

083: Hellenistic Literature – Apollonius of Rhodes and the “Argonautica”

When we last met, I gave an account of some of the most important poets working in Alexandria during the third century B.C., but neglected to name one last figure. Joining the vaunted ranks of Callimachus and Theocritus is a man named Apollonius of Rhodes. His most famous work, *The Argonautica*, is the only surviving Hellenistic epic, recounting the story of the hero Jason and the Argonauts as they pursue the Golden Fleece. While Homer and Virgil are the definitive authors of Greek and Latin epic poetry, Apollonius falls in the middle of these intellectual giants, his work often being viewed as a curious experiment bridging the gap between the two. In this episode, we will analyze the *Argonautica*, comparing and contrasting it with the works of Homer to see how Apollonius was able to challenge the traditional models of heroism and the epic, creating a poem which exemplified the characteristics of Alexandrian scholarship during this period. For this episode, I will be citing passages from the translation of Peter Green, published under University of California Press in 1997, and contains a fair bit of useful supplementary materials that aided my research.

The Argonautica

*Starting from you, Phoibos [Apollo], the deeds of those old-time mortals
I shall relate, who by way of the Black Sea's mouth and through the
cobalt-dark rocks, at King Pelias' commandment,
in search of the Golden Fleece drove tight-thwarted Argo.*¹

So begins the opening lines of the *Argonautica*, Apollonius' magnum opus and the only epic of the Hellenistic period to survive in its entirety. Arranged in four books in total and measuring out at just under 6,000 lines, it is quite small in comparison to both the *Odyssey* and especially the *Iliad*, the latter being more than double the length of the *Argonautica*.² The poem recounts the tale of the hero Jason and his crew of Argonauts, who sail upon their eponymous ship *Argo* into the Black Sea to retrieve the Golden Fleece, and in their journey they encounter famous figures like the witch Medea and many obstacles. Apollonius was not the first to put this story in written form – there are references to the voyage of the Argonauts in the *Odyssey* of Homer and Hesiod's *Theogony*, but a more thorough examination of Jason's story is also in the works of the poet Pindar and the Athenian playwright Euripides.³ The *Argonautica* is the most complete account though, and forms the basis for the majority of later interpretations.⁴

Before we move forward, let us turn to the man of the hour, Apollonius of Rhodes.⁵ Despite his namesake, Apollonius was in fact born in Alexandria around 300 B.C., his family belonging to the Ptolemais tribe. Little is known about his early life, but as a young adult he became a pupil of the famed Callimachus in the 280s, and it was during this time that he composed an early draft of the *Argonautica* and published it for his contemporaries to read. It seems that the literary elite were less than kind in their assessment of his work, so much so that Apollonius chose to abandon the city of his birth rather

¹ Apollonius of Rhodes, 1.1-4

² 5,835 lines of hexameter, to be exact. By comparison, the *Iliad* is over 14,000 lines.

³ Homer, *Odyssey*, 12.70; Hesiod, *Theogony*, 993-1002; Pindar, *Pythian Odes*, 14; Euripides, *Medea*

⁴ For instance, Apollodorus, 1.9.16-26

⁵ Our four main sources on the life of Apollonius of Rhodes (The Suda, Lives 1 and 2 of the Scholia, and P.Oxy. 1241) are quite messy, and sometimes directly contradicting. The reconstruction offered by Green, P. (1997): 1-8 served as my model of biography.

than continue to face the onslaught of negative criticism. There is a tradition of scholarship, based on a reference in the Byzantine *Suda*, that suggests a quarrel took place between Apollonius and Callimachus over the reception of the first draft, resulting in Apollonius' self-imposed exile. Callimachus himself famously criticized epic poetry and the imitators of Homer, deeming them bloated works lacking subtlety, so this extrapolation may not be too far of a reach.⁶ Recent scholarship over the past 50 years has largely discredited this supposed argument though, but it has not stopped people from speculating further on the connection between both men.⁷ Apollonius' next stop would be Rhodes, where he spent many years working as a respected teacher of rhetoric and refining the *Argonautica*. He was gifted Rhodian citizenship for his efforts, and the grateful poet chose to sign off his works as a Rhodian rather than an Alexandrian. Yet he would make his peace and return back home to Egypt in the 260s, as Ptolemy II offered him the lucrative post of royal tutor for the future Ptolemy III Euergetes, along with the position of Head Librarian.⁸ He occupied this role for the next twenty years, eventually retiring around 246, and died sometime afterwards.⁹ The publication of the *Argonautica* in its final form must have taken place during his time at Rhodes, as it was far better received in the Alexandrian circles, which presumably allowed him to claim the prestigious title in Ptolemy's Library.

With his background out of the way, a summary of the *Argonautica* is appropriate. Book I begins with the reason behind the expedition: King Pelias, ruler of Iolcus on the eastern shores of Greece, is informed of Apollo's prophecy foretelling his eventual demise at the hands of a man wearing a single sandal. Our hero Jason turns up to the royal feast one shoe short, due to his aid of the goddess Hera (who was disguised as an old woman), and so the king issues a quest for the hapless young man to sail north into the Black Sea and fetch the famed Golden Fleece, hidden somewhere in the far-off lands of Colchis (the modern state of Georgia in the Caucasus). Pelias intends it to be a suicide mission, but with the aid of the gods Jason manages to receive his famed ship, the Argo, staffed with some of the most respected heroes in all of Greece, including the demigod Heracles, the twins Castor and Pollux, and lyre-playing Orpheus.¹⁰ With Jason elected as leader of the Argonauts, the men depart Iolcus and sail away into the northern Aegean. The Argo makes a landing at the island of Lemnos, populated only by women who share an amorous encounter with the crew. As they cross the Hellespont, the Argonauts face wild six-armed barbarians and accidentally involve themselves in a night attack that results in the death of a local king, while Heracles is left behind in Bithynia in search of his young ward.

In Book II, the Argo approaches the entrance of the Black Sea. Jason and the crew rescue the beleaguered King Phineus from his harassment by ravenous harpies, and as their reward they are given the knowledge necessary to pass the formidable Symplegades, a pair of rocks at the mouth of the Bosphorus that smashes any ship that attempts to sail through. This information, along with the direct assistance of the goddess Athena, enables the Argo to cross without harm. Their travels along the southeastern shores of the Black Sea have them encounter local peoples like the Amazons, but some of the Argonauts are killed by the area's wildlife or die of disease. One island is heavily guarded by the

⁶ Callimachus, *Aetia*, frg. 1.23-24

⁷ Gleij, R.F. (2001): 4-5

⁸ P.Oxy 1241 mistakenly lists him as the teacher of Ptolemy I instead of Ptolemy III, which can be explained by the similar appearance of the Greek word for "First" (πρῶτον) and "Third" (τρίτον)

⁹ Anonymous, *Suda*, Eratosthenes; The *Suda* confuses the succession of Head Librarian, mistakenly making Apollonius the successor of Eratosthenes, as there is another Apollonius ("the Classifier") who actually came after Eratosthenes.

¹⁰ The Greek rendition of Pollux is technically Polydeukes, but the Roman form is far more well-known and what I will stick with.

vicious Stymphalian birds, who are attacking a shipwrecked group of four brothers, but the winged monsters get driven off by the intervention of the Argonauts. These brothers are actually the descendants of King Aetes, ruler of Colchis and the keeper of the Fleece, and in return they join up with Jason and guide the heroes to the kingdom.

The arrival of the Argo into Colchis marks the beginning of Book III, with Jason advising diplomacy to acquire the Fleece over open warfare. Instead of being happy at the safe return of his grandsons, King Aetes is livid at the idea of handing over his treasure to this interloper. In steps Jason, who tries to soothe his majesty's concerns and explains his god-given mission. Aetes is obliged to not kill them on the spot, but devises a series of tasks for Jason to undertake to claim his prize, much to our hero's dismay: the first is to plow the Plain of Ares using a pair of fire-breathing oxen, the second is use these fields to plant the teeth of a giant serpent, and the third is to slay the armored warriors that will erupt from the sown earth. Like Pelias, Aetes' tasks were suicidal, but little did the king know that both his family and the gods themselves were conspiring against him. On Mount Olympus, Hera and Athena work out a plan to ease Jason's trials by enlisting the aid of Aphrodite and her mischievous son Eros. The target is to be Medea, Aetes' daughter and an accomplished sorceress, trained in magic by the goddess Hecate herself, and the poor girl falls madly in love with Jason once struck with cupid's arrow. Medea is driven into a state of turmoil, torn between remaining loyal to her father or helping Jason, to the point of where she considers ending her life. She instead decides to follow her heart, meeting with her beloved in secret to provide him the potions and knowledge necessary to best Aetes' trials. The book concludes with Jason successfully overcoming the labors with Medea's tricks and spells, leaving the king bewildered at his failure.

In the fourth and final book, Medea flees from the palace to the Argonauts' camp, fearing her father's wrath for her aid of Jason and his plans to slay the heroes. She encourages them to steal the Fleece, guarded by the aforementioned serpent, and for her help Jason promises to marry and bring her back to Greece. The pair manage to snatch their prize after casting a sleeping spell on the fearsome snake, but could not bask in its golden aura for long, as Aetes and the Colchian navy were hot on their trail. Recalling an earlier prophecy, the Argonauts decide not to return through the Bosphorus, instead choosing to sail into the mouth of the Danube river, which empties out from the western shores of the Black Sea. Their intended path was to cut through Central Europe and escape to Greece via the Adriatic, but just as they entered into what they deemed to be safe waters, it is revealed that half the Colchian navy lay in ambush. Led by Medea's brother Prince Aspyrtus, a truce was offered to the Argonauts: they may keep the Fleece as per the terms of Jason's victory, but Medea must be handed over for judgement by a council made up of local kings acting as mediators, who would determine whether she must be brought back to Colchis or remain in Jason's protection. Medea herself was terrified at the prospects of facing punishment at the hands of her father, and begged her soon-to-be husband to not abandon her. The pair lured Aspyrtus to a private meeting on a nearby sacred island of Artemis, and when the prince's guard was relaxed, Jason sprung from the shadows and ran him through with his sword.

Though the Argonauts were freed from further harassment by the now-leaderless Colchians, it turns out that committing murder of a blood relative under false pretenses on a sacred island was not going to win them any favors. Largely off-screen, Zeus was furious at this betrayal, vowing that the Argonauts would not be able to return home until they absolved themselves of their crime by the magics of the

sorceress, Circe. The heroes were forced to turn around and head northwards, once again pressed into sailing through Europe by way of the Po, Rhine, and Rhone Rivers. This extended detour eventually led them to pass into the Sardinian Sea, allowing them to stop at Circe's island and perform the necessary rituals. After surviving the dangers of the enchanting Sirens and violent Wandering Rocks along the coast of Italy, the Argo has finally reached back into the Adriatic Sea, only to discover that the second part of the Colchian fleet lay in wait off the shores of Corfu. The local king offered to mediate between the two parties, though his queen reveals to Jason and Medea that they intended on handing Medea back over to Aeetes – that is, if she still remained a virgin. The pair decided to wed in a secret cave, consummating their marriage on top of the Golden Fleece, and the news of their union was enough to convince the Colchians to give up and stay behind rather than going back to Aeetes empty-handed.

After some celebrations, the Argonauts embark on what they believed to be their voyage homewards. Fate decreed that they were to face one more detour, and the winds blow them southwards all the way back to the Gulf of Sidra in Libya. Shipwrecked with little drinking water and the intolerable heat of the African sun, the Argo's crew became despondent and believed their doom was fast approaching. With the assistance of some local nymphs, the heroes carried the Argo across the sands of Libya for nearly 12 days, before reaching Lake Triton and the famed Garden of the Hesperides. There they find a fresh spring to quench their thirst, and the god Triton ferried their ship back into the Mediterranean. After a brief clash with Talos the mechanical giant, the crew safely lands on the island of Aegina, marking the end of the journey of the Argonauts, and Apollonius concludes his poem with the following passage:

*Be gracious, my heroes, race of the Blessed, and may these
songs of mine year by year be sweeter for men
to sing! For now I have reached the illustrious conclusion
of your labors, since there befell you no further adventures
as you set sail from Aegina and continued your voyage;
no storms, no tempests opposed you; calmly you coasted
past the Kekropian shore, and Aulis, in the channel
beyond Euboea, and past the Opuntian cities of Lokris,
and joyfully stepped ashore on the beach at Pagasai.¹¹*

In many ways, the *Argonautica* is a deliberate callback to the works of Homer, yet also manages to encapsulate the changing literary standards of both the Alexandrian poets and the broader Hellenistic period. Like its predecessors, the lines are composed in dactylic hexameter, and Apollonius directly invokes the Muses, signaling his intent to keep with the custom of epics.¹² The retelling of the Argonauts' voyage is rife with allusions to the older Homeric poems. In some of the earliest sections of Book I, Apollonius recites a full list of all 55 crewmembers of the Argo, providing very brief biographies and motivations for joining the expedition.¹³ This bears an obvious similarity to the famous (or infamous) Catalogue of the Ships in the *Iliad*, which is equally as long and onerous.¹⁴ A description of the rich mythological imagery on the cloak of Jason, known in Greek as an *ekphrasis*, is a parallel to Homer's

¹¹ Apollonius of Rhodes, 4.1773-1781

¹² For example, Apollonius of Rhodes 1.18-22, 3.1-5, and 4.1-5

¹³ Apollonius of Rhodes, 1.18-228

¹⁴ Homer, *Iliad*, 2.494-759

own passage on the shield of Achilles.¹⁵ The *Argonautica* serves as something of a prequel to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as we find that many of the destinations and characters that Jason runs across are featured in those stories: for instance, the sorceress Circe would later be encountered by Odysseus, and the Argonauts also meet with Thetis, the mother of Achilles (who according to Apollonius was prophesized to be wed to Medea in Elysium upon their deaths).¹⁶

While these elements pay homage to the traditional Greek epic, the differences between the *Argonautica* and earlier works tell us quite a bit about Apollonius' skills and overall intent. As we can recall from my previous episode, one of the defining traits of Alexandrian poetry during the Hellenistic period was the frequent appearance of aetiological stories. These are essentially accounts of how things came to be, and like the works of Callimachus, we find Apollonius dedicating several passages to exploring them. In Book II, we get a story about the origin of the Etesian winds, a phenomenon occurring every summer whereby the north winds steadily blow cool air throughout the Aegean Sea. Apollonius recounts a story involving a son of Apollo and his sacrifices to Zeus and the Dog star Sirius as the reason for their existence.¹⁷ These digressions often have little if anything to do directly with the journey of the Argonauts, but they provide context behind some locations and are intended to tie elements of the poem together, and is something I will elaborate on further.¹⁸

In most Greek epic poetry, the gods have a very active part to play when it comes to affecting the narrative and the characters within them. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have the gods hold council meetings on Olympus to discuss the events of the story, or take a physical appearance on earth to interact with the characters and aid them.¹⁹ They may also be the root cause of the heroes' problems, such as Apollo inflicting pestilence among the Achaeans during the Trojan War, or Poseidon interfering with Odysseus' journey home to Ithaca.²⁰ Divine intervention is a recurring feature in the *Argonautica* as well, but there are some key differences in presentation.²¹ Zeus, king of the gods and the supreme authority of the pantheon, is mentioned but does not appear in any significant capacity.²² Instead we have a main triad of divinities: Apollo, Athena, and Hera. They are not the only gods in the story of the Argonauts, but they are the most involved. It is Apollo's own prophecy that serves as the catalyst for the expedition, and we have his physical manifestation in Book II which leads to the naming of a local island.²³ Hera and Athena have far more of a presence and impact on the course of the story compared to the more distant Apollo. Athena's intervention prevents the Symplegades from smashing the Argo (by literally using her hands to move the ship away from the rock), and Hera scares off the Colchian fleet with a lightning storm.²⁴ These two also work together to come up with a plan to allow Jason to succeed in Aeetes' trials, leading to the manipulation of Medea.²⁵

¹⁵ Apollonius of Rhodes, 1.721-768; Homer, *Iliad*, 18.478-608; Shapiro, H.A. (1980)

¹⁶ Apollonius of Rhodes, 4.663-752, 4.774-879

¹⁷ Apollonius of Rhodes, 2.498-527

¹⁸ Köhnken, A. (2010): 136-137

¹⁹ For example, in Homer, *Iliad*, 1.493-611; Homer, *Odyssey*, 1.42-122;

²⁰ Homer, *Iliad*, 1.9-52; Homer, *Odyssey*, 1.31-34

²¹ Köhnken, A. (2010): 137-138

²² Perhaps the closest thing to an appearance is Zeus' anger following Asprytus' murder, see Apollonius of Rhodes, 4.557-560

²³ Apollonius of Rhodes 2.669-684

²⁴ Apollonius of Rhodes, 2.598-606, 4.507-510

²⁵ Apollonius of Rhodes, 3.6-166

As a hero, the presentation of Jason differs significantly from his Homeric counterparts. Achilles and Odysseus are shown to be forceful decision-makers, whose actions directly dictate the course of their stories. True, each character is deeply affected by Fate or the divine intervention, but we can see a sense of agency and competency in their respective fields. Achilles is the most skilled warrior, Odysseus is the most cunning, and the manifestation of these traits results in consequences both good and bad. Jason on the other hand is surprisingly passive, even bordering on the incompetent. Perhaps a better expression would be “out of his league” – Jason is not a particularly great fighter, nor especially clever, and his command of the Argo was due to his bloodline rather than any special skillset. It’s also worth mentioning that he did not originally volunteer for this position, and his limited ability as a leader is also called into question by the Argonauts during a handful of times.

What few qualities Jason does possess are his good looks and his innate (or divinely-given) capacity for charming the female sex. He manages to bed Hypsipyle of Lemnos in Book I, a queen of an island whose women murdered all the local men. His most famous tryst is with the witch Medea, who fell in love with Jason and aided him in defiance of her father. When Medea shows a moment of hesitation in her plan, he immediately assesses the situation and persuades her from leaving his ship by using that charm.²⁶ There are other examples that reinforce the theme of sex and romance being central to his role as a hero. Going back to the parallel between the descriptions of Achilles’ shield and Jason’s cloak, there is a notable contrast. Achilles’ shield exemplifies his role as the warrior, a divinely given gift to be used in his duel with Hector. By comparison, Jason puts on his cloak to enhance his appearance before consorting with Hypsipyle. He even goes so far as to use Golden Fleece as a bedspread on his first night of lovemaking with newly-wed Medea, a symbolic display of his amorous prowess over his long-sought after prize.²⁷ Jason’s reputation as a seducer of women was enough for Dante to condemn him to the eighth circle of the Inferno, along with pimps and other deceivers of history.²⁸

In a similar vein to the Homeric heroes, Jason too possesses an innate character flaw, but it seems to be the inverse. Both Achilles and Odysseus were afflicted by hubris, excessive pride, to some capacity, borne from their tremendous skill and abilities. Jason on the other hand is not prideful at all, but is instead saddled with *amechanos*, “helplessness”.²⁹ Critics have noted that Jason is gripped with a sense of powerlessness on a number of occasions in the story. When King Aeetes presented the three trials that needed to be solved in order to acquire the Golden Fleece, Jason is rendered silent with the overwhelming burden laid before him, which Apollonius describes as follows:

*So [the king] spoke. But Jason, eyes fixed on the ground before him,
sat there speechless, unmoving, at a loss in this crisis.
Long he considered the problem, tried every angle, yet dared not
boldly take up the challenge, so huge a task it seemed.*³⁰

Often it is solely through the actions of others that Jason is able to accomplish his goals. In Book I, Jason’s authority as leader of the Argo is only reinforced by the support of Heracles, which sets the tone

²⁶ Apollonius of Rhodes, 4.106-108

²⁷ Apollonius of Rhodes, 4.1141-1143

²⁸ Dante, *The Inferno*, 18.82-97

²⁹ Apollonius of Rhodes, 1.460-461, 2.885, 3.432

³⁰ Apollonius of Rhodes, 4.422-425

of the work in many ways.³¹ More obvious is the fact that it is not through his own bravery or cunning that allows Jason to overcome the trials of Aeetes, the problems are instead solved by Medea and her magic. Even accounting for his powers of seduction, Medea only falls in love with him because of the direct intervention of Hera, Athena, Aphrodite, and Eros, thus making the labors far easier to complete. The prominence of female characters, both human and divine, and the extent to which they assist Jason in his quest differs quite a bit from the heroes of Homer or the other Argonauts, who are more traditionally masculine. Idas, an Argonaut who is more in line with a Homeric ideal, scoffs at the idea of relying on a woman's help when Jason explains Medea's plan to beat Aeetes' trials.³²

On the whole, Jason does not strike one as an especially impressive figure when compared to the many other heroes of Greco-Roman mythology, even within the context of his own story. Perhaps, though, this is precisely what Apollonius intended. It has been argued that the characterization of Jason explicitly flies in the face of the traditional hero archetype, and the result is a dynamic and complex character in his own right.³³ There are many Argonauts in the tale who can point to a divine ancestry or their skill as great warriors, traits typically found in the Homeric heroes. Though he does possess royal blood, Jason is just a man with no feats to his name. His most frequently used weapon was not a sword or a spear, but diplomacy. When the Argonauts encounter a potentially hostile opponent, Jason tries to de-escalate the situation as much as he can. This is often shown to be the correct course of action: when King Aeetes threatens the expedition with death and disfigurement, the Homeric Telamon nearly bursts a blood vessel out of indignation. Before Telamon gets the outnumbered Argonauts killed with his impending outburst, Jason quickly steps in as the voice of reason to steer Aeetes towards a less bluntly malevolent action.³⁴

This contrast in behavior is consciously acknowledged by Apollonius, who sets Jason apart from his own crew in both personality and action. During the election of the expedition's leader, the Argonauts universally vote that Heracles take command. The demigod passes on the offer, arguing instead that it should go to Jason, perhaps a signal from Apollonius that the traditional hero is not what this story requires.³⁵ Though he is the greatest warrior of the bunch, Heracles is shown to be something of a dumb brute and is quickly removed from the story as he searches for his missing ward.³⁶ The aforementioned Telamon and Idas are prime examples of how the older model of warrior-hero was not the ideal fit for the job, given their quick tempers and foolish bravado. As the captain of the ship, Jason seems to care about his men and does display signs of sorrow and regret if they are killed or lost in the process.³⁷ His ability as a diplomat and willingness to accept help from unorthodox sources do also end up being the deciding factors that enable his ultimate victory. The passage I cited earlier about Jason's stunned silence in response to the tasks of Aeetes may seem to portray him as a coward – it is hard to imagine Heracles or Achilles being dismayed by the challenge – but it is a completely reasonable reaction of an average person faced with similar prospects.³⁸ By virtue of his abilities and in spite of his realistic

³¹ Apollonius of Rhodes, 1.330-349

³² Apollonius of Rhodes, 3.1169-1170

³³ Jackson, S. (1992); Klein, T. (1983); Hunter, R.L. (1988); Gutzwiller, K. (2007): 77-79

³⁴ Apollonius of Rhodes, 3.382-385

³⁵ Apollonius of Rhodes, 1.330-349

³⁶ Apollonius of Rhodes, 1.1161-1171, 1.1265-1272 compares Heracles to an out-of-control bull.

³⁷ For instance, Apollonius of Rhodes, 2.851-863

³⁸ Jackson, S. (1992)

shortcomings, he *did* manage to acquire the Golden Fleece, which is arguably more of an impressive feat that if performed by someone with superhuman abilities.

It may also be too far to write off Jason as an utterly incapable but well-intentioned hero figure either. We cannot also fail to recognize that Jason is either deeply pragmatic, or downright ruthless in his efforts to secure the Fleece. His relationship with Medea is that of a one-sided infatuation: he does not love Medea, but willingly uses her divinely-bestowed befuddlement to achieve his goals. At his worst, Jason manipulates her into participating in the murder of her brother Aspyrtos, an act that is explicitly described as treacherous and downright sacrilegious.³⁹ This rather twisted series of events would eventually lead to tragic consequences, as demonstrated in Euripides' play, *Medea*. When comparing the two traditions, Apollonius' portrayal of Medea paints her far more as a victim than that of Euripides. Book III and IV dedicates several passages describing the extent of her inner turmoil, the actions of Eros causing a great amount of mental anguish as she wavers between guilt and fear. It appears to drive her to the point of insanity, threatening suicide on a number of occasions when she felt (correctly or otherwise) that Jason was considering abandoning her.⁴⁰

The *Argonautica* was a byproduct of Alexandrian scholarship, and by extension the patronage of the Ptolemies. It is worth investigating what sort of ties does the poem have with the aims of the Ptolemaic dynasty. Apollonius' geographical layout of Jason's travels is quite important – the crew sails from Greece into the Black Sea, Central Europe, the Adriatic, Italy, and North Africa.⁴¹ In some sense, the Argo and the Argonauts may be seen as the best and brightest of Greece carrying civilization to often hostile and wild lands. Within the various aetiological digressions and itinerary of the Argo's voyage, Jason and his crew encounter a large number of sites that would eventually become Greek colonies.⁴² The most exceptional example takes place at the very end of the story when the Argonauts are in Libya. Before they depart on the last leg of their voyage, one hero named Euphemus is given a clod of earth by the god Triton, which he keeps close to his heart.⁴³ As they approach Greece once again, Euphemus has a dream where the piece of earth is being nursed by his breast, before morphing into a woman with whom he makes love. She is revealed to be a Caliste, a daughter of Triton and literal piece of Libya itself, asking Euphemus to place her in the sea when he awakes. Once he honors this request, the sunken clod turns into a great island that rises from the waters, the future Thera or Santorini.⁴⁴ This rather bizarre section is functionally the final episode of the poem, and must be significant enough for Apollonius to make it so. Many authors attribute Euphemus as the mythical ancestor of the Theraians, who would send their own expedition to Libya and found the city of Cyrene, the first major Greek colony of Africa.⁴⁵ This important for the Ptolemaic worldview: Apollonius' foreshadowing of the Greek colonization of Africa is explicitly linked to the later colonization of Egypt following Alexander's conquests, and plays

³⁹ Apollonius of Rhodes, 4.393-395 (note the "honeyed words"), 4.469-479; Byre, C.S. (1996): 13-14; By way of Medea's veil being literally splattered with the blood of her brother, and Jason performing the grisly ritual to absolve himself of murder and the wrath of the Furies, Apollonius ensures that we view the act an impious one, involving the breaking laws regarding blood-relations and overall treachery.

⁴⁰ In Apollonius of Rhodes, 4.391-393, she not only threatens to kill herself but to also use the Argo (and all of its crew) as her funeral pyre, a foreshadowing of the Medea that would murder her own children out of rage against her husband.

⁴¹ See Meyer, D. (2001) and Thalman, W.G. (2011) for the nature of Geography in Apollonius' work.

⁴² Thalman, W.G. (2011): 77

⁴³ Apollonius of Rhodes, 4.1551-1563

⁴⁴ Apollonius of Rhodes, 4.1731-1764

⁴⁵ Herodotus, 4.150-152; Pindar, *Pythian Odes*, 14.14-56

into the notion of bringing Greek culture abroad.⁴⁶ Greece may certainly be the central location around which everything ties back to, but Apollonius may be attempting to show the transfer of civilization into Ptolemaic Alexandria, the wellspring of art and literature that (in their eyes) replaced Athens as the new epicenter of the Greek world.

The final published version of the *Argonautica* was a smash hit in Alexandria and beyond. As I have mentioned in previous episodes, Virgil explicitly drew upon Alexandrian poets like Theocritus as models for his own work, and it appears that Apollonius was an inspiring figure as well. While the *Aeneid* is said to Virgil's answer to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, there are many elements to the story and its structure that are paralleled with that of the *Argonautica*.⁴⁷ Aeneas' characterization as a hero contains echoes of Jason, and the tragic romance of Jason and Medea may have served as the inspiration of the similarly ruinous relationship between Aeneas and Queen Dido of Carthage. Its survival into the modern period with relatively little debates on its composition is a testament to its consistent popularity throughout antiquity. Fragments of the work have been discovered in Egyptian papyri ranging from the first century B.C. to the fifth century A.D., and over 50 manuscripts are attributed to the High and Late Middle Ages, most coming out of Constantinople and brought over to Italy during the Renaissance (which would explain Dante's familiarity).⁴⁸ As we move closer to the modern period, the *Argonautica* has suffered a drop in appreciation when compared to Homer or Virgil, who remain part of the core curriculum for much of Europe and North America to the present day. Some of this can be attributed to the portrayal of Jason as a sort of anti-hero, but Apollonius' reinvention of the Homeric epic has been increasingly acknowledged as a hallmark of Greek literature, worthy of its position alongside the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid*.

With our discussion on Apollonius at an end, so too does our series on Hellenistic literature as well. Now by no means is this a complete account, as I have neglected to discuss the likes of Lycophron, Nicander, Herodas, Erinna, and others. My intention was to give you a general survey of the most important authors and genres that developed in this period, and if we include my earlier episode on Polybius and his *Histories*, I believe that this is a reasonably well-rounded introduction to a topic which I tried to avoid becoming bogged down in. As such, if you are looking to get a more in-depth discussion, then I encourage you to check out the bibliographies for each of these past episodes. Of these many books I used in my research, I found Kathryn Gutzwiller's "*A Guide to Hellenistic Literature*" to be a great launching point that covers all the bases while remaining concise, so I would highly recommend you start from there.

⁴⁶ Thalman, W.G. (2011): 78-91; Gutzwiller, K. (2007): 76-77; Köhnken, A. (2010): 146-149

⁴⁷ Nelis, D.P. (2001)

⁴⁸ Schade, G. and Eleuteri, P. (2001): 37-49

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