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the ideology of geographical space in the Argonautica of Apollonius of Rhodes

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Publication date

2013

Document Version

Author accepted manuscript

Published in

The ideologies of lived space in literary texts, ancient and modern

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

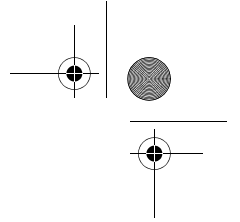
Klooster, J. (2013). Argo was here: the ideology of geographical space in the *Argonautica* of Apollonius of Rhodes. In J. Heirman, & J. Klooster (Eds.), *The ideologies of lived space in literary texts, ancient and modern* (pp. 159-173). Academia Press.
<https://www.doabooks.org/doab?func=search&uiLanguage=en&template=&query=9789038221021>

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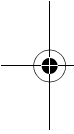
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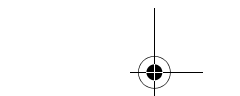
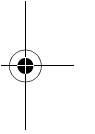
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THE IDEOLOGIES OF LIVED SPACE IN LITERATURE, ANCIENT AND MODERN



??? Jo Heirman and Jacqueline Klooster ???



Argo was Here

The Ideology of Geographical Space in the *Argonautica* of Apollonius of Rhodes

Jacqueline Klooster

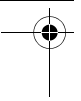
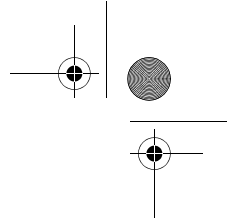
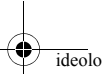
In this paper I will look at the representation of space in the *Argonautica*, the third century BCE epic poem by the Alexandrian poet Apollonius of Rhodes, with an eye on its politico-ideological overtones. The *Argonautica* relates the mythical journey of the Argonauts, a group of fifty young heroes, from Greek Iolcus to exotic Colchis on the edge of the Black Sea and back again in search of the Golden Fleece, which they obtain with the help of the Colchian princess Medea. The journey encompasses some remarkably detours, most notably past the Libyan coast and through a river network in central Europe. It is immediately clear on a first reading that the route of the Argo is not told in a purely realistic way; literary tradition and myth play an important role in its constitution.

Apart from being a rich tale of adventure, a refined psychological portrait of first love gone wrong and a creative commentary on Homeric poetry, the *Argonautica* is also a (literarily) allusive and a geographical epic that deals in various significant ways with the spaces passed by or entered by the Argonauts on their quest for the Golden Fleece. In the scope of this paper, I cannot do justice to the complexity of the epic's composition, but nevertheless I hope to highlight some of its key themes with regard to ideologies in its spatial representation.

An Ideological Epic?

Nothing would seem more natural than looking for panegyric or ideological issues in any epic written at court for a newly established dynasty, as this particular poem was for the Macedonian Ptolemies who reigned over Egypt in third century BCE from their capital Alexandria. The Ptolemies formed one branch of the successor kings who had divided the 'Hellenised' territory in the wake of Alexander the Great's campaigns in the East. Apollonius was head librarian of the famous Alexandrian Library which these monarchs had set up, and in this capacity, he presumably would have also been the tutor of the royal children; his connections to the court would seem to have been close (see below for the historical context). Surprisingly, as Richard Hunter wrote in 1993, the *Argonautica* has rarely been considered from a political angle:

Very little attention... has been paid to the Ptolemaic context of Apollonius' epic, to the question of why the Head of the Library would write on this subject rather than any other. Even in formulation the question sounds strange. Until recently it would have been thought hardly worth asking.¹



Traditional scholarship focused on the poem's many remarkably subtle allusions to earlier literature and research, in particular its deep engagement with the Homeric epics and its intriguing narrative voice.² The resulting idea that Apollonius wrote in and for a highly elite, esoteric community in the so-called Ivory Tower of the Ptolemaic Library precluded a political interpretation.

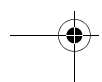
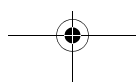
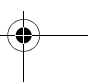
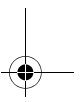
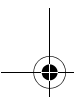
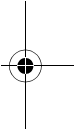
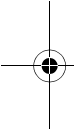
The problematic heroism of the poem's main protagonists may also have blocked this avenue of research. Jason, the leader of the expedition, is characterised as a rather melancholy, un-warlike young man whose main feature is his attractiveness to women and his ability to use them for his schemes.³ Medea is both a young girl in love with Jason and a dangerous, exotic witch. By ending the epic with the disembarkation at Iolcus, Apollonius stops short of the outcome of his protagonists' marriage. But these horrific events, represented in Euripides' famous earlier tragedy *Medea*, in which the eponymous protagonist kills her children by Jason in a jealous rage at being left by him for a Corinthian princess, casts a shadow over the end of the *Argonautica*. How could such ambivalent protagonists be expected to prefigure, symbolise or ideologically represent anything to do with a self-respecting dynasty?

Additionally, there do not appear to be any direct causal links between the narrative of Argo's journey and the Ptolemaic regime in Egypt: the Argo's quest for the Fleece does not explicitly result in the founding of the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt. In this respect the *Argonautica* is very different from, for instance, Vergil's *Aeneid*, the great foundational epic of the Augustan age. The *Aeneid* makes clear from its proem that all of Aeneas' far-flung adventures would inevitably lead to a great event, the establishment of the Roman empire:

Arms and the man I sing, who first from the coasts of Troy, exiled by fate, came to Italy and Lavine shores; much buffeted on sea and land by violence from above, through cruel Juno's unforgiving wrath, and much enduring in war also, till he should build a city and bring his gods to Latium; whence came the Latin race, the lords of Alba, and the lofty walls of Rome. (1.1-7, trans. H. R. Fairclough)

Compare this to the *Argonautica*'s proem, where there is no such foreshadowing of a final ideological 'goal' and the scope of the narrative is restricted entirely to the mythical primeval times and spaces of the heroes, the epic past as 'walled off from the present', in Bakhtinian terminology.⁴ Spatially, this enclosed character of the narrative is reflected by the fact that the trajectory of the Argonauts is not a journey from A to B, unlike Aeneas' quest from Troy to Latium, but a round trip from A to B back to A. Greece is both the point of departure and return, so it is a significant location although it is not prominent in the proem.

Beginning with you, Phoebus, I will recount the famous deeds of men of old, who, at the bidding of King Pelias, down through the mouth of Pontus and between the Cyanean rocks, sped well-benched Argo in quest of the Golden Fleece. (1.1-4) ... But now I will tell the lineage and the names of the heroes,



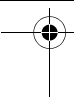
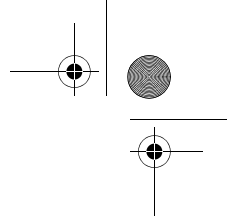
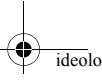
and of the long sea-paths and the deeds they wrought in their wanderings; may the Muses be the inspirers of my song. (1.20-22, trans. Race)

Nevertheless, unlike what the narratee might be led to expect from this proem, a teleological worldview operates in the *Argonautica* that is expressed mainly in the many aetiological tales (stories of cause or origin) that are related whenever the Argonauts stop to establish new cults, bury their comrades or rename the environment. In fact, one such *aitia* is obliquely referenced in the proem: the Symplegades, or Clashing Rocks, became immobile after the Argo sailed through them and thus no longer threaten travellers passing through the mouth of the Bosphorus.

Such aetiological digressions, which often but not always focus on spatial changes, are usually accompanied by expressions like ‘...and so it remains until this day’ and ‘...for later men to see’,⁵ making clear that the Argonauts’ entire venture is focalised from the perspective of the Hellenistic narrator. And, since the *aitia* mostly describe Greek influences on previously un-Greek territory, it follows that the Argo’s voyage is seen, at least on one level, as leading to the establishment of Greek imperial domination in Hellenistic times.⁶ The role of Greece as point of departure and return in the epic acquires a different significance in this light, as does the anachronistic use of the name ‘Hellas’ throughout the narrative.⁷ Even in the fragmented world of Hellenism, Greece will always remain the referential centre and source of Greek of culture, or so the *Argonautica* forebodes.

The ideological and political side of the *Argonautica* has now been amply recognised by studies like that of Stephens and Newman and, more recently, Mori and Thalmann.⁸ Thalmann’s recent book, *Apollonius and the Spaces of Hellenism*, 2011 is especially relevant because it describes the way space is used to explore issues of colonialism and the ideology of Greek imperial domination in the age of Apollonius’ Alexandria. I am broadly in agreement with the way in which these scholars read the treatment of space in the *Argonautica*, but I also believe that the ostentatious learnedness and constant allusions to mythical and literary traditions make it clear that Apollonius the narrator was, in fact, an armchair traveller rather than an explorer himself. I will argue that this explicitly literary, and hence often deliberately unrealistic, representation of geography is meant to illustrate that all there was to know about the world was contained in the Greek poetic and scholarly tradition, or, in other words, in the Ptolemaic Library, of which Apollonius himself was the head librarian. These two strategies support each other: the learned armchair scholar-narrator who frequently digresses is not opposed to, but rather part of, the ideological project of the epic.

With these themes in mind I will explore a number of issues linked to Apollonius’ representation of space: the age-old opposition between East and West (or Greek versus non-Greek), the many aetiological digressions, the Argonauts’ interventions in the landscape, and the combination of literary tradition with geographical science (erudition).



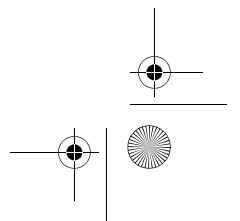
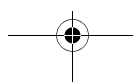
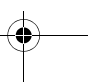
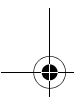
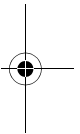
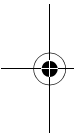
A Greek Library in Egypt

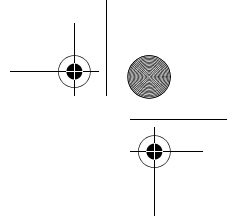
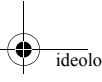
To put my interpretation of the epic in context, we need to take a look at the historical surroundings of Apollonius. In the third century BCE, Ptolemy Soter, one of the Macedonian generals of Alexander the Great, built a great library in Alexandria, the capital of Ptolemaic Egypt that had recently been founded (in 331 BCE) by Alexander the Great. The location of the city was strategically chosen; its site on the Egyptian shore opened up the pathway to the Mediterranean trade routes. It looked to mainland Greece rather than to inland Egypt. This was probably the reason why Alexandria was known in Roman Antiquity as *Alexandria ad Aegyptum*: it was perceived as ‘near Egypt’ rather than in Egypt’s heartland. The city was also the site of the grave monument (the so-called *Soma*) of Alexander the Great, laying a very direct and tangible claim to his heritage as Hellenising conqueror.⁹

The Ptolemaic dynasty was to rule over Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean for several centuries. Besides the monument for Alexander, the ideological claims of early Ptolemaic rule are also underlined by the foundation of the Great Alexandrian Library and the adjacent *Mouseion* or Shrine of the Muses, an institution for scholars and poets. This project broadcast a claim to control and perpetuate the heritage of Greek literary tradition and scholarship or, in modern sociological terms, the possession of cultural capital and control over Greek cultural memory.¹⁰ In the Library and *Mouseion*, the Ptolemies financially supported research and scholarship as well as the creation of new poetry. This resulted in an enormous output of learning, such as the commentaries on and editions of the Homeric texts by famous scholars like Zenodotus, Aristophanes of Byzantium and Aristarchus, as well as a remarkable poetic output clearly inspired by and celebrating the Ptolemies by such poetic luminaries as Callimachus of Cyrene, Theocritus of Syracuse, Apollonius of Rhodes and others.

Anecdotes about this library and its contents reveal that the aim of the Ptolemies was to take over the cultural and intellectual empire that had previously been claimed by Athens.¹¹ Thus, for example, Ptolemy Euergetes (III), probably king in Apollonius’ time, is said to have borrowed the original manuscripts of the Attic tragedians against a costly deposit of 20 talents of silver. He had these manuscripts copied with great care and then sent back the copies, keeping the originals. The purpose of this trick is clear: he who holds the originals, owns Greek literature.

Other anecdotes demonstrate that there was a marginal interest in the traditions of foreign cultures, including the famous tale of the translation of the Jewish *Pentateuch* by 72 scholars as commissioned by Ptolemy Soter (II) and the presence of Zoroastrian (Persian) writings in the Library. But generally speaking, one cannot escape the impression that ‘Greekness’ formed the dominant focus of the Library and *Mouseion* and that the incorporation of foreign texts into the Library in Greek translation somehow turned them into Greek annexations. A similar pattern of incorporating the Greek literary past can also be traced in the new poetry written by the scholar-poets of the Library, like Apollonius and Callimachus. By their manifold intertextual allusions to great works of the Greek past, they





carve out a position for themselves in Greek literary tradition, incorporate it into their own works and force their readers to acknowledge it.¹²

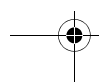
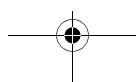
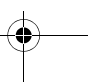
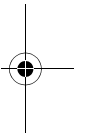
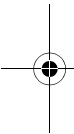
So what does this tell us about the alleged Egyptian element in Ptolemaic culture, particularly poetry, which has been the focus of much recent scholarship?¹³ It is evident that the Ptolemies frequently had themselves represented in statuary as wholly Egyptian pharaohs.¹⁴ Such statues are generally believed to emphasise the continuity of the ruling class (all previous rulers over Egypt and the Persian Achaemenids, who ruled before the conquest of Alexander, had had themselves represented in this fashion) and thus make Macedonian rule palatable to Egyptian subjects. Susan Stephens has argued that a similar ideology can also be traced in Ptolemaic literature. However, as critics of this approach point out,¹⁵ the identification of Egyptian elements can sometimes depend on reading deeply between the lines or explaining broad cultural/religious parallels between Greece and Egypt as deliberately intended.¹⁶ Even if such Egyptian elements are indeed present and intentional, the medium as well as the message are nevertheless different from the unequivocally Egyptian pharaonic statues of the Ptolemies. The Egyptian outlook in Hellenistic poetry is much more subdued and clearly not meant to encourage the Egyptians accept the status quo. Unlike the visual arts, literary art at the Ptolemaic court was presumably intended first and foremost for the small ruling elite of Macedonians and Greeks, as Anatole Mori argues about the *Argonautica*:

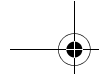
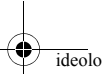
On my view the poem frames the connection between the practical forms of (Greco-Macedonian) political authority and the celebration of (mainly Greek) cult practice for a Greek speaking audience, one that would have been gratified by tales of a divine mandate for Hellenic rule over Egypt.¹⁷

This is not to deny that it may well have been pleasant, perhaps even vital, for the Ptolemies to feel that the venerable but outlandish Egyptian culture, onto which they grafted themselves, was deeply, mythically entwined with their own Greek tradition; that Egypt, though strange, was not entirely alien. This can be related, for instance, to the generally accepted idea in antiquity that the Greek and Egyptian races had issued from the same roots via the involved mythological genealogies that eventually led to the twin brothers Aegyptus (eponymous father of the Egyptians) and Danaos (idem of the Danaans, that is to say, the Greeks).

To understand the importance of all this we must place the Hellenistic rule over Egypt in the long history of Greco-Egyptian relations and the Greek perception of Egypt. The Greeks had always felt a certain ambivalence towards Egypt. Herodotus, the sixth century BCE historian, famously treats Egypt as a kind of ‘topsy-turvy world’ where everything happens in a manner that is markedly un-Greek, especially with regard to gender reversal (2.35.2):¹⁸

Just as the Egyptians have a climate peculiar to themselves, and their river is different in its nature from all other rivers, so, too, have they instituted customs and laws contrary for the most part to those of the rest of mankind. Among them, the women buy and sell, the men stay at home and weave; and whereas





in weaving all others push the woof upwards, the Egyptians push it downwards. Men carry burdens on their heads, women on their shoulders. Women pass water standing, men sitting. They ease their bowels indoors, and eat out of doors in the streets, explaining that things unseemly but necessary should be done alone in private, things not unseemly should be done openly. (...) (Trans. A.D. Godley)

At the same time, Herodotus shows great respect for the venerable antiquity of Egyptian religious custom and wisdom.¹⁹ This is the background against which we should see the Ptolemies' attitude towards matters Egyptian.

To return to the literary output that was financially encouraged by the Ptolemies, this cultural project advocates a compounded ideological message. On the one hand the incorporation of all earlier Greek learning and literature in a new Greco-Macedonian royal institution (the Library) was of the utmost importance; we may compare the way Alexander the Great subjected Athens, the cultural capital of the Greek world in his time, to Macedonian rule. On the other hand, we find the agenda of legitimising Greek/Macedonian rule over the East and in particular Egypt. Both these ideologies could be called expressions of cultural or ideological imperialism; the *Argonautica*, as I shall argue, incorporates both.

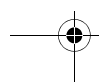
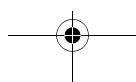
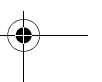
Egypt and Libya in the *Argonautica*

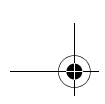
Regarding the mythological legitimising of Greek presence in Egypt, two passages in the *Argonautica* come to mind. One seems more concerned with Egyptian and Greek *identities* in the mythical age, and the other is more directly with colonised *spaces*.

The first is the intriguing claim that the Colchians, inhabitants of Aea at the mouth of the river Phasis on the Eastern side of the Black Sea, were really Egyptians. It appears in the following context. After stealing Medea and the Fleece, the Argo is being followed by the hostile Colchians, who attempt to block their passage. Luckily, Argos, son of Phrixus, a half-Greek cousin of Medea, knows an alternative route back from Aea (Colchis) to Iolcus. (4.259-293) He learned of this route from ancient pillars that date from a primeval era, as the narrator recounts:

From [Egypt], they say, a man traveled all around Europe and Asia, relying on strength, might and courage of his soldiers. He founded countless cities on his way, some of which are perhaps still inhabited, others not, for a great stretch of time has since passed. Aea at least has continued to exist to this day, along with the descendants of those men whom that king settled to dwell in Aea. They, in fact, preserve their forefather's writings, pillars on which are found all the routes and boundaries of the sea and land for those who travel around them. (4.272-281, trans. Race)

There is a lot one could say about this passage regarding the *identity* of the Greeks and the inhabitants of the East. The passage clearly forms an adaptation of Herodotus (2.103.2-





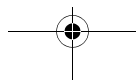
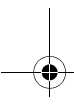
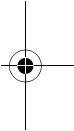
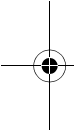
104.1). In the first place, the mythical pharaoh it refers to, Sesonchosis (or Sesososis), alias Sesostris, is mentioned by Herodotus in a similar tale to prove the Egyptian descent of the Colchians. Yet, as critics have remarked, he is described by Apollonius, in a way that could easily call to mind Alexander the Great, especially because his name is not given in the passage. There were earlier traditions that drew parallels between these two great campaigning kings.²⁰ The parallelism is enhanced in the context of the *Argonautica*, as Thalmann notes, by the fact that, unlike Herodotus, Apollonius describes Sesonchosis as a coloniser and founder of cities, not simply a conqueror.²¹

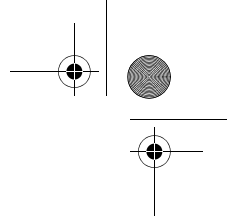
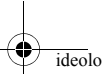
The implied equation of Colchians with Egyptians is equally important. It serves to explain a number of things about their customs, like their strange burial practices (3.200-209, they hang the bodies of their male dead in trees but bury their women), which is entirely in line with the Herodotean claim to the effect that the Egyptians were ‘most opposite to the other people’ in every way.²² It is also relevant that the Colchian king Aetes is a ‘son of Helios’, just as the Egyptian pharaohs were considered sons of the Sun god Amon.

This Egyptian angle acquires a highly relevant symbolism: the stealing of Medea and retrieval of the (originally Greek) Golden Fleece from Colchis by the Argonauts could be said symbolically to foreshadow the conquering of Egypt (which was under Persian rule during the time of Alexander) by the Greeks in the Hellenistic age. Herodotus uses the same pattern of stealing women ‘from the other side’ (either Greek or Eastern) throughout his first book to explain the causes of the eternal conflict between Greeks and barbarians (Herodotus 1.2-2.3 recounts the rapes of Io, Europa, Helen and Medea).

So Apollonius’ use of Herodotus’ identification of Colchians with Egyptians, who are, in this narrative, outsmarted by Greeks seems highly significant. It forms an implicit aetiology for Greek rule over Egyptian spaces and a typological template for later conflict between East and West. From this perspective, it is particularly attractive to relate the story of Jason and Medea’s unhappy marriage to the fact that Medea was eponymously considered the mother of the Medes by some, including Herodotus (7.62.1). This could well mean that their doomed liaison, like that of Dido and Aeneas in Vergil’s epic, symbolises the enmity between the descendants of Jason (the Greeks) and their arch-enemies, the Persians, often called ‘Medes’. Only after the Persian king Darius III had been conquered by Alexander at Gaugamela could this prototypical conflict between East and West be considered over, at least temporarily. We see a heavily Herodotean undertone colouring the whole Colchian episode, in which this specifically Herodotean identification of the Colchians as Egyptians is the key moment.

Keeping in mind the agenda of legitimising Greek rule over specifically over the *spaces* of North Africa, we can understand why so much is made in the *Argonautica* of the lengthy Libyan episode in book 4.1233-1620, which finds its most famous literary predecessor in Pindar’s fourth *Pythian Ode*.²³ After a storm, the Argonauts are beached on the shallows of the Syrtes on the coast of North Africa. This region is described throughout as eerily empty, lifeless, uncultivated and soundless, with a disconcerting blurring of the elements; sea, land and sky are all vast, undifferentiated expanses. This causes complete





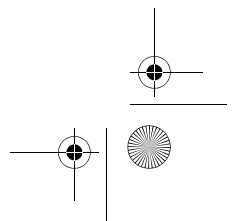
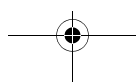
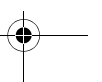
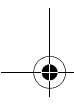
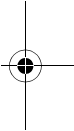
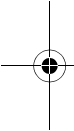
disorientation in the Argonauts, a feeling that there is ‘nowhere to go’. What nature there is, is inverted: there is too much water, and it is too shallow; plants grow there rather than on land; and there is no animal, much less human life (4.1235-1250). In short, the North African shore is presented as a pre-civilised landscape. The effect this has on the Argonauts is that they too revert to a pre-civilised state, break up their community and retreat into the desert to die alone. To their fortune, Jason is then accosted by the Libyan Herossae, indigenous goddesses clad in primitive goat-skins, with an oracle that lifts their desperation and helps them find their way again (4.1308-1362).

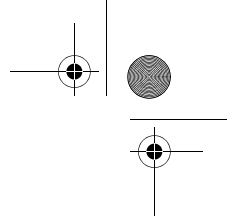
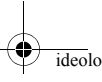
The Herossae advise the Argonauts to ‘carry their mother’, that is to say, the ship Argo, over the desert sands in the tracks of the horse of Poseidon. Thalmann convincingly reads this oracle as referring to the tradition of Greek foundation-oracles, which so often play key roles in Greek stories of colonisation and often turn on metaphors, equivocations and the like (citation). He moreover contends that the Argo/mother should be read, in concordance with this oracular language, as symbolising in this passage the ‘motherland’ of the Argonauts, as a piece of Greek earth. This would turn the Argonauts’ heroic carriage of their vessel over the desert sands for twelve days and twelve nights into a kind of symbolic fertility rite, and confirm the colonising symbolism of the whole episode.²⁴ In addition, it may be noted that at a later stage in the Libyan episode the Hesperides, other local Libyan nymphs, symbolically grant the Argonauts a drink of water, while Triton, the sea god, offers a clod of earth to the individual Argonaut Euphemus as they depart from Libya. Combined, these gifts can be read as a symbolic surrendering of the territory, as we often find it in Herodotean histories.

As noted, the Argonaut Euphemus receives a clod of Libyan earth as a gift from Triton.²⁵ Euphemus disturbingly dreams that he nurses this clod at his breast in the form of a tiny woman, like a daughter, but later to his shame and horror he copulates with her. However, the clod-woman assuages his guilt by saying that she will turn out to be the nurse of Euphemus’ descendants, the island/nymph Calliste, not his blood relative. Euphemus casts the clod overboard, as per her request in the dream, and the island Calliste is born from it. Later this would come to be called Thera, and the Dorian Greeks would migrate from there to the Libyan region of the Cyrenaica, which still was a prosperous Greek city state in the third century BCE and practically next door to Alexandria.

The history of this Greek city in Libya is highly relevant to this passage. Although it became subject to Alexander the Great in 331 and was later practically annexed by the Ptolemies of Egypt, it seems to have long enjoyed a nominal independence. That is, until the marriage of Berenice, daughter of Cyrene’s king, to Ptolemy III Euergetes, the ruler in Apollonius’ time. From then until 96 BCE, Cyrene was completely under Ptolemaic rule. Depending on how we wish to date the epic, the Libyan episode may have had a great contemporary relevance for the dynasty.

In the typical binary oppositions at play in this kind of colonising myth, as Stephens observes, the Greeks play the role of the male in this passage; the female clod of earth (compare the local goddesses Herossae and the Hesperides) willingly subjects to domination (the common metaphor of ploughing and fertilising soil for sexual intercourse is





inverted here) and nurses and feeds the children of the coloniser. This is a foreshadowing of the peaceful and fruitful union of the coloniser and the colonised; we might even say it functions as a foil to the marriage of Jason and Medea. As Thalmann remarks, the fact that the clod that becomes Thera, a nurse and lover, nicely complements the fact that the Argo is the Greeks' true 'mother' and a piece of Greece: colonised land can never be a true mother, since her settlers are not indigenous, but she fulfils the role of nurse and lover willingly and well. The ultimate message is clear: the Greek presence in northern Africa had been divinely ordained to bear fruit ever since mythical times. In this sense the prophetic dream of Euphemus is surely the most important aetiology in the epic for Greeks in North Africa in the third century BCE.

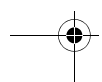
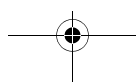
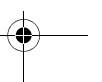
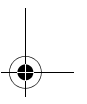
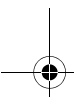
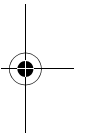
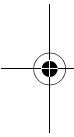
Aetiologies: Altering Space

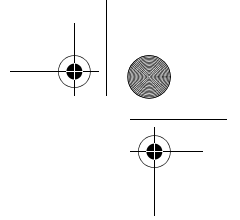
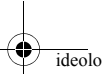
This brings us to the topic of the many aetiological digressions in the *Argonautica*. Throughout the narrative it is emphasised that the Argonauts create lasting changes in landscapes they pass through by removing, replacing or impregnating former inhabitants, renaming places and leaving physical reminders of their passage in the form of graves, altars and other constructions. This makes un-Greek, often unclaimed, landscape 'Greek' by a physical token: 'Argo was here'. In many cases, such actions are described in the form of aetiological digressions which link the actions of the Argonauts with rituals, cults and settlements that can allegedly still be witnessed in the time of the epic's narrator and intended narratees (indicated by formulas like 'still to be seen', 'in later days' etc.).²⁶ As noted, this gives the world-view of the epic a distinctly teleological cast, focusing on the Hellenistic era and its Greek domination over the world as endpoint.

Many of these *aitia* revolve around the institution of religious cults by the important Argonaut Orpheus and bear a seal of divine approval.²⁷ When the mythical bard Orpheus is introduced in the epic, it is significant that he is the first to be named in the heroic catalogue, that he possibly functions as a kind of intratextual alter ego of the narrator²⁸ and that he is able to make nature (i.e. space) comply to his music:

And [Orpheus], they say, charmed the hard boulders on the mountains and the course of rivers with the sound of his songs. And the wild oak trees, signs still to this day of his singing, flourish on the Thracian shore of Zone where they stand in dense, orderly rows, the ones he led forth from Pieria, charmed by his lyre. (1.26-31)

The Argonaut Heracles is another central figure in the epic as the personification of heroic strength. Unlike Orpheus he changes nature by the force of his hands. He eradicates trees (1.1188-1205), creates springs (4.1441-1449) and kills monsters (1.989-1011) and snakes (4.1433-1435). His role in the community of the Argonauts is, from the start, that of an outsider. As semi-divine son of Zeus, he is literally too big for the ship and its crew: in a subtly humorous scene in the first book he even breaks his oar because he rows so much harder than his comrades (1.1160-1171). This finally results in his being left behind by accident in Mysia, where he (the only apparently pederastic crew member) goes off in





search of his squire/*eromenos* Hylas. Occasionally, the Argonauts catch glimpses of him as he crosses the earth before them, always far off in the distance, a divine trailblazer riding the world of monsters. In this context it seems relevant that Alexander the Great famously included Heracles as one of his heroic ancestors.²⁹ To see Heracles as prefiguring Alexander, in some senses, does not seem implausible. He stands to the Successor Kings (like the Ptolemies) as Heracles stands to the rest of the heroic crew of the *Argo*: a larger, more heroic, even semi-divine trailblazer who conquers and Hellenises far-flung regions.

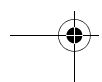
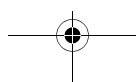
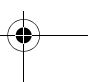
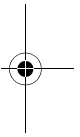
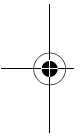
Scholarly Geography in the *Argonautica*: The Armchair Traveler

As we have seen, the many aetiological digressions in the epic are a way for the Apollonian narrator to claim that heroic Greeks had left their civilising marks on a large territory surrounding the Mediterranean and eastwards around the Black Sea. Special emphasis seems to be reserved for the North African-Egyptian connection.

How may we link this observation with the celebrated? learnedness of the narrator? Let us begin with a look at Apollonius' representation of geography. Throughout, the *Argo*'s route is mapped with great precision, often almost in the style of a scientific work. The first leg of the journey from Iolcus to Colchis (books 1-3) is fairly straightforward. Apollonius follows traditions that presented the natural course towards Colchis through the Bosphorus and along the southern shore of the Black Sea. *Argo*'s return, on the other hand, is odd. There were various traditional routes, namely retracing his path on the way back, passing through a river network in north-western Europe, travelling through the Adriatic and Ligurian seas surrounding Italy, or crossing North Africa.³⁰ Instead of limiting himself to one of these, Apollonius *combines* them with some very unlikely results. In fact, it seems probable that one of the epic's aims was the combination of various routes of the *Argo* as found in previous poets and contemporary scientific sources.³¹ It is probably useless to ask what Apollonius actually believed to be (scientifically) true; the point is that he includes what he has been told, following the *Argo*'s progress 'on an imaginary map on which earlier poets and historians have left their marks: signposts that cannot be ignored by a Hellenistic writer.'³²

This project of combining earlier poetical/scientific geographies in the *Argonautica* is, as I claim, also part of what one could call Apollonius' ideological or panegyric agenda: he shows that all previous Greek traditions converge in his own work. To make the *tour de force* of this combination of previous traditions especially noticeable, he often marks out the *Argo*'s geographical detours with emphatic invocations of the Muses, goddesses of poetic inspiration who in Hellenism had become more or less the personifications of Greek poetic tradition, to show he is patching together different accounts.

A striking example of this procedure is 4.552-556. Before embarking on the most Odyssean stretch of the *Argo*'s journey (around the Western coast of Italy, where mythical geography traditionally located the places of Odysseus' adventures as recounted in Homer's *Odyssey*), the narrator asks the Muses how it is possible that traces of the *Argo*



are to be seen beyond the Adriatic Sea and Italy. This is certainly not where the Argonauts were heading at this point in the narrative, so they must have made a very strange and unexpected turn to arrive at the west coast of Italy: ‘But goddessess [Muses], how is it that beyond this sea around the Ausonian land and the Ligystian islands (which are called the Stoechades) countless traces of the Argo are clearly to be seen?’ In this way, marked by an invocation to the Muse, the stitching together of different poetic traditions becomes apparent. It is clearly marked out as such.³³

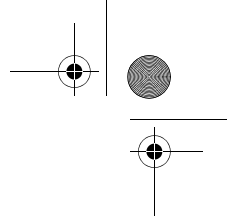
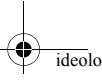
The fact that Apollonius’ scholarly and poetic work mainly took place in a royal establishment dedicated to research and the literary arts called the *Mouseion*, literally ‘Shrine of the Muses’, helps us see that his invocations of these goddesses might actually stand for his browsing in the adjacent or incorporated Library to create his version of the mythical tale of the Argonauts’ journey, which had been told countless times in varying versions before. From Alexandria, and from within the great Ptolemaic establishment of the Library and *Mouseion*, aided and inspired by his reading of the most famous and most obscure writings from the Greek literary and scholarly tradition, the armchair traveller Apollonius is able to imagine and chart the journey of these mythical Greek heroes to the most exotic of places. The narrative of the Argo’s journey thus both encompasses and claims as Greek the physical world as well as the mythical or literary world. Indeed, it shows how all stories pertaining to this world, both realistic and fantastic, are ultimately available in the greatest shrine of Greek culture, the Ptolemaic Library.

Conclusion

To conclude my essay, I return to Apollonius’ description of Orpheus. Orpheus is the archetypal Greek mythical bard, and his prominent inclusion in the *Argonautica* is often interpreted by scholars as a symbolic intratextual representation of Apollonius’ poetical persona. With this interpretation at the back of our minds, let us look again at the text introducing Orpheus.

And [Orpheus], they say, charmed the hard boulders on the mountains and the course of rivers with the sound of his songs. And the wild oak trees, signs still to this day of his singing, flourish on the Thracian shore of Zone where they stand in dense, orderly rows, the ones he led forth from Pieria, charmed by his lyre. (1.26-31)

I suggest that the Greek phrasing of ‘dense, orderly rows’ (ἐξείης στιχόωσιν) alludes to hexameter verse; it may also be recalled that the Greek rhetorical term for poetic material was ὕλη (wood),³⁴ which seems to be hinted at by the orderly rows of oak trees. That Orpheus leads them down from Pieria, country of the Muses, makes it likely that ‘poetical material’ is symbolically referred to. Orpheus functions as a metaphor for the poet Apollonius because he is ordering and harmonising traditional literary material to establish a unified narrative about the Argonauts, ‘proof’ of which is then provided by the (still visible) traces left in Argo’s wake. Similarly, Orpheus leaves his marks on the landscape by



his songs, with lasting results: the trees he has charmed with his song remain to this day as signs of his singing.³⁵

The mastery over poetic tradition and (geographic) knowledge, here symbolised by Orpheus' powerful singing that orders space, can also form an important way of building an empire. This is confirmed by the metapoetical vignette of Amphion and Zethus building the walls of Thebes, one of the vignettes described in the *ekphrasis* of Jason's cloak (1.721-768), his weapon of seduction when he goes to meet the Lemnian queen Hypsipyle. This cloak has been made by the goddess Athena and represents many scenes that clearly carry symbolic significance for various major themes in the epic.³⁶ Thus the vignette showing the goddess Aphrodite mirroring herself in the shield of the god Ares seems to foreshadow the motif of how (Medea's) love eventually helps Jason achieve his martial aim (the conquest of the Golden Fleece). Additionally, the vignette representing the mythical heroes Amphion and Zethus building the city walls of Thebes depicts Amphion effortlessly making the boulders move to the sound of his lyre (like Orpheus), while Zethus uses strenuous physical force (like Heracles). But both efforts are ultimately constructive:

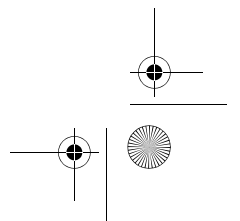
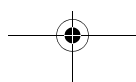
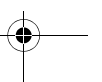
And on it were the twins sons of Antiope, Asopus' daughter, Amphion and Zethus. Nearby was Thebes, still without towers, whose foundation stones they were just now laying with great zeal. Zethus was carrying the top of a high mountain on his shoulders, like a man toiling hard, but after him came Amphion, playing loudly on his golden lyre and a boulder twice as big followed in his footsteps. (1.735-741)

Interpreted in an ideological vein, this mythical vignette may suggest that he who masters *mousike*, the art of the Muses, can move mountains like Amphion or Orpheus.

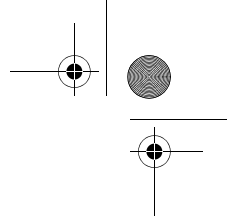
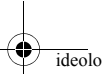
This would have been a welcome message for the Ptolemies, founders of the greatest Library on earth and its famous *Mouseion*. For them, political, economic and military power (as symbolised in the epic perhaps by Heracles and Zethus, and in reality by their conquering predecessor Alexander) was only part of the story. They backed up their claims of territorial rule with claims of universal literary and cultural hegemony, based on the appropriation of the Greek tradition. They controlled it with scholarship and philology and added to it with the composition of new poetry and scholarship by state-funded poet-scholars in the *Mouseion* and the Library. Apollonius, the head librarian, philological scholar of Homer and creative poet of a mythical Greek travel epic, embodies all of these ambitions.

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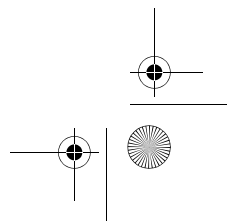
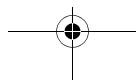
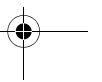
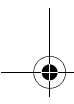
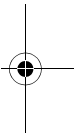
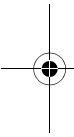
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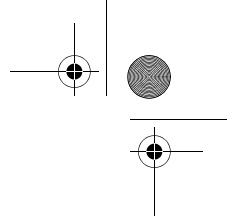
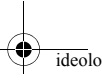


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**Notes**

1. Hunter (1993: 3).
2. Excellent work on the narrative structure of the *Argonautica* has been done by e.g. Fusillo (1985); Cuypers (2004: 43-62); Morrison 2007: 271-312. The Homeric vocabulary has been the focus of work by Campbell (1983) and Rengakos (2003).
3. For Jason as anti-hero, cf. Lawall (1966, 121-169).
4. Bakhtin (1981: 15).
5. Cf. 1.1058; 1.1345; 2.841-4; 2.851-7; 2.864-50; 4.1620-2; 1.1145-9; 2.604-606; 4.1444; 4.1755.
6. Cf. Clauss (2000: 26); Klooster (2007: 66); Thalmann (2011:39-41).
7. Thalmann (2011: 53-76).
8. Stephens (2000: 195-215); (2003); (2005); Newman (2001: 309-341); Mori (2008).
9. For the layout and topography of ancient Alexandria, see Fraser (1972).
10. Cf. resp. Bourdieu (1993), Assmann (1997). For this aspect of the Library and its poet-scholars, see Klooster (2011).
11. Cf. Too (2010: 17-81).
12. See e.g. Fantuzzi and Hunter (2004); Acosta-Hughes (2010); Klooster (2011).
13. E.g. Selden 1998; Stephens (2001); (2003); Hunter (2003).
14. See e.g. Empereur (1998) for images.
15. See e.g. Mori (2008: 9).
16. It has to be admitted that both Stephens (2003) and Selden (1998) identify striking parallelisms between Egyptian myth/literature and Hellenistic ones. The importance of such passages would seem to lie in an attempt at syncretism.
17. Mori (2008: 9); Stephens (2000: 195-215) also acknowledges this as part of the message of Hellenistic poetry, in particular the *Argonautica*.
18. This is remarkably similar to Apollonius' description of the customs of the peoples on the shores of the Black Sea, the Chalybes, Tibareni and Mossynoikoi, as well as the Amazons and the Colchians. In general, the reversal of genders is a recurrent theme in the epic.
19. Cf. e.g. Isocrates *Busiris*.
20. Stephens (2000: 200). A parallel between Sesosis and Alexander had already been drawn by Hecataeus of Abdera (third century BCE). According to D. S. 1.55.2-3, first century BCE). Alexander is called the new Sesonchosis in Ps. Callisthenes' *Alexander Romance* (1.34.22)
21. Thalmann (2011: 42-47).
22. Cf. Fusillo (1985: 159-67); Stephens (2000: 198-99), Thalmann (2011: 42-47).
23. That this is the ideological background of the episode has been stressed by Stephens (2000); (2003); Clauss (2000: 11-32); Mori (2008) and Thalmann (2011). The Libyan episode's





most famous literary adaptation is in Pindar's *Pythian* 4, but Apollonius seems to mix in elements from other versions. The colonisation of Cyrene also forms the topic of Herodotus book 4. It was apparently also treated by Hesiod and Antimachus.

24. Thalmann (2011: 89-91).
25. This is also the name of the god of the Nile, elsewhere in the epic, viz. 4.260.1233
26. See Fusillo (1985); Hunter (1993); Klooster (2007: 63-81), Danek (2009), Köhnken (2010: 136-151). Examples of human constructions are: 1.1058-1062: the grave of Cyzicus; 1.1345: a city founded by Polyphemus; 2.841-4: the grave of Idmon; 2.851-7: the grave of Typhis; 2.864-850; 4.1620-2: temples to Triton and Poseidon. Examples of changes in nature (often but not always with help of semi-divine intervention) are: 1.1145-9: a spring created by Rhea; 2.604-606: the Symplegades become fixed; 4.1444: a spring created by Heracles; 4.1755: a clod of earth becomes Calliste.
27. For Orpheus as an ordering force, cf. Clare (2002: 231-260). Other examples of the power of his song are: 1.569-574: fishes swim in the wake of Argo; 2.161-3: the shore is charmed (*iaineto*) by his song; twice Orpheus' song is indirectly linked to the creation/finding of a spring: 1.1140-1151-2; 4.1423-1430.
28. Cf. Klooster (2011: 75-91), with references to earlier literature.
29. Cf e.g. the contemporary Theocritus *Idyll* 17.20-27.
30. Cf. Delage (1930: 51-54; 277-291). The return via the north-western rivers is derived from Timaeus and Timagetus; the Mediterranean episode is partly Homeric and partly derived from Timaeus; the Libyan episode is found in Hesiod, Pindar, Herodotus and Antimachus. There are in fact also traditions he refutes: namely that the Argo returned via Oceanus (so Hesiod, Pindar, Hecataeus and Antimachus), which is pointedly denied by Apollonius: Hera warns the Argonauts not to enter Okeanos in 4.634-644. Alternatively, the Argo could have returned the same way it came (so Callimachus).
31. Cf. Delage (1930, *passim*); cf. Meyer (2001: 219; 222; 234).
32. Meyer (2001: 227).
33. On Apollonius' relation with the Muses, see González (2000: 270-292); Morrison (2007: 271-312); Klooster (2011: 209-222). This process of pointing out that there were contrary or famous literary traditions on which Apollonius based his account is marked by many Muse-invocations throughout the epic. They frequently refer to localities or names, such as at 2.844-845; 4.982-992; 4.1381-1387.
34. Cf. Plb. 2.16.14; Longinus; 13.4, 43.1, Arist. *EN* 1094b12; Phld. Rh. 2.124.
35. Cf. Klooster (2011: 76-77); Thalmann (2011: 32) also sees the figure of Orpheus as symbolising the ordering of the material of the epic.
36. The interpretation of the cloak is attempted by many scholars; see the bibliography in Fusillo 1985 and Manakidou (1992). Bulloch (2006: 44-68) suggests there is a deeper correspondence with the Hesiodic Catalogue of Women, which obliquely reflects on the sinister turn Jason's relation with Medea will take. I hold (Klooster 2012: 72-75) that there is a polyvalent symbolism present in many of the vignettes.

