

Colchis – Land of Golden Fleece, Myths and Reality

The kingdom of Colchis laid the foundation to the Georgian statehood.

One of the ancient Greek myths associated with Georgia is believed to belong to the first half of the second millennium BC.

The first evidence of the Argonauts' campaign on board the Argo Ship (Argo meaning "fast" in Greek) in quest of the Golden Fleece on the territory of West Georgia (then widely known as the kingdom of Colchis) can be found in Homer's epic poems *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (8th c. BC), and later, in *Argonauts* by Apollonius of Rhodes (3rd c. BC).

...Jason, the son of the rightful king of Iolcus, had to bring the Golden Fleece from Colchis in order to regain the throne in Ellada (present day Greece). Jason, head of the Argonauts, after overcoming great hardships succeeded in kidnapping the Golden Fleece, symbol of welfare of Colchis. Medea, the daughter of King Aetes (son of the Sun-God Helios) was inspired by Gods to fall fatally in love with Jason and it was her who assisted the Argonauts to achieve the goal.

Medea, renowned in Greek mythology as a "universal sorceress" (highly knowledgeable of the mysterious world of herbs and drugs) is considered to be the mother of the field of medicine. Therefore, it is commonly acknowledged that medicine derives its name from Medea.

Medea, claimed by Aristotle as the most tragic figure, has been the source of inspiration for many artists and men of letters ever since. *Medea*, the most popular tragedy worldwide, belongs to the famous Greek dramatist Euripides (5th c. BC). Under its direct influence, more than 300 works were created in different epochs.

It is true that Euripides changed the contents of the myth to some extent. In particular, the motive of deliberate murder of her own sons by Medea is not evidenced in any other pre-Euripidian source. By this twist of the plot the great tragic playwright succeeded in turning the famous Colchian personage from the Greek mythology into the most recognized character of the world drama. Undoubtedly, no other literary character associated with Georgia can equal Medea in popularity.

One of the beauties of the coastline of Pitsunda (Abkhazia, Georgia) is a monumental composition of Medea at the verge of sacrifice of her two sons, sculptured with profound tragic expressiveness by the well-known Georgian sculptor Merab Berdzenishvili. Medea's monument with the Golden Fleece in her hand is erected in one of the most beautiful squares of Batumi as well.

The legend about the Argonauts is revived along the Batumi coastline, especially at the Gonio Fortress (named *Apsaros* by Greeks in memory of Medea's dismembered brother, Apsyrtus).

The well known historian Procopius Caesarensis (6th c.) writes about the sites of the city of Apsaros; he describes its amphitheater and hippodrome, specially emphasizing that the grave of Apsyrtus is located to the east of the city. It is also evidenced, that in 18th and 19th centuries, the foreign travellers were still invited to visit the grave of Medea's brother.

It is notable too that the high official Legate Arian who was commissioned by the Roman Emperor Hadrian (2nd c.) for inspection of the Colchian seaside castles, reported that the citizens of Phasis (present day Poti), a sea port where the river Phasis (Rioni) meets Colchian Sea (Black Sea), demonstrated the anchor of the "Argo" Ship. According to the myths, the Argonauts travelled in Colchis on the river Phasis.

Numerous Greek authors deemed the campaign of the Argonauts in Colchis quite real. To their opinion, the Golden Fleece, kept by the Colchians, was a book, written in gold letters on a piece of sheep-skin which contained the secrets of producing gold by chemistry.

According to the ethnographic data, gold in Svaneti (Georgia) was obtained from the sands of the Enguri River by means of sheep-skin.

Discoveries from Vani (Georgia) archaeological expedition (2003-2004) reassert once more that Colchis, the land of gold – as described in Greek mythology – was a real country. The Vani excavations also attest to the fact that the cultural heritage of Georgia was an integral part of ancient civilization.

Strabon, the great Greek scholar named as "father of geography", (1st c., BC) in his famous work *Geography* gives the following characteristic features of West Georgia, historical Colchis: "The extent of the fame of this country all across the ancient world is proved by the myths on Jason's campaign as well as by the preceding myths about Phrixus... The riches of this country: gold, silver and iron were a real reason of the Argonauts' campaign".

It's interesting to note that in 1984 the Greek Argonauts' route was repeated by a famous English scholar and traveller Tim Severin. He travelled and explored legendary geographical routes. Tim Severin experimentally proved possibility of Argonauts' expedition.

...After millennia, in modern epoch, Argonauts have been metaphorically called just adventure-loving people wandering in foreign countries in search of gold, or wealth in general.

More than 50 chess adventure-loving Argonauts will soon sail their ships into the turbulent waves of the World Championship. The World Champion in Rapid Chess will be the one, whose "Argo" will act more rapidly and the winner will get hold of "the Golden Fleece".