

THE GOLDEN FLEECE AND THE GOLDEN-FLEECED RAM: TESTIMONY AND INTERPRETATION OF ANCIENT LITERARY SOURCES

Vita Paparinska

University of Latvia,
Faculty of Humanities

Abstract. *The Golden Fleece figures in Greek mythology as the objective of the voyage of the Argonauts. The incompatibility of the object of the search with the effort invested in its acquisition has furthered discussion of the real meaning of the Golden Fleece, which has generally been accepted to be a metaphor since antiquity. Modernity, especially at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, has been productive and inventive in the decipherment attempts of the metaphor's hidden meaning. A number of interpretation theories has been developed, which, though interesting and well-argued, are sometimes highly divergent from the interpretation of the Golden Fleece in the ancient sources. A proper understanding of the original or close to original meaning of the metaphor of the Golden Fleece requires a scrupulous look at ancient Greek and Roman testimony, an overview of which the paper intends to provide.*

Keywords: *the Argonaut myth, the Golden Fleece, metaphor, gold / wealth of Colchis, royal power.*

The story of the Argonaut voyage survives in three epic poems: the *Argonautica* (Ἀργοναυτικά) of Apollonius Rhodius (3rd century BC), the *Argonautica* of Gaius Valerius Flaccus (1st century AD) and the *Argonautica Orphica* (Ὀρφῆως Ἀργοναυτικά) by an unknown author, probably datable to 5th/6th century AD. All the three poems speak of the Argonauts' adventurous voyage to the fabulous land of Colchis in search of the Golden Fleece. Although the *Argonautica Orphica*, with its focus on the figure of Orpheus and the presentation of the narrative from Orpheus' perspective, stands somewhat apart (Bacon 1925, 37–41), the poems are similar content-wise. If the narrative of the poems is supplemented with the

mythographic material of the *Library* of Pseudo-Apollodorus (1st/2nd century AD) and the *Fabulae* of Hyginus (1st century BC–early 1st century AD), then the story of the Argonaut myth can be reconstructed with some certainty.

The reconstructed Argonaut myth corresponds to the template proposed by the Russian scholar Vladimir Propp in his study *Morphology of the Folktale* (Propp 2009). Namely, the hero undertakes a quest in order to obtain something. The object of the quest can be something new, something that fulfils a lack in his life or something that the hero has been deprived of. The quest may be the hero's initiative or of someone who may have dispatched him. In the latter case, the dispatcher may be actu-

ally sending the hero off in the hopes of his death. The quest poses many obstacles and requires an investment of considerable effort on the part of the hero. During the quest, the hero encounters a magical helper/donor who provides help in the form of a material object or critical knowledge that is necessary for the hero to complete his mission. The hero meets the villain, who is a worthy opponent, and he is subjected to an arduous test. The hero battles with the villain, either directly or indirectly, the outcome being either his victory or death. The hero emerges from the combat as a winner and, after the victory, though pursued by an adversary, he returns home with the object of his quest. The hero's prize for his valorous deeds may be kingship and/or marriage with a princess.

In the Argonaut story, the unusual element is the object of the quest – the Golden Fleece. Taken at face value, an animal's fleece, even if it is golden, seems incompatible with the efforts invested in its acquisition, even more so as the fleece, after it is procured, disappears from the story. It is obvious that in the Argonaut story, the focus is on the enterprise itself, and the quest serves as a theatre for ascertaining the heroic status of an outstanding protagonist. The nominal object of the quest is not important.

In the second half of the 19th century and early 20th centuries, the general interest in the myth and the study of this unique phenomenon did not bypass the Argonaut story. The Golden Fleece was the element of the myth that provoked interpretation attempts. Different theories appeared, generally explaining the Golden Fleece as a metaphor.

For K. O. Müller in his study *Orchomenos un die Mynier*, the Golden

Fleece was a metaphor for religious expiation and purification, for P. W. Forchhammer – a metaphor for rain clouds that are brought to Greece in early spring from the East, for W. Mannhardt – a metaphor for sunlight, for A. Faust – a metaphor for the land of golden grain. M. Svoronos explained the Golden Fleece as a metaphor for a trophy, the gilded ram-like prow of the ship, which Phrixus, after his escape to Colchis, dedicated in a sanctuary. The British classical scholar Janet Ruth Bacon, in her study *The Voyage of the Argonauts*, makes a thorough analysis of the above-mentioned theories, outlining their merits and deficiencies, and finally refutes them with good arguments (Bacon 1925, 42–66). In Bacon's opinion, the Argonaut voyage basically reverberates the explorations of the Greek mariners in the Mediterranean sea and beyond:

In its original form the Argonaut story was a narrative of a real voyage in the Euxine Sea, made by Minyans of Thessaly in the late fourteenth or early thirteenth c. B. C. This feat, marvellous in itself, became very soon embellished with many of the stock incidents of the fairy tales about quests and journeys. [...] Very early also the voyage of Jason became connected with another Minyan story, that of Phrixus and the ram, a myth enshrining the cessation of human sacrifice in the royal family of Orchomenus. [...] From Phrixus' ram came the idea of the fleece, which became golden in association with the gold of Colchis (Bacon 1925, 168–169).

Bacon proposes the idea that the Golden Fleece stands for riches imported through trade connections from the East (Bacon 1925, 138–167). Her argument is based on the evidence of archaeology.

The diverse interpretation attempts of the metaphoric meaning of the Golden Fleece, which were made in the second half of the 19th century and early 20th century, have subsided. In the latest philological studies (*Brill's Companion to Apollonius Rhodius* (2008) and the *Flavian Epic* in the *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies* series (2016)), the shift of focus on paratextual aspects promotes more interest in the motivation of an ancient author to select a particular myth. The Golden Fleece is accepted to be a metaphor without much discussion of its meaning. On the one hand, it is understandable. The diversity of the Golden Fleece interpretation options proves that from a (comparatively) modern perspective, an ancient concept or phenomenon can be interpreted in a number of ways. On the other hand, digression from the modern theories and an exclusive consideration of the views that antiquity had of the Golden Fleece is of scholarly interest.

A possible start would be the figure of the golden ram, the carrier of the Golden Fleece, κριὸς χρυσόμαλλος (Diodorus Siculus 1935, 4.47.1) or *aries inauratus*, (Hyginus 1872, 3) itself.

The ancient texts do not say much about this miraculous animal. Sophocles and Euripides had tragedies with the name *Phrixus* – the ram could be expected to appear in these texts; yet, the surviving material is insufficient to make definite conclusions (Sophocles 1889, fr.654–656; Euripides 1889, fr.819–838).

Some short casual remarks about the ram can be found in the mythographic texts. Namely, this miraculous animal was born from the union of Neptune, who had transformed himself into a ram, and The-

ophane, a *formosissima virgo* whom Neptune had turned into a female sheep (Hyginus 1872, 188). The only episode in which the ram appears is the flight of Phrixus and Helle, the children of Athamas, the Boeotian king, and his former wife, Nephele, to Colchis. In the *Library* of Ps.-Apollodorus, Nephele saves Phrixus from being sacrificed by giving him a golden-fleeced ram, whom she had received from Hermes, and the ram carries Phrixus and Helle away to Colchis (Apollodorus 1921, 1.9.1) In Hyginus' *Fabulae*, the golden-fleeced ram is sent as a saviour by Nebula to her children Phrixus and Helle who, overcome by madness, are wandering in a forest (Hyginus 1872, 3).

The manner of Phrixus and Helle's escape, but for the decisive help of the golden-fleeced ram, was not firmly established in antiquity – this is convincingly proven by the British scholar D. Robertson. His study shows that the majority of literary texts speak of Phrixus and Helle swimming on the back of the ram or beside him. Swimming scenes have been identified on vases, coins and other objects. Flying on the back of the ram is supported by few literary references (Robertson 1940, 1–8).

When the ram had completed his rescue mission, Phrixus had sacrificed him (Diodorus Siculus 1935, 4.47.1; Palaephatus 1902, 30) – to Zeus in the Greek sources (Apollonius Rhodius 1912, 2.1143–47; Apollodorus 1921, 1.9.1) and to either Jupiter (Hyginus 1875, 2.20) or to Mars (Hyginus 1872, 3) in the Latin texts. There are also more exotic variants – the ram sheds his golden fleece and ascends to the stars (Pseudo-Eratosthenes 1847, 19) or, after immolation, he is conveyed to the sky (Hyginus 1875, 2.20), becoming the con-

stellation Aries. The variants related to the fleece differ regarding the details, the majority favoring the variant that it is kept in the grove of Ares and guarded by a never-sleeping dragon.

The conclusion is that nothing of what is said in the ancient texts about the golden-fleeced ram helps to understand the objective of the Argonaut voyage.

The Golden Fleece – χρυσῆ δорά (Hesiod 1914, fr.51; Pherecydes, fr.53; Pseudo-Eratosthenes 1847, 19), πᾶγχρυσον δέροσ (Euripides 1994, 480), ἔριον χρυσοῦν (Pausanias 1935, 9.34.5), δέρας χρύσειον (*Argonautica Orphica* 1764, 888), χρύσειον κῶας (Apollonius Rhodius 1912, 1.4; 2.1193; 3.13; Theocritus 1912, 13.16), *aurea lana* (Propertius 1990, 3.11.12), *velulus fulvum* (Ovid 1914, 2.11.4) – is mentioned oftentimes in the texts, but there are very few instances when the author tends to explain its metaphoric meaning from the Argonaut voyage perspective, i.e., what the Golden Fleece stands for and whether it merits being the objective of the long and dangerous Argonaut voyage. The few available ancient Golden Fleece interpretation instances fall into two distinct groups. First, the Golden Fleece is taken for a representation of gold specifically and the wealth of Colchis specifically, and, second, the Golden Fleece is understood as a metaphor for royal power.

Some text instances show that in antiquity, the Golden Fleece was explained literally – as a fleece saturated with particles of gold. As the Greek authors Strabo (c. 63 BC–23 AD) and Appian (c. 95–165) write, the use of animal hides for the collection of gold particles carried by mountain streams to the plains was a standard gold-mining practice of ancient Colchians: “[i]n

their country the winter torrents are said to bring down even gold, which the barbarians collect in troughs lined with fleeces; and hence the story of the Golden Fleece”¹ (Strabo 1928, 11.2.19). “Many streams bear from Caucasus invisible gold-dust. The inhabitants put sheepskins with shaggy fleece into the stream and thus collect the floating particles. Perhaps the Golden Fleece of Aetes was of this kind”² (Appian 1972, 103).

As to the opinion of contemporary scholars, it is not unanimous in regard to the Golden Fleece being a metaphor for the gold collected with the help of animal hides. Georgian scholars are fully supportive of the ancient testimony. They refer to geological field investigations and archaeological evidence, which prove that an extensive and commercially significant gold collection practice was existent in the area that can be identified with ancient Colchis (Okrostsvavidze 2016, 61–69). The British scholar David Braund, an expert in the history and culture of the Black Sea region in antiquity, in his study *Georgia in Antiquity* (1994), refutes the idea that the Golden Fleece represents gold collected in the Caucasian mountains. His argument is that, first, animal hides were not used in this manner for gold collection from streams exclusively in Colchis, and, second, that the story of the Golden Fleece precedes Colchian gold-working, which

¹ παρὰ τούτοις δὲ λέγεται καὶ χρυσὸν καταφέρειν τοὺς χειμάρρους, ὑποδέχεσθαι δ’ αὐτὸν τοὺς βαρβάρους φάτναις κατατετρημέναις καὶ μαλλωταῖς δοραῖς· ἀφ’ οὗ δὴ μεμνηθεῦσθαι καὶ τὸ χρυσόμαλλον δέροσ.

² χρυσοφοροῦσι δ’ ἐκ τοῦ Καυκάσου πηγαὶ πολλαὶ ψήγμα ἀφανές· καὶ οἱ περίοικοι κάρδια τιθέντες ἐς τὸ ρεῦμα βαθύμαλλα, τὸ ψήγμα ἐνισχόμενον αὐτοῖς ἐκλέγουσιν. καὶ τοιοῦτον ἦν ἴσως καὶ τὸ χρυσόμαλλον Αἰήτου δέροσ.

is only found in some quantity beginning with 5th century BC. Besides, as Braund points out, archaeological evidence suggests that Greeks were familiar with by far more prosperous countries of the East than Colchis; thus, Colchis would hardly figure as a metaphor for fabulous wealth (Braund 1994).

Yet, even if not fabulously wealthy, Colchis was believed to abound in precious metals. The Latin author Pliny the Elder (23–79 AD) speaks of gold and silver deposits there: “Saulaces, the descendant of Aetes, reigned in Colchis. Having found virgin earth in the country of the Suani, he is said to have extracted from it a large amount of gold and silver. His kingdom besides has been famed for the possession of the Golden Fleece”³ (Pliny 1952, 33.15).

As to the abundance of precious metals in the Colchic land, Strabo’s remark is much the same but is such for the emphasis on the riches of Colchis as the objective of Jason’s voyage and of those earlier – Phrixus’ included: “[t]he riches of Colchis in gold, silver and iron proclaim the motive of Jason’s expedition, as well as of that which Phrixus had formerly undertaken”⁴ (Strabo 1917, 1.2.39).

The 12th century Greek scholar Eustathius of Thessalonica, in his *Commentarii ad Dionysium Periegetem*, repeats Strabo’s pronouncement almost word for word and unobtrusively remarks that the acquisition of the Golden Fleece had been

the objective of the Argonaut expedition (Eustathius 1828, 689). Beside the fact that the Colchians collected particles of gold in fleeces, Eustathius mentions the general wealth of the Colchic land. The lines between the physical value of the fleece, saturated with golden dust, and the wealth of Colchis are blurred. The Golden Fleece is understood as a specific object of value and a metaphor for the wealth of Colchis, famous for its precious metals.

Related to the notion of the Golden Fleece being a representation of gold or general wealth is the interpretation that the Golden Fleece was a metaphor for writing in liquid gold or for a manual that contained instructions on how to make gold.

The opinion that the Golden Fleece, a material object, was a metaphor for an intellectual skill, i.e., of writing in gold, is ascribed to an otherwise unknown Charax of Pergamon by Eustathius (Eustathius 1828, 689). This idea is strongly upheld by the Georgian scholar G. Kvashilava who argues that this unique method of writing was laid out on a piece of parchment made of the skin of a ram, and that the Argonauts travelled from Greece to Colchis to study this unique Colchian art (Kvashilava 2008, 244).

The notion that the Golden Fleece stood for writing in gold seems to have developed into the notion that it represented writings about obtaining gold through the conversion of metals. The 7th century chronicler Joannes Antiochenus argues that the Golden Fleece was a metaphor for a manual written on animal hides on how gold could be produced by means of alchemy (Joannes Antiochenus 1885, fr.15.3). Likewise, the Byzantine *Suda* explains the metaphoric meaning of the Golden Fleece

³ *Regnaverat in Colchis Saulaces Aetae suboles, qui terram virginem nactus plurimum auri argentique eruisse dicitur in Suanorum gente, et alioqui velleribus aureis incluto regno.*

⁴ ὁ πλοῦτος [τῆς Κολχίδος] ἐκ τῶν χρυσείων καὶ ἀργυρείων καὶ σιδηρείων δικαίαν τινὰ ὑπαγορεύει πρόφρασιν τῆς στρατείας, καθ’ ἣν καὶ Φρίξος πρότερον ἔστειλε τὸν πλοῦν τοῦτον.

as a representation of a book written on animal hides, containing the secret of how to transmute metals into gold:

The golden-fleeced skin, which Jason took after coming through the Black Sea with the Argonauts into Colchis, and [sc. taking also] Medea the daughter of the king Aeetes. This was not as is reported in poetry, but it was a book written on skins, concerning how it is necessary that gold comes about through alchemy. Therefore, the men of that time naturally called the skin “golden,” because of the function which arose from it⁵ (Suda On Line, Δ 250).

There are two text instances that provide a testimony of a basically different understanding of the notion of the Golden Fleece. One of them is the story of Phrixus in the mythographic text collection *On Incredible Things* (Περὶ ἀπίστων), the authorship of which is ascribed to Palaephatus, a Peripatetic, probably a student of Aristotle.⁶ The author prefers a rationalistic explanation of the objective of the Argonauts’ voyage. The Argonauts sail to Colchis with the aim of obtaining an object of immeasurable value – a life-size, golden statue of a woman. The woman’s name had been Fleece (Κῶς), and, for some reason (the text is corrupt here), a certain Krios (Κριός) had put the statue on a boat and had it transferred to Colchis: “[the Ram]

⁵ Δέρμας: τὸ χρυσομάλλον δέρμας, ὅπερ ὁ Ἰάσων διὰ τῆς Ποντικῆς θαλάσσης σὺν τοῖς Ἀργοναύταις εἰς τὴν Κολχίδα παραγενόμενοι ἔλαβον, καὶ τὴν Μήδειαν τὴν Αἰήτου τοῦ βασιλέως θυγατέρα. τοῦτο δὲ ἦν οὐχ ὡς ποιητικῶς φέρεται, ἀλλὰ βιβλίον ἦν ἐν δέρμασι γεγραμμένον, περιέχον ὅπως δεῖ γίνεσθαι διὰ χημείας χρυσόν. εἰκότως οὖν οἱ τότε χρυσοῦν ὀνόμαζον αὐτὸ δέρμας, διὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν τὴν ἐξ αὐτοῦ.

⁶ Theon calls Palaephatus a Peripatetic (Theon 1854, 96). The *Suda* mentions four persons with the name of Palaephatus (pi 69, 70, 71, 72), three of which are probably the same person and can be dated to 4th century BC.

himself equipped a ship with all the goods and fortunes among which was a life-size, golden statue that Fleece had made of herself from her own wealth. [...] Phrixus married the daughter of Aeetes, the king of Colchis, giving as a dowry the golden statue of Fleece. Later, when Athamas died, Jason sailed in the Argo after Fleece’s golden statue, not after the skin of a ram”⁷ (Palaephatus 1902, 30).

A likewise rationalistic explanation is one by the Roman scholar Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 BC). A breed of Colchian sheep had fleece that was extremely costly. Hence, it was called the “Golden Fleece.” Such a fleece had been the object of the Argonauts’ quest:

Of the ancients, the most illustrious were all shepherds, as is shown by the Greek and Latin language and by the ancient poets, who call some men “rich in flocks,” others “rich in sheep,” others “rich in herds”; and they have related that on account of their costliness some sheep actually had fleeces of gold – as the ram in the realm of Aeetes in Colchis, in search of whose Golden Fleece the Argonauts of royal blood are said to have fared⁸ (Varro 1934, 2.1.6).

Although Varro’s comment is pragmatic and practical, though not stated explicitly, it may contain a metaphoric undertone. As

⁷ αὐτὸς [Κριός] ναῦν στείλας καὶ γεμίσας τὴν ναῦν ἀπάντων ἀγαθῶν καὶ χρημάτων, ἐν οἷς καὶ εἰκὼν ἦν, ἦν [...] Κῶς αὐτὴ ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων χρημάτων ἑαυτῆς εἰκόνα ἰσόμετρον χρυσὴν ἐποιήσατο. [...] γαμεῖ Φρίξος τὴν τοῦ Κόλχων βασιλέως θυγατέρα Αἰήτου, δοῦς ἔδνον τὴν χρυσὴν εἰκόνα τῆς Κῶ. ὕστερον δὲ Ἀθάμαντος τελευτήσαντος Ἰάσων πλεῖ τιμὴ Ἀργοῖ ἐπὶ τοῦτον τὸν χρυσοῦν τῆς Κῶ, ἀλλ’ οὐχὶ δέρμα κριοῦ.

⁸ *De antiquis illustrissimus quisque pastor erat, ut ostendit et Graeca et Latina lingua et veteres poetae, qui alios vocant polyarnas, alios polymelos, alios polybutas; qui ipsas pecudes propter caritatem aureas habuisse pelles tradiderunt, [...] ut in Colchide ad Aeetam, ad cuius arietis pellem profecti regio genere dicuntur Argonautae.*

some contemporary life scientists point out, the Golden Fleece is a metaphor for the husbandry of a rare and expensive breed of sheep in ancient Georgia, and the Argonaut voyage – an attempt to introduce this skill in Greece (Ryder 1991, 57–60; Smith, G.J. and Smith, A.J. 1992, 119–20).

The second Golden Fleece interpretation, i.e., of the Golden Fleece being a metaphor for royal power, is evident from the fact that both Pelias, the unlawful holder of the royal power in Iolcus, and Aetes, the king of Colchis, equate the Golden Fleece with the right to rule. Although Pelias secretly hopes that Jason’s attempts to gain possession of the Golden Fleece will fail and Jason himself will perish, his words, with which he sends Jason on the quest, clearly indicate correlation of the Golden Fleece and royal power: “[b]ring the thick-fleeced skin, perform willingly the deed [...] and I swear I will deliver up to you the royal power and the kingdom”⁹ (Pindar 1997, 4.165-166).

Aetes is reluctant to part with the Golden Fleece, as he believes that its possession guarantees his kingship: “After this, while Aetes was king of Colchis, an oracle became known, to the effect that he was to come to the end of his life whenever strangers should land there and carry off the Golden Fleece”¹⁰ (Diodorus Siculus 1935, 4.47.2). “Aetes, son of the Sun, was told that he would keep his kingdom so long as the fleece, which Phrixus has ded-

icated, stayed in the sanctuary of Mars”¹¹ (Hyginus 1872, 22).

The notion of the Golden Fleece as a metaphor for royal power is, to some degree, supported by the golden-fleeced female lamb in the story of Atreus and the kingship of Mycenae. As recorded in the epitome to the *Library* of Ps.-Apollodorus, possession of the golden-fleeced lamb granted its owner royal legitimacy:

The wife of Atreus was Aerope, daughter of Catreus, and she loved Thyestes. Atreus once vowed to sacrifice to Artemis the finest of his flocks, but when a golden she-lamb appeared, they say that he neglected to perform his vow. Having choked the lamb, he deposited it in a box and kept it there, and Aerope gave it to Thyestes, by whom she had been seduced. The Mycenaeans had received an oracle which bade them choose a Pelopid for their king, and they had sent for Atreus and Thyestes. And when a discussion took place concerning the kingdom, Thyestes declared to the multitude that the kingdom ought to belong to him who owned the golden lamb, and when Atreus agreed, Thyestes produced the lamb and was made king¹² (Apollodorus 1921, 2.10-11).

Another piece of evidence for the correlation of the Golden Fleece and royal

¹¹ *Aetae Solis filio erat responsum tam diu eum regnum habiturum, quamdiu ea pellis, quam Phrixus consecraverat, in fano Martis esset.*

¹² γυνὴ δὲ Ἀτρέως Ἀερόπη τοῦ Κατρέως, ἦτις ἦρα Θυέστου. ὁ δὲ Ἀτρέως εὐζάμενός ποτε τῶν αὐτοῦ ποιμνίων, ὅπερ ἂν κάλλιστον γένηται, τοῦτο θῦσαι Ἀρτέμιδι, λέγουσιν ἄνρὸς φανείσης χρυσῆς ὅτι κατημέλησε τῆς εὐχῆς· πνίξας δὲ αὐτὴν εἰς λάρνακα κατέθετο κάκει ἐφύλασσε ταύτην· ἦν Ἀερόπη δίδωσι τῷ Θυέστη μοιχευθεῖσα ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ. χρησιμοῦ γὰρ γεγονότος τοῖς Μυκηναίοις ἐλέσθαι βασιλεία Πελοπίδην, μετεπέμψαντο Ἀτρέα καὶ Θυέστην. λόγου δὲ γενομένου περὶ τῆς βασιλείας ἐξείπε Θυέστης τῷ πλήθει τὴν βασιλείαν δεῖν ἔχειν τὸν ἔχοντα τὴν ἄρνα τὴν χρυσοῦν· συνθεμένου δὲ τοῦ Ἀτρέως δεῖξας ἐβασίλευσε.

⁹ δέρμα τε κριοῦ βαθύμαλλον ἄγειν, [...] τοῦτον ἄεθλον ἐκὼν τέλεσον· καὶ τοι μοναρχεῖν καὶ βασιλευμένον ὄμνυμι προήσειν...

¹⁰ μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα βασιλεύοντος τῆς Κολχίδος Αἰήτου χρησιμὸν ἐκπεσεῖν ὅτι τότε καταστρέψει τὸν βίον ὅταν ξένοι καταπλεύσαντες τὸ χρυσόμαλλον δέρος ἀπενέγκωσι.

power is the color of the fleece. Gold itself and golden colors are traditionally associated with royalty like the occasionally mentioned white or purple colors of the fleece (*Scholia Apollonii Rhodii* 1813, 4.177; 1147).

The view of the Golden Fleece as a metaphor for royal power is upheld by leading contemporary studies (Braund 1994, 21–23; Newman 2001, 309–40). The American classicist J. K. Newman mentions evidence of the ram's correlation with royalty in ancient cultures. The Georgian archaeologist O. Lordkipanidze, known for his studies of the cultures of Colchis and Caucasian Iberia, considers that the key to the proper understanding of the Golden Fleece must be sought in the ancient Anatolian and Hittite notions about the magic power of the ram, especially its skin or fleece. Lordkipanidze argues that the abovementioned Varro's reference to an expensive breed of sheep is actually a veiled reference to royal power (Lordkipanidze 2001, 1–38). The American classicist M. De Forest makes an interesting comment on the Golden Fleece as a metaphor for royal power. She holds the opinion that the Golden Fleece is a “golden mirror” in which the characters see reflected whatever they value most. Thus, the fleece is, in reality, a representation of royal power but only in the mind of Aetes (De Forest 1994, 148).

If the Golden Fleece interpretation theories are taken as a whole, an interesting tendency can be observed; nevertheless, the *caveat* about the questionable nature of the conclusions due to the insufficient amount of the relevant texts has to be applied.

Most of the interpretation instances appear in the Roman culture around the turn

of BC and AD. This is probably the impact of Roman Stoicism. The Stoics argued that in undisturbed conditions, preconceptions develop naturally and correctly in every human being. The preconceptions are true, but they do not equate to proper knowledge. For this reason, from one generation to another, preconceptions have been transmitted in a corrupted condition – through poetry, for instance. As the Stoics held that their own philosophical ideas *in nuce* were present in the myths, a segregation of the preconceptions from the corrupted tradition would allow to incorporate partial cognitions into true knowledge, i.e., Stoic philosophy. This is the essence of the discussion in 1st century AD Stoic philosopher Cornutus' treatise *Theologiae Graecae compendium* (Cornutus 1881). The rhetorician Dio Chrysostom (c. 40–115 AD), who presented himself as a philosopher (Stoicism being a dominant trait in his philosophical beliefs) is of much the same opinion (Dio Chrysostom 1939, 12; 1946, 53).

A theory that stands completely apart is the rationalizing Golden Fleece interpretation, which survives in *Περὶ ἀπίστων*, the mythographic text collection by Palaephatus. Palaephatus' remark that the Golden Fleece was, in reality, a golden statue of a woman by the name of “Fleece” in the wider context of the treatise, especially in the light of the illuminating preface, shows that the interpretation of the Golden Fleece reflects tendencies current in the intellectual environment of Athens in 4th century BC. In the increasingly cosmopolitan atmosphere, the very nature of myth had undergone change. Rationalism, a reliance on reason as the main source and test of knowledge and critical examination, an

evaluation and a reevaluation of previously unquestioned ideas were all predominant. Stories about the past were considered by reference to standards of plausibility. The literal understanding of the myth was questioned (Hawes 2014, 1–36).

The overall conclusion is that an overview of the ancient sources that speak of the Golden Fleece shows that the interpretative instances of the Golden Fleece in the ancient texts are few in number. The Golden Fleece was such a firmly embedded, integral element of the Argonaut story that its genuine meaning was rarely

considered. If it was ever questioned, the Golden Fleece was taken to be a metaphor for a material or immaterial entity of objectively high value. This entity of high value could be either gold – gold in the direct sense or the wealth of Colchis in general – or another term denoting royal power. As to the theories of modernity, they are, in most cases, basically just elaborations of the interpretations offered by the antique sources, namely that the Golden Fleece is something to be desired and the lack of which is critical for an individual or the community.

REFERENCES

- Argonautica Orphica*. 1764. *Orphei Argonautica, hymni, libellus de lapidibus et fragmenta*. Lipsiae: sumptibus Caspari Fritsch.
- Apollodorus. 1921. *Epitome. The Library*. Volume II, book 3.10–end. Epitome. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Apollonius Rhodius. 1912. *Argonautica*. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Appian. 1972. *Roman History (Historia Romana), Volume II, books 8.2–12*. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Bacon, Janet Ruth. 1925. *The Voyage of the Argonauts*. Boston: Small, Maynard and Company Publishers.
- Braund, David. 1994. *Georgia in Antiquity. A History of Colchis and Transcaucasian Iberia, 550 B.C.-A.D. 562*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Cato. *On Agriculture (De agri cultura)*. Cato and Varro. *On Agriculture*. 1934. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Cornutus. 1881. *Compendium Theologiae Graecae*. Lipsiae: in aedibus B. G. Teubneri.
- De Forest, Mary Margolies. 1994. *Apollonius' Argonautica: a Callimachean epic*. Leiden: Brill.
- Dio Chrysostom. 1939. *Discourses (Orationes) 12–30*. Volume 2. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Dio Chrysostom. 1946. *Discourses (Orationes) 37–60*. Volume 4. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Diodorus Siculus. 1935. *Library of History (Bibliotheca Historica)*. Volume II, books 2.35–4.58. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Euripides. 1889. *Phrixus. Tragicorum Graecorum fragmenta*. Lipsiae: in aedibus B. G. Teubneri.
- Euripides. 1994. *Medea. Volume I. Cyclops. Alcestis. Medea*. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Eustathius. 1828. *Commentarii ad Dionysium Periegetem. Geographi Graeci minores*. Volume 1. Lipsiae: Libraria Weidmannia.
- Hawes, Greta. 2014. *Rationalizing Myth in Antiquity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hesiod. 1914. *Fragmenta. Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns, and Homerica*. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Hyginus. 1872. *Fabulae*. Jenae: apud Hermannum Duft.
- Hyginus. 1875. *Astronomica*. Lipsiae: in aedibus T. O. Weigeli.

- Joannes Antiochenus. 1885. *Fragmenta historicorum Graecorum*. Volumen IV. Parisiis, ed. Ambrosio Firmin Didot, Institutii Franciae typographo.
- Kvashilava, Gia. 2008. On the Phaistos disk as a sample of Colchian goldscript and its related scripts. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/2033655/Kvashilava_Gia_2008_On_the_Phaistos_Disk_as_a_Sample_of_Colchian_Goldscript_and_Its_Related_Scripts_in_Georgian_and_English
- Lordkipanidze, Otar. 2001. "The Golden Fleece: myth, euhemeristic explanation and archaeology", *Oxford journal of archaeology* 20: 1–38.
- Newman, John Kevin. 2001. *The Golden Fleece. Imperial dream. A Companion to Apollonius Rhodius. Mnemosyne Supplement* 217. Leiden: Brill.
- Okrostsvardize, Avtandil et al. 2016. "A modern field investigation of the mythical "gold sands" of the ancient Colchis Kingdom and "Golden Fleece" phenomena", *Quaternary International* 409: 61-69.
- Ovid. 1914. *Amores. Volume I. Heroides. Amores*. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Palaephatus. 1902. *Peri apiston. Mythographi Graeci*. Volume 3. Lipsiae: in aedibus Teubneri.
- Pausanias. 1935. *Description of Greece (Graeciae descriptio)*. Volume IV, Books 8.22–10. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Pherecydes. 1885. *Fragmenta. Fragmenta historicorum Graecorum*. Volume 1, Parisiis: Editore Ambrosio Firmin Didot. Available at: <http://www.dfhg-project.org/DFHG/index.php?volume=Volumen%20primum>
- Pindar. 1997. *Pythian Odes. Volume I. Olympian odes. Pythian odes (Olympia, Pythia)*. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Pliny. 1952. *Natural History (Naturalis historia)*. Volume IX, books 33–35. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Propertius. 1990. *Elegies (Elegiae)*. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Propp, Vladimir. 2009. *Morphology of the folktale*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Pseudo-Eratosthenes. 1847. *Catasterismi. Mythographi Graeci*. Volume 3. Lipsiae: in aedibus B. G. Teubneri.
- Robertson, Donald Struan. 1940. "The Flight of Phrixus", *The classical review* 54 (1): 1–8.
- Ryder, Michael Lawson. 1991. "The last word on the Golden Fleece legend?", *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 10 (1): 57–60.
- Scholia Apollonii Rhodii*. Vol. 2. 1813. Lipsiae: apud Gerh. Fleischer Jun. = Leipzig: Fleischer Jun.
- Smith, G. J. and Smith, A. J. 1992. "Jason's Golden Fleece", *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 11 (1): 119–120.
- Sophocles. 1889. *Phrixus. Tragicorum Graecorum fragmenta*. Lipsiae: in aedibus B. G. Teubneri.
- Strabo. 1917. *Geography (Geographica)*. Volume I, books 1–2. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Strabo. 1928. *Geography (Geographica)*. Volume 5, books 10–12. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Suda On Line. Available at: <http://www.stoa.org/sol/>
- Theocritus. 1912. *Greek Bucolic Poets. Theocritus. Bion. Moschus*. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Theon. 1854. *Progymnasmata. Rhetores Graeci*. Volume 2. Lipsiae: in aedibus B. G. Teubneri.
- Varro. 1934. *Cato and Varro. On Agriculture. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press*.

AUKSO VILNA IR AUKSAVILNIS AVINAS: ANTIKINIŲ LITERATŪROS ŠALTINIŲ LIUDIJIMAI IR INTERPRETACIJA

Vita Paparinska

S a n t r a u k a

Svarbiausias epinės poemos, t. y. mitologinio pasakojimo apie herojišką žygdarbį, reikalavimas – parodyti ir įrodyti veikėjo ar veikėjų atitiktį heroizmo idėjai taip, kaip ji suvokiama epinės poezijos erdvėje. Žygdarbis čia svarbesnis ir įdomesnis už konkretų vykdomos užduoties objektą. Tai akivaizdu išlikusiuose epinės poezijos tekstuose, kuriuose pasakojama apie argonautų kelionę į Kolchidę (Apolonijo Rodiečio *Argonautica*, Valerijaus Flako *Argonautica*, *Argonautica Orphica*). Herojinės užduoties tikslas – gauti stebuklingo auksavilnio avino kailį. Argonautų užduoties objekto reikšmė *per se* atrodo neadekvati pastangoms, įdedamoms į šį sumanymą. Pasakojimo logika rodo, kad aukso vilna yra metafora.

Aukso vilna, kaip antikinių tekstų objektas, minima dažnai, tačiau jos metaforinės interpretacijos pavyzdžių, t. y. tikslaus vertės apibrėžimo žvelgiant iš argonautų kelionės perspektyvos, mažai. Norint suprasti tikrąją (ar artimą tikrąją) metaforinę aukso vilnos reikšmę, būtina panagrinėti atitinkamus antikinius tekstus.

Daugelyje tekstų aukso vilna suvokiama arba kaip aukso reprezentacija (kalnų upėmis nešamos aukso dalelės, kurias kolchai rinkdavo vilnomis, gyno aukso statula ar itin brangi ypatingos avių veislės vilna), arba apskritai kaip Kolchidės turto metafora (kolchų žemėje apstu vertingų metalų). Tolesnė šios sampratos raida akivaizdi bizantiškuose šaltiniuose – aukso vilna čia reiškia alchemijos, kurios išmanymas leidžia paversti metalus į auksą, knygą. Kai kuriuose tekstuose aukso vilna figūruoja kaip karališkosios valdžios metafora (karaliaus valdžia, kurią Jasonas tikisi įgyti, ir karališka galia, kurią Ajetas siekia išlaikyti).

Palyginti su išlikusiais antikiniai interpretaciniais liudijimais, šiuolaikinis mokslas kur kas produktyvesnis. Daugelis aukso vilnos metaforinės interpretacijos teorijų buvo sukurtos XIX ir XX amžių sandūroje. Nors kai kurios šiuolaikinės teorijos kyla iš antikinių sampratų, daugeliu atvejų nūdienai nepasiūlė nieko iš esmės nauja: kad ir kokios būtų detalės, aukso vilna reiškia tai, ko trokštama ir ko stygius kelia pavojų individui arba bendruomenei.

Gauta: 2017-08-30

Priimta publikuoti: 2017-11-13

Autorės adresas:

Vita Paparinska
Humanitāro zinātņu fakultāte
Latvijas Universitāte
4a Visvalža Street, LV-1050 Riga, Latvia
El. paštas vita.paparinska@lu.lv