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# Review of Ingo Schaaf, *Magie und Ritual bei Apollonios Rhodios*

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**Ingo Schaaf, *Magie und Ritual bei Apollonios Rhodios: Studien zu ihrer Form und Funktion in den Argonautika. Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten, Bd. 63.* Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2014. Pp. viii, 402. ISBN 9783110309485. €119.95.**

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Ingo Schaaf offers an extensive and detailed examination of the treatment of magic and ritual in the *Argonautica* of Apollonius of Rhodes. This study fills an important gap in contemporary research on Apollonius, and it promises to place the scholarship on magic in the *Argonautica* on the same level that geography now enjoys. Schaaf argues that comparison the text of the *Argonautica* and other evidence for magic and ritual in the third century demonstrates that Apollonius approaches these subjects with the same kind of scholarly precision that he brings to the study of the texts of Homer, geography, or medicine. He also places Apollonius' interest in magic and ritual in its Alexandrian context, in particular arguing that his frequent references to Dionysus and Dionysian ritual corresponds to the importance of that god in the religious program of the Ptolemies. Schaaf is inclusive in his search for *comparanda* to the practices described by Apollonius, often referring to Classical drama and the Greek Magical Papyri, when Hellenistic parallels are lacking, as they often are. This approach cuts both ways: on the one hand, it provides a much more global view of Apollonius' place within magical and religious thought throughout antiquity, and it provides what context there is for Apollonian descriptions that are otherwise hard to

parallel. On the other hand, it tends to obscure potential distinctions between Apollonius' research on actual magical or ritual practices and literary references by or to Apollonius.

Schaaf organizes the work into seven sections: an introduction, discussing the state of the scholarship on the topic, and discussions of the terminology and methods he proposes to employ. Most important here is the note on the difficulty of drawing a clear line between "magic" and "religion", especially in the Hellenistic period. The next four sections are each devoted to one of the four books of the *Argonautica*, following the text in strict order. This promises ease of reference for those who know the epic well, but also means that thematically related discussions can be widely separated, e.g., the two subsections on Orpheus occur at the beginning of chapter 2 and near the end of chapter 5; later discussions usually reference earlier ones, but forward references are less consistent. In particular, this arrangement makes Schaaf's overall argument about the importance of Dionysian ritual appear less forceful than it is. A concluding section reviews the findings of the research, and an extensive and well-organized bibliography, index of ancient authors referenced, and a topical index completes the book.

The first chapter lays the groundwork for the study, defining the question to be addressed, reviewing the relevant literature, discussing problems of terminology, and outlining the methodological framework. In defining the subject of the study, Schaaf notes the need to update the 1939 dissertation, *Brauch und Ritus bei Apollonios Rhodios*,<sup>1</sup> which applies an outdated Frazerian approach, and he refines the topic, arguing that modern discussions of Hellenistic culture helpfully blur the divisions between the modern concepts of "religion", "superstition", and "magic". The literature review briefly summarizes main trends in Apollonius scholarship, such as his relation to the Ptolemies, his Homer criticism, his character-technique, and so forth. The discussion of terminology primarily addresses what is to be understood by the terms "magic" and "ritual", and the section on method discusses the opportunities and, to a lesser extent, the problems of using later (i.e., imperial period) ritual and magical texts for comparison. This section also defends the use of the *Argonautica* as a source-text for the history of magic and

ritual on the basis of the Alexandrian poet's commitment to a Hellenistic aesthetic of realism.

Chapter two addresses episodes in the first book of the *Argonautica* that connect with ritual or magic in some way. Schaaf approaches these connections very broadly, so that he includes a lengthy section on the proem discussing its hymn-like character and the ambiguous position of the Muses as ὑποφῆτορες (interpreters/inspirers). The section on Orpheus demonstrates how Apollonius plays on the varied traditions around Orpheus to link his magical powers, religious authority, and poetic skill with the literary "charm" of the *Argonautica*, introducing what will become one of the main thematic threads of the study. Schaaf also collects the evidence for the Samothracian Mysteries, suggesting the narrator's refusal to divulge their secrets functions both to augment his own authority and to advertise the Ptolemaic sponsorship of the cult. The chapter ends with a discussion of the Argonauts' supplication of Rhea on Dindymon; this is the most rewarding part of the chapter, as Schaaf demonstrates that the myriad details of the episode correspond closely to the scattered evidence for the historical cult at Dindymon. Schaaf is selective in choosing which episodes to treat; for example, there are no sections on the embarkation rituals at Pagasai or the New Year's rituals that inform the Lemnian episode.

The third chapter continues by examining specific episodes in book two of the *Argonautica*, the passing of the Callichorus River and the ethnographies of the tribes of the south-east Black Sea coast. The Callichorus River occasions the etiology that Dionysus established dances there when he was returning from India; Schaaf uses this to introduce another of his main themes, that Apollonius evinces a wide-ranging interest in Dionysian ritual that mirrors the importance of the god in third-century Alexandria. This is a wide-ranging argument, connecting various aspects of the god, from his connection with Persephone in the Eleusinian Mysteries to his patronage of the Hellenistic "Technicians of Dionysus", with subtle references in the *Argonautica*. The section on the ethnographies is relatively straightforward. Schaaf argues that many of the details Apollonius uses to characterize these peoples as "barbarians" may in fact originate in

reports of authentic local practices that can be paralleled elsewhere.

In chapter four Schaaf proceeds to Apollonius' third book, where he includes shorter sections on the innovative presentation of Eros and the Colchian burial practices, suggesting that they reflect actual Colchian worship of Sun, Moon, and Earth. Naturally, the presentation of Medea and her help for Jason comprise the center of this chapter. Schaaf compares Medea's status as priestess of Hecate with the evidence for priestesses of Hecate in the Greek world and Apollonius' temple of Hecate with an attested temple of a Colchian goddess variously identified as Rhea or Leucothea. He surveys the pharmacological literature for *comparanda* for the Προμήθειον, and finds it most comparable to charms against fire in the Greek Magical Papyri, though also influenced by literary antecedents *Odyssey* 11 and Sophocles' *Root-cutters*. He similarly finds that the ritual Medea prescribes looks both to earlier literature and contemporaneous practice. This chapter in particular displays Schaaf's diligence in tracing parallels and even-handedness in considering their appropriate weights in comparison to Apollonius' literary concerns; it provides a strong case that Apollonius incorporated contemporary research on magic and ritual practices into his poetry as much as he did his Homeric scholarship.

Chapter five concludes the linear progress through the four books of the *Argonautica*. Schaaf begins with a broadly literary look at Medea's flight from the palace, arguing that Apollonius invokes the imagery of Maenadism to convey her troubled state of mind in a way particularly appropriate to his Alexandrian setting. Short sections on Medea's door-opening spell and Mene's apostrophe relate them to extant magical texts and abilities attributed to witches in literature respectively. Schaaf similarly outlines a range of literary and magical/ritual practices in the background of Medea's enchantment of the dragon. He then compares the rites the Argonauts perform for Hecate with the mysteries at Samothrace and Callichorus, especially noting the narrator's refusal to divulge their secrets. A long section on the death of Apsyrtus thoroughly explores the literary and ritual antecedents of Jason's *maschalismos*; as part of his larger argument, Schaaf suggests the use of

Hypsipyle's cloak, originating ultimately from Dionysus, foreshadows the *sparagmos*-like dismemberment of the Colchian prince. The purification of Jason and Medea by Circe receives somewhat cursory treatment, with the main literary precedents mentioned, but the main focus on the irony of a "civilized" Circe purifying Jason's "barbarous" murder. Schaaf returns to the figure of Orpheus in the discussions on the Sirens and Drepane, emphasizing his role as a sympathetic user of verbal θέλξις in contrast to Medea's dangerous pharmacological kind. The latter discussion also reiterates Apollonius' Dionysian researches, since Jason and Medea are married in the cave where Macris first nursed the god. The chapter concludes with a detailed examination of Medea's use of the Evil Eye against Talos; Schaaf again demonstrates that Apollonius faithfully represents contemporary practice and theory about the phenomenon. Proceeding from the narrator's apostrophe, Schaaf connects this episode to the theme of the opposition of Orpheus and Medea's different kinds of enchantment, and to the role of Orpheus as a figure of the narrator of the *Argonautica*.

The sixth chapter briefly summarizes the findings of the earlier chapters and emphasizes the thematic connections, and the final section groups together abbreviations, bibliographies of editions, collections of sources and fragments, reference works, secondary literature, an index of passages discussed, and a topical index.

Schaaf presents us with an important body of research that further connects the *Argonautica* to the *realia* of third century Alexandria, along the lines of Apollonius' recognized response to developments in Hellenistic geography. Schaaf's primary argument that Apollonius demonstrates a scholarly interest in magic and ritual, and that his descriptions of these practices can consistently be paralleled in literary and non-literary texts is compelling. Some readers may find that the secondary argument that Apollonius uses the epic to promote, or at least reflect the sponsorship of Dionysian cult in Alexandria by the Ptolemies less secure, but, at a minimum Schaaf provides a convincing challenge to the conventional wisdom that Apollonius excludes Dionysus from his epic, following the model of Homer. The literary theme, that Orpheus reflects a positive, verbal enchantment that is opposed to Medea's negative, pharmacological one is well-argued,

though it perhaps awaits further development in relating it to the common experience of Apollonius' Medea as a broadly sympathetic character. The linear organization of the work, following the order of episodes in the *Argonautica*, may suggest that the work exhaustively treats all occurrences of magic and ritual in the epic, whereas Schaaf is in fact selective, and it is not the most effective at communicating the broader themes, though this does not detract from the quality or importance of the work. Similarly, a fuller discussion of the potential problems in appealing to parallels in Attic tragedy or the Greek Magical Papyri to demonstrate Apollonius' interest in non-literary magical practices could be desired, but, again, this is a minor point in the larger scale of Schaaf's work.

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**Notes:**

1. Teufel, M. 1939. *Brauch und Ritus bei Apollonios Rhodios*. Diss., Tübingen.

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