecting himself with his shield against the flames, Jason firmly grabbed the bulls by their iron horns and started beating his legs against their brazen feet, piercing his spear into their sides with great force. These details remind of metalwork practice, after metal is softened in the fire.

The second task – fighting the armed men sprung from the dragon's teeth – was the most complicated one. This episode of the myth presumably refers to resisting the aggression of the neighbouring united tribes. Jason was to be aware of the character traits of those people, and of the rules of fighting against them. Following Medea's advice, Jason threw a rock into the crowd of the warriors and hid away behind his shelter. Unable to realize where the rock had come from, the infuriated soldiers attacked and defeated one another (III, 1365-1375). The secret throwing of a rock presumably refers to causing dissension among the neighbouring tribes of Colchis, and beating them with the method 'divide et impera'.

Aetes calls these tasks the trial of courage and might through hazardous activities:

πεῖρα δὲ το μένεός τε καὶ ἀλκῆς ἔσσειε ἄεθλος
τόν ῥ' αὐτὸς περίεμι ξεροῖν ὀλοόν περ ἔοντα.

III, 407.

⁵ There are controversial opinions on whether Jason should be regarded as a hero or not. Apollonius Rhodius does not deheroize him – *primus inter pares*. See: U. Gärtner, *Gehalt und Funktion der Gleichnisse bei Valerius Flaccus*, Hermes, Stuttgart 1994, 67, 285.

Scholars come up with a question: why should Jason be regarded as a hero if he owed glory solely to Medea? When he hesitates, he finds it difficult to take a firm decision, characterized by *αμειχανία*. See: K. H. Stanzel, *Jason und Medea* (Beobachtungen zu den Gleichnissen bei Apollonios Rhodios, *Philologus*, 143, 1999, 2, 250; A. Ferenczi, *Sine honores labores – Valerius Flaccus*, *Philologus*, B. 139, 1995, H. I. 147-156.

However, we certainly should not forget that although after hesitation, Jason nevertheless agrees to undertake Aetes' tasks. This should be regarded as his bravery. His actions are likewise brave as he is accomplishing the tasks, although he copes with them with the help of Medea.

Aeetes states that he practices such activities every day. This is why the Argonauts dare not take up the tasks. Jason addresses Aeetes:

Αἰήτη, μάλα τοί με δίκη περιπολλὸν ἔεργεις.
(III, 427.)⁶

In my opinion, this passage can be translated in the following way:

‘With your customs, Aeetes, you have burdened me overmuch.’

I.e. here τοὶ δίκη must refer to a ‘custom’. Jason’s reproach implies that the accomplishment of Aeetes’ tasks requires knowledge of Colchian customs and practices as well as of the character of tribes in the neighbourhood of Colchis, and of the rules of fighting against them. That is why Jason finds it difficult to accept Aeetes’ condition.

As concerns the dragon, guarding the Fleece, putting him to sleep was not among Aeetes’ tasks; however, realizing that Jason owed his success to Medea, the king decided to stop the Argonauts in time. Jason took the Fleece away from the oak tree again with the help of Medea, who invoked Hypnosis and Hecate. Putting Dragon to sleep symbolically means weakening the vigilance of the Colchians.

Undoubtedly, the voyage of the Argonauts to the farther land of Colchis is certainly a brave and heroic feat. Jason is not a distinguished hero of the expedition, but he is a truly just, sensible, shrewd and balanced person. He modestly agrees to be the leader of the Argonauts only after Heracles refuses to assume the honourable duty (I, 351-352); generously forgives Telamon his mischief (I, 1332-1344); feels responsibility to his companions – with these character traits he closely resembles Aeneas. Jason obediently listens to Aeetes’ reproaches and agrees to accomplish the task hoping to find a way-out. His appreciation of the situation is realistic; he is guided by his common sense and not by emotions. He chooses to refrain from offensive activities against Aeetes only because he believes that the truth is on the king’s side. Therefore, he tries to win the king’s favour. Jason admits that he owes his successful voyage to farther Colchis to the Argonauts, and the retrieval of the Golden Fleece to Medea. He wants to acquire the Fleece only because he knows that all the Hellenes expect the brave Argonauts to retrieve it into their

⁶ The Georgian translation of this fragment sounds as ‘მეტიხმეტად შემბოჭვე შენო სამართავლოთ, აიეტო!’ (A. Urushadze, 1970).

In Russian: ‘Много помех и по праву, Эит, для меня создаешь ты.’ See Аполлоний Родосский, *Аргонавтика*, перевод, введение и примечания Гр. Ф. Церетели, Тбилиси 1964.

In English: ‘With thy plea of right, Aeetes, thou dost shut me in overmuch.’ See Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica*, translated by R. C. Seaton.

land (IV, 203-204). He does not argue with Aeetes on who the Fleece rightfully belongs to, but after accomplishing the tasks, he believes that he has every right to claim the Fleece. Aeetes, understanding that the Argonauts are helped by his daughters (IV, 5-10), finds their victory unfair and therefore, is still reluctant to give up the Fleece to the strangers. Aeetes' refusal is clearly substantiated in Medea's dream. She dreamed that her father broke his promise and refused to let the Argonauts take away the Fleece because the tasks were accomplished by Medea and not by Jason. Medea was entrusted to resolve the conflict between the stranger and the Aeetes, and she took Jason's side (III, 616-635).⁷ The Argonauts, seeing that they were pursued by the Colchians and willing to avoid a conflict with numerous tribes supporting Aeetes, decided to agree with their pursuers that under the rightful decision (εὐδικίη) and in compliance with Aeetes' promise, the Argonauts would retain the Fleece for ever (ἐμπεδόν), as, although cunningly, they anyway succeeded in overcoming the ordeal of Aeetes (IV, 338-349). In return, Jason was to give up Medea.

So, the Ram, which had fled Hellas, was retrieved (whether rightfully or not) with the considerable help of half-Hellenic sons of Phrixus.

The legend has obviously preserved the traces of a Hellenic expedition to the Black Sea East coast. It accounts for the mixed Colchian-Hellenic population of the legendary kingdom of Colchis and attests to the Hellenic attempt to make peaceful relations with Colchians tribes, and at the same time gain control over the land distinguished for its riches, the country that pursued agriculture and metalwork. Evidently, this was the cause for conflicts between these two ancient nations.

⁷ Here Medea's dream is not prophetic, and neither does it determine the future; it reflects the spiritual state of a person. U. Gärtner, *Träume bei Valerius Flaccus*, Philologus, 140, 1996, 2, 303.