

Placing the Unplaceable: The Making of Apollonius' Argonautic Geography

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IN HIS EPIC MASTERPIECE, the *Argonautica*, Apollonius of Rhodes gives an apparently straightforward description of the wondrous route of the *Argo*. The swift ship sets out from Thessalian Iolcus—the native polis of Jason, the captain—and after making a number of stopovers around the Aegean, the Bosphorus, and the Pontic littoral (*Argon.* 1.580–2.1259), the crew finally disembarks in Colchis, modern Georgia.¹ Caucasian Colchis is ruled by the dangerous king Aeëtes, whose daughter, Medea, joins the Argonauts for their way back to Greece. On her return the *Argo* also touches at various places easy to find on the map. The ship goes, for example, to various coastal sites in Italy, where Apollonius places most of the ordeals that Odysseus later will experience. Calypso's island, Circe's homestead, the alluring Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis, and the Πλαγκταί—the floating rocks—are all found on or around the Apennine peninsula.² After also casting anchor by the island of Corcyra—in this context inhabited by the Odyssean Phaeacians—and along the northern coast of Libya, Jason and his Argonauts return to Iolcus.³

We are, however, left with a practical problem, as the author offers a highly problematic route for the ship's passage from the Black Sea to the western Mediterranean: the *Argo* sails up the Ister (Danube), then exits into the Adriatic Sea through an imaginary branch of the Ister (4.300–30). As Vian points out, Apollonius' geography seems in general to represent a synthesis

¹ *Argon.* 2.1260–85. This is consequently also where the Golden Fleece, the object of the quest, is to be found.

² Calypso's island: *Argon.* 4.572–75; Circe: 4.659–63; Sirens: 4.891f; Scylla and Charybdis: 4.922f; Πλαγκταί: 4.924–60

³ Phaeacian Corcyra: 4.982–97; Libya: 4.1228–1628.

of that of his contemporaries.⁴ Even the Illyrian branch of the Ister may have had some basis in general geographical misconceptions.⁵ Apollonius' next maneuver is, however, quite unparalleled. From the innermost nook of the Adriatic the Argonauts sail up the River Po, subsequently identified with the mythical stream Eridanus. This waterway is moreover connected to the Rhodanus (Rhone), a river that thereupon leads the ship into the western Mediterranean (*Argon.* 4.595–651).

Apollonius' problems in planning an itinerary for the return that would harmonize with the actual geography of the Mediterranean are not exceptional among writers of the Argonautic myth. The return route, clearly an ancient dilemma, is treated very differently by various writers. Although Euripides and his contemporary Herodotus let the *Argo* go and return by the same course,⁶ this is not a feasible solution for most authors. This is evident in their struggle to find any other feasible egress from the Black Sea. It is as if the basic frame of the myth restrains the wondrous ship from a homecoming that merely repeats the voyage out. Even though the extensive Argonautic material is inconclusive, we may nevertheless sense the logic of the ancient περιήγησις behind the shifting itinerary:⁷ if the *Argo*

⁴ F. Vian, *Apollonios de Rhodes: Argonautiques* III² (Budé ed., Paris 1996) 17.

⁵ Some sources indicate that certain authorities actually asserted this misperception of the Danube: "Le Ps.-Skylax (§ 20) situe en Istrie l'estuaire occidental de l'Istros. Il s'agit en réalité d'une petite rivière, homonyme de l'Istros pontique" (Vian [*supra* n.4] 26). According to the scholiast (*ad* 4.282–91b), Apollonius copied this part of the Argonautic route from the example of the early Hellenistic geographer Timaeetus. An Adriatic mouth of the Danube occurs in both Theopompus' fourth-century B.C. *Philippica* (*FGrHist* 115F129=Strab. 7.5.9) and in Hipparchus in the second century B.C. (Strab. 1.3.15). Ready acceptance that the Argonauts took this impossible route is demonstrated by the numerous sites in the Adriatic associated with the Argonauts and the Colchians who pursued them. Both Strabo and his older contemporary, Diodorus Siculus, however, find the claim of a branch of the Ister pouring into the Adriatic definitely incorrect: Strab. 1.3.15, 7.5.9; Diod. 4.56.7f.

⁶ Eur. *Med.* 1f, 1236; Hdt., *FGrHist* 31F10 (=ΣAp. Rhod. *Argon.* 4.259).

⁷ Hesiod, the earliest source to tie both the mythical river Phasis, the world-embracing Oceanus, and the most distant shore of the Libyan continent into the itinerary, clearly indicates that the *Argo's* passage originally may have represented a circumnavigation of the world disc. See ΣAp. Rhod. *Argon.* 4.282–91b ('Ἡσίοδος δὲ διὰ Φάσιδος εἰσπελευκέναι λέγει), 257–62b ('Ἡσίοδος δὲ ... διὰ τοῦ Ὀκεανοῦ φασιν ἔλθειν αὐτοὺς εἰς Λιβύην): both *ap.* Hes. *Cat. fem.* fr. 45, in H. G. Evelyn-White, *Hesiod: The Homeric Hymns and Homeric* (Loeb ed., London 1914).

originally was considered to have circumnavigated the world disc, then a return by another way than the voyage to Colchis would be an essential aspect of the story.

But instead of joining this ancient quest for the exact route of the return, I would like to concentrate on the more basic question behind all this confusion. Why is the mythical itinerary of the Argonauts so hard to combine with the geographical realities?

To answer this question, it would seem relevant to follow Apollonius' route to the uttermost point where the geography appears uncomplicated, namely Colchis. In spite of Apollonius' easily discernible cruise through the southern Black Sea to modern Georgia, not even this appears to represent a simple line on the map. Looking at earlier sources, one suddenly discovers that Colchis itself, an apparently solid target, seems to evaporate. Before the fifth century B.C. poets Pindar and Simonides,⁸ there is in fact no clear identification of either Medea or her ὀλοόφρων father, Aeëtes, with the land of the eastern Euxine Sea.⁹ As Bunbury points out, the legend of the Argonautic voyage was "already familiar to the Greeks in the age of Homeric poems, long before either the Milesians or Megarians had penetrated the Euxine [Black Sea]."¹⁰ Hall emphasizes that Medea, accordingly, is not depicted in foreign costume until the fifth century.¹¹ It is as if Aeëtes and his daughter, at this early stage in the myth, belong to a category beyond the well-developed notion of the barbarian.

Although an ancient Colchian connection must therefore be discarded, we nevertheless have something that appears to be an earlier name for the homeland of this dangerous son of Helios. Already the seventh-century poet Mimnermus identifies the land of Aeëtes with *Aea*, a name simply meaning "Land."¹² This vague, geographical term must relate to the name of Aeëtes, which can thus be translated as the "Man of the Land."

⁸ Pind. *Pyth.* 4.11, 212; Simon. *PMG* 545 (=E²Eur. *Med.* 19).

⁹ D. Ø. Endsjø, *To Be and Not Be: Liminal Aspects of Greek Mythical Geography* (Diss. University of Bergen 1996) 69.

¹⁰ E. H. Bunbury, *A History of Ancient Geography among the Greeks and Romans* (London 1883) I 27.

¹¹ E. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian* (Oxford 1989) 19.

¹² Mimnermus 11 West (=Strab. 1.2.40).

Unlike Colchis, Aea is *not* in modern Georgia, just somewhere "in the east." Disconnected from the Caucasian country with which it is later identified, the homeland of Aeëtes and Medea is suddenly a realm impossible to pinpoint on a map. Homer, for example, does not offer a specific location for the land of Aeëtes. He nevertheless has Circe, Aeëtes' sister, observe that the *Argo*, on her way *back* from Aeëtes' land, is the only vessel that has so far managed to pass through the dreaded Πλαγκταί, the wandering rocks (*Od.* 12.70). These rocks appear to be not far from Circe's *Aeaea*, which, according to Homer, is the land of the rising sun, placed somewhere in the eastern Oceanus (*Od.* 12.3f). The landlocked Black Sea, which will later represent an obligatory part of the Argonautic itinerary, is nowhere either mentioned or indicated.

That the most ancient Greeks in this way saw a connection between Circe's *Aeaea* and the Aea of her brother Aeëtes is not surprising. As all sources, from Homer on, have the *Argo* navigating in the far east, it seems logical that Aeëtes' Aea, like Circe's *Aeaea*, also is originally found at the world's end, at the brim of Oceanus where the sun rises.¹³ This is accordingly also where Mimnermus places this vague and undefined country: somewhere in Oceanus by the rising of the sun, where the sun's rays are kept in a golden chamber.¹⁴ By most geographical standards, these directions are as elusive as Never-Never-Land's "second star to the right and straight until morning." Such a location would, however, represent a geography that suits the lineage of Aeëtes, as the son of Helios and the daughter of Oceanus.

Continuing this tradition of a fairy-tale geography, Hesiod is said to have had the *Argo* sail into Oceanus through the mighty stream of Phasis,¹⁵ one of Oceanus' numerous offspring (*Hes. Th.* 340). This vast stream does not appear in any way to be the

¹³ As the ocean and celestial elements thus are combined, it is interesting to note that J. S. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought* (Princeton 1992) 15, proposes that this should be understood literally: "the many passages in epic poetry which describe the sun and stars as arising from or setting into Ocean, and in particular Homer's assertion that Ursa Major lacks a 'share of the baths of Ocean' (*Hom. Od.* 5.275, *Hom. Il.* 18.489), were taken to mean that Ocean's waters extended to the edge of the celestial dome."

¹⁴ Mimnermus 11 West (=Strab. 1.2.40): Μίμνερμον, ὃς ἐν τῷ ὠκεανῷ ποιήσας τὴν οἴκησιν τοῦ Αἰήτου πρὸς ταῖς ἀνατολαῖς ἐκτὸς.

¹⁵ Σ*Argon.* 4.282-91b: Ἡσίοδος δὲ διὰ Φάσιδος εἰσπεπλευκέναι λέγει (= *Cat. fem.* fr. 45).

same as the river in classical times identified with the Phasis, the Colchian Rioni flowing into the eastern Black Sea. This Caucasian river has no connection whatsoever with the world-embracing Oceanus; Hesiod's waterway is a great river connecting the inner sea with the outer Oceanus. For Hesiod, the Phasis is a mythical waterway leading from somewhere in the Mediterranean to a route that enabled the *Argo* literally to circumnavigate the world.

How then could the mighty Phasis turn into a tiny streamlet, as it is in Apollonius' epic? Bolton finds it likely that Phasis originally was a legendary but imaginary river. Thereupon it became identified with the mighty Tanaïs (modern Don), a waterway that would prove a likely connection to Oceanus.¹⁶ When the Tanaïs, along with the other major rivers, were no longer considered to flow from Oceanus to the Mediterranean,¹⁷ the much smaller Caucasian Rioni would be identified with the mythical Phasis. This, at least, was the furthest east one could venture from the Black Sea.

As Phasis was not originally found in Colchis, Hesiod's inclusion of this great river in the Argonautic itinerary can in no way be seen to indicate that Hesiod placed Aeëtes anywhere in Caucasia. Rather, the stress on the *Argo*'s route via the Phasis out into the world-embracing Oceanus suggests that Hesiod would not disagree with Mimnermus' location of Aeëtes' land at the absolute end of the world.

Nevertheless, a number of authorities on ancient Colchis still argue for an ancient link with the land of Aeëtes. Otar Lordkipanidze claims on the basis of Herodotus that "die beiden synonymen Ortsnamen (Aia und Kolchis) zwei verschiedene chronologische Ebenen der Namengebungen bezeichnen. Dabei müsste Aia die älteren sein."¹⁸ But, as I have tried to dem-

¹⁶ J. D. P. Bolton, *Aristeas of Proconnesus* (Oxford 1962) 55–58.

¹⁷ Already from the fourth century B.C., when Timaeus has the *Argo* sail to the source of the Tanaïs, whence they hauled the ship overland to Oceanus (*FGrHist* 566F85=Diod. 4.56.3), the discussion concerns where on the Eurasian continent the sources of the Tanaïs were. The mythical connection of rivers between the world-embracing Oceanus and the Mediterranean was thus disregarded at an early point. Cf. A. Hermann, "Tanais (1)," *RE* IV.A.2 (1932) 2162f.

¹⁸ O. Lordkipanidze, *Das alte Georgien (Kolchis und Iberien) in Strabons Geographie. Neue Scholien* (Amsterdam 1996) 43. In claiming that Aea is an older synonym for Colchis, Lordkipanidze refers to T. K. Mikeladse, *Dziebani kolchetisa sa samchretagmosawlet schawizgwispiretis udzwelesi mosachleobis istoriidan* (Tbilisi 1974) 159.

onstrate, Aea, the "older synonym," in the most ancient sources is not identified with Caucasia at all. In rejecting the idea of Aea as "ursprünglich ein geheimnisvolles und hinter der Grenze der bewohnten Erde gelegenes Land"¹⁹ because the Argonauts first passed through the entrance of the Black Sea, Lordkipanidze is presupposing a connection between Homer's Πλαγκταί and the Bosphorus. This connection cannot be deduced from the Homeric text and is not found in sources before the fifth century B.C.²⁰ Lordkipanidze refers to a possible Hittite origin of the myth of Jason and Medea, a theory based on Haas' comparison of references elsewhere to wondrous fleeces and guardian monsters. But even if this is correct and thus locates the *origin* of the myth in the direction of Colchis, the Hittite material does not in any way help to identify *Aea* with a specific place.²¹

In his study of ancient Georgia, David Braund also identifies the eastern Euxine as the location of the Argonauts' voyage, referring to Hesiod's treatment of the Phasis River, the mythical waterway that Braund assumes always has been placed in this area.²² He then argues that "the *Iliad* links Jason with Lemnos *on the way to the Black Sea*,"²³ when in fact Homer says nothing of where the *Argo* sailed after visiting Lemnos. A more important reference, however, is that of Hesiod's contemporary, Eumelus of Corinth, who "places Aeetes among the Colchians." Eumelus' story, however, is preserved in an indirect quotation in Pausanias' *Periegesis* of the second century, when Aea had become so regularly identified with Colchis that no one would react to using the one name for the other. But when Pausanias, 900 years after Eumelus (*PEG* 3 = Paus. 2.3.10), writes Εὐμηλος [...] ἔφη [...] Αἰήτην ἀπιόντα ἐς Κόλχους, I do not find the connection conclusive.

Dion, likewise assuming a link between Colchis and Aea, tries to explain away all the most ancient material that places Aea somewhere in Oceanus by referring to an "océanisation" de Jason." This process apparently must have taken place *before*

¹⁹ Lordkipanidze (*supra* n.18) 159.

²⁰ Cf. *Od.* 12.59–72; Pind. *Pyth.* 4.203–10; Hdt. 4.85.

²¹ V. Haas, "Medea und Jason im Lichte hethitischer Quellen," *AntHung* 26 (1978) 241–53; Lordkipanidze (*supra* n.18) 39f.

²² D. Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity: A History of Colchis and Transcaucasian Iberia 550 BC–AD 562* (Oxford 1994) 15.

²³ Braund (*supra* n.22) 15 (my emphasis). *Il.* 7.467–79 (cf. 23.747) mentions the son of Jason and Hypsipyle, the queen of Lemnos.

the time of the extant sources.²⁴ Dion defends his novel suggestion with another innovative theory, claiming that “l’Aïètes océanique” is a duplicate of the Caucasian Aeëtes: both are offspring of the Sun, the former being the brother of Circe, the latter the father of Medea.²⁵ This interesting theory has scant foundation in the sources. Dion is, as far as I know, the only one who has ever understood Hesiod as writing about *two* sons of Helios with the name of Aeëtes.²⁶

As Aeëtes and Medea’s homeland was situated originally at the end of the earth and not in Colchis, we are left with a location that *cannot* be identified with any actual geography. The way these unplaceable spaces were reinterpreted and placed within the bounds of known landscapes is, of course, related to the general rationalist critique initiated by Xenophanes and the other Presocratic philosophers. Apollonius’ location of the various Odyssean sites in the western Mediterranean likewise results from a similar rationalization.²⁷

Given that in the fifth century B.C. Aea is already being identified with Colchis, it is evident Apollonius did not initiate this impulse. The interesting aspect of this process highlighted by Apollonius’ epic is that it occurs simultaneously with the general expansion of geographical knowledge among the Greeks through trade and colonization.²⁸ In attempting to combine the mythical account with the facts of their extended geographical knowledge, the classical and Hellenistic Greek poets and mythographers saw that sailing eastward in a landlocked Mediterranean did not lead very far. Thus the geographical realities literally reduced the itinerary. From the wondrous land of the rising sun, Aea is suddenly transformed into a mere city in Colchis, which, sailing east, is as far as one gets going in that direction. In placing the Colchian littoral close to πόντου καὶ γαίης [...] ἔσχατιῆσιν, Apollonius, in fact, applies the term Homer and Hesiod reserve for the absolute, physical end of the

²⁴ R. Dion, *Aspects politiques de la géographie antique* (Paris 1977) 58–62.

²⁵ Dion (*supra* n.24) 61f.

²⁶ Hes. *Tb.* 956–62: Ἡελίω δ’ ἀκάμαντι τέκεν κλυτὸς Ὠκεανίη Περσηῖς Κίρκην τε καὶ Αἰήτην βασιλῆα. Αἰήτης δ’ υἱὸς φαεσιμβρότου Ἡελίοιο κούρην Ὠκεανοῖο τελέεντος ποταμοῖο γῆμε θεῶν βουλήσιν Ἴδυιαν καλλιπάρηον. ἥ δέ οἱ Μῆδειαν εὐσφυρον ἐν φιλότῳ γείναθ’ ὑποδηθεῖσα διὰ χρυσέην Ἀφροδίτην.

²⁷ L. Pearson, “Apollonius of Rhodes and the Old Geographers,” *AJP* 59 (1938) 446f.

²⁸ For an extensive overview of how the Greeks’ knowledge of the world gradually expanded, see Bunbury (*supra* n.10).

earth and the world-encircling Oceanus,²⁹ suggesting that Apollonius considers these most ancient poets to have a world view limited within the extension of the geographical knowledge of his own contemporaries.

This reduction of the outward route, which of course also renders impossible the circumnavigation of the world disc, explains at the same time why neither Homer, Hesiod, nor even Pindar worried about the return: given access to the world-embracing Oceanus as a feasible route, it is easy to let the *Argo* circumnavigate the earth. But reinterpreting the return without having the mythical possibility of reaching this practical sea route makes the way back actually impossible, if one is to retain the tradition that prohibits the *Argo* from returning the same way it went out. Thus the rationalization of geography eventually forces Apollonius to create a waterway independent from the contemporary geographic belief. In his attempt to place the unplaceable, he must have realized that it is not possible to devise an itinerary that actually is compatible with the real world. Apollonius therefore has to create a new 'impossible' geography.

Although Apollonius goes to the paradoxical extent of making up routes in order to save his overall rational reinterpretation of the Argonautic itinerary, the space that the Argonauts traverse represents no straightforward geography. Apollonius' literary world reflects a landscape of confusion, a landscape where even space itself is unsettled. Here there are both clashing and wandering rocks,³⁰ soil from which armed men will grow when sowed with dragon teeth (*Argon.* 3.1354–58), while in Libya all

²⁹ *Argon.* 2.418; cf. 2.1260f: ἴκοντο Φᾶσιν τ'εὐρὸν ῥέοντα, καὶ ἔσχατα πείρατα πόντου. Cf. πείραθ' ἴκηαι γαίης καὶ πόντοιο (*Il.* 8.478f); ἔσχατα γαίης (Hes. *Th.* 731); πείρατα γαίης (*Il.* 14.200, 301; *Od.* 4.563, 9.284; *Hymn. Hom. Ven.* 227; Hes. *Th.* 334f, 518, 622); πείραθ' Ὀκεανός (*Od.* 11.13).

³⁰ Ἄρασσομένοι πέτραι (*Argon.* 2.549–604); πέτραι πλαγκταί (4.924–55). Apollonius is the first known author who operates with two sets of ambulating rocks. The first set, the horrible floating rocks of Homer (Πλαγκταί, *Od.* 12.61), Apollonius identifies with Bosphorus. This is a tradition that can be traced back to the fifth century B.C (Hdt. 4.85). The second set is, in fact, only a duplication of the Homeric rocks retained to explain why Homer could describe his treacherous rocks as close to the abode of Circe, which Apollonius places in the west. Homer's original rocks were, of course, close to the rising sun. Apollonius' inferior copy, moreover, does not appear to impress even its innovator, for passing this second set of moving rocks is presented as a relatively uneventful incident in comparison with the passing of the first set, which has all the characteristics of an onerous ordeal (*Argon.* 4.924–60; 2.549–610).

distinct spatial features seem absent, the very land stretching out ἤπει ἰσα—like mist (4.1245–49). This imaginary geography, moreover, includes such denizens as Harpies and Sirens, dragons, fire-breathing bulls, and brazen giants.³¹ Similarly, Apollonius demonstrates that means of transport normally impractical are actually helpful in these surreal landscapes, such as the gold ram that carries Phrixus across the sea to Aeëtes' abode (2.1143ff; cf. 1.763f). The *Argo* is hardly an ordinary ship. Although Apollonius reduces the Hesiodic and Pindaric accounts of how the *Argo* was carried straight across the Libyan continent,³² he still operates with a vessel that may cross long distances on dry land (4.1381–87). The way the ship is literally said to fly, as if by divine assistance, through the two sets of ambulating rocks³³ may also indicate that Apollonius is trying to rationalize earlier accounts of a flying ship, though the previous material here is inconclusive.

These nonsensical landscapes seem to recall the most distant periphery described by various classical and early Hellenistic geographers. Even the periphery's landscapes have an indefinable character. Journeying northwards with the fifth-century B.C. Herodotus, one ends by encountering air completely impenetrable, filled with either feathers or snow (Hdt. 4.31). On his journey to the world's edge in the ultimate northwest, the fourth-century B.C. Greek captain, Pytheas of Massalia, witnesses a complete negation of all separate basic entities of the physical world: he is checked by a formless mass comprised of "neither earth, nor sea, nor air, but a kind of mixture of these" (Strab. 2.4.1). A removal of all *spatial* distinctions is thus suggested.

As for the denizens of the periphery, one finds also an apparent lack of proper categories as indicated in the description of the landscape. This is exemplified by the equality and actual physical similarity between the sexes in Herodotus' lands

³¹ Harpies: 2.187ff; Sirens: 4.891–921; dragons: 4.127–30; fire-breathing bulls: 3.1288–1319; brazen giants: 4.1638–48.

³² For Hesiod (*Cat. fem.* fr. 45=ΣAp. Rhod. *Argon.* 4.257–62b), after the Argonauts' journey "through Oceanus" they disembarked in the furthest parts of Libya, whence they carry the *Argo* to reach "Our Sea," i.e., the Mediterranean. Cf. Pind. *Pyth.* 4.25f.

³³ At the Bosphorus the ship is carried ὑψοῦ δὲ μεταχρονίη, which may be translated as "high in the air" (*Argon.* 2.587); at the Πλαγκταί the ship is definitely well up in the air as the playful Nereids treat it as a bathing ball (4.950–55).

of the bald people and the Issedones (4.26, 23), and in the land of the Atarantes no individual has any name of his or her own by which to be identified (4.184). The Ethiopians' closeness to the dead and their longevity, like that of the Hyperboreans, seem to have erased the distinction between both the dead and the living and between men and gods.³⁴ Describing how people at the sources of the Ganges sustain themselves on the vapors of roasted meats and the fragrance of flowers, the fourth-century B.C. Megasthenes (*ap.* Strab. 15.1.57) gives these denizens of the periphery a diet that resembles that of the Olympians rather than that of proper human beings. Men with goats' feet in the Asian periphery (Hdt. 4.25), dog-headed men in India and Libya,³⁵ and the furry and clawed people that Alexander's admiral Nearchus encountered near the Indus (*Arr. Ind.* 24.1-9) similarly blur the line between humanity and the sphere of animals.

Two major differences, however, distinguish the geography of Apollonius from that of Herodotus and his successors. The first is one of place. Apollonius' fantastic geography is found well within the limits of the οἰκουμένη—the known and more or less civilized world—while the more irrational landscapes of Herodotus and the geographers are always outside the οἰκουμένη towards the end of the world. When Herodotus, for example, describes the territory within the limits of the οἰκουμένη, he is accordingly down to earth and does not veer off easily into the fantastic.

The second major difference is the aspect of time. Apollonius' confused geography is set in the past, while the landscapes outside the οἰκουμένη of his various contemporaries represent the present. As one follows the adventurous Argonauts, one soon realizes why the nonsensical elements in the geography of the οἰκουμένη represent the past. The irrational elements are eliminated as the *Argo* sails through them; the passage actually civilizes the geography or, more precisely, it places the unplaceable.

The known geography of the οἰκουμένη is actually created from a spatial primeval chaos. From what originally represents a blur of undefined time, space, and social categories, Apollonius' Argonauts, through their achievements, inaugurate history and incorporate this realm into the rationally perceived world.

³⁴ Hdt. 4.23-24; Megasthenes, *FGrHist* 715F27b (=Strab. 15.1.57).

³⁵ Hdt. 4.191; Ael. *NA* 4.46; *cf.* Strab. 1.2.35 on Hesiod and Aeschylus.

Apollonius' tale is thus the ancient history of how the rest of the Mediterranean world was created from primordial chaos, just as the landscape of the Greek lands is understood to have emerged from an undifferentiated blur.³⁶ At the moment of the *Argo's* departure from the polis, Orpheus' song of "how the earth, the heaven, and the sea once mingled together" (1.496f) effectively hints at this ultimate consequence of the Argonauts' mission. As this confused state once was the condition even of Greece, this is still the state of the periphery to which they are heading and which they consequently will put into an order similar to their native land.

Orpheus' song can also be seen as referring to the amorphous landscapes of Apollonius' Libya (4.1245–49). The Hellenistic poet actually has this continent reflect the undifferentiated primordial substance that Anaximander considered to have preceded all things.³⁷ All the illogical combinations of different elements here in fact depict the area's general primordial quality. Apollonius also connects the motley ensemble following Circe—creatures consisting of limbs apparently so haphazardly assembled that these figures resemble neither beasts nor humans—with autochthonous forms of life that appeared automatically from the first amorphous substance:³⁸ an idea he seems to have taken from Empedocles' theories on the creation.³⁹

The Argonauts' heroic endeavour opens up distant lands for the common man, who lacks their heroic stature; and it actually creates the way through previously unknown territories. As chaos is in this way put into order, Apollonius' Clashing Rocks accordingly come to rest after the *Argo* has passed through them (2.604ff). When Jason's paramour Medea slays Talus, the giant survivor from the bronze age (4.1638–88), she simultaneously puts an end to that ancient era and opens up this part of the periphery for men of the present age. The Argonauts similarly remove the marauding Harpies (2.269–300) and Medea

³⁶ Thucydides (1.3), for example, refers to an ancient period when "the Greeks were not yet known by one name, and so marked off as something separate."

³⁷ 12A15 D-K (=Arist. *Ph.* 203b).

³⁸ *Argon.* 4.676–77: τοίους καὶ προτέρας ἐξ ἰλῦος ἐβλάσθησε χθῶν αὐτῆ μικτοῖσιν ἀρημεμένους μελέεσσιν.

³⁹ 31A72 D-K (=Aët. 5.19.5). For a more extensive survey of Empedocles' fragments on zoogonic theories see Kirk-Raven, *Presocratic Philosophers*² 302–305.

lulls the dragon to sleep (4.145–66), while Jason with his own hands subdues the fire-breathing bulls (3.1288–1319).

As the geography is domesticated, divine Circe, the wondrous Phaeacians, and the other Odyssean ordeals no longer have any place; but the Argonauts do not remove these figures, even though they all seem to have disappeared from Apollonius' contemporary Mediterranean landscapes. Literary history obliges Apollonius to retain these Odyssean elements in his Argonautic passage as ordeals and challenges for the hero from Ithaca to confront later.

In Apollonius' Argonautic landscape one finds a radical reinterpretation of Homeric geography. Homer's Πλαγκταί never cease from moving, but remain forever an ordeal for whoever may venture into these places of the human imagination.⁴⁰ The passage of Odysseus does not change the space he traverses. Although Apollonius' rocks become everyday scenery the moment a passing hero is able to withstand the ordeal, Homer's rocks represent an eternally irrational geography far away from the normal existence of humanity. Homer is operating within a geography situated not only beyond the human ken but forever beyond any ordinary sense of time and space.

The wondrous geography of Homer is nevertheless quite similar to the fantastic contemporary periphery of the classical and early Hellenistic geographers. One is actually looking at the same kind of space. The irrational geographies of Herodotus and of Pytheas are the landscapes the Greeks never brought into order. Beyond the οἰκουμένη there is still a space of primeval confusion awaiting a Greek hero to define and locate within proper categories.

In sum, Apollonius' *Argonautica* is a civilizing epic. It reinterprets a wondrous passage through a mythical geography as a story of how the known world is discovered and put within the proper definitions of time and space. As it is a story of how the οἰκουμένη was shaped, certain restrictions have to be imposed upon the itinerary. Instead of imagining the *Argo's* journey to the most distant parts of the world as described by Herodotus and the many geographers in the wake of Alexander, Apollonius brings the passage well within the known geography of his contemporaries. Lands never transformed into accessible areas for the common Hellene have to be left out of Apol-

⁴⁰ Cf. D. Ø. Endsjø, "To Lock Up Eleusis: A Question of Liminal Space," *Numen* (forthcoming).

lonius' itinerary. Arguing against the *Argo's* voyage through the most remote parts of Oceanus, the Augustan geographer Strabo consequently claims that "a voyage through regions desolate and uninhabited and so out of the way from our part of the world would be neither famous nor 'in all men's minds'."⁴¹ The geographers of the most distant periphery based their stories more on rumors than actual reports—the magnificent lands of the Hyperboreans and the Ethiopians were simply not reachable. A Persian army is gradually reduced to cannibalistic savages as they unsuccessfully attempt to reach Ethiopia (Hdt. 3.25); Pindar simply states that "neither by ship nor by foot can you find the wondrous road to the meeting-place of the Hyperboreans."⁴² For Apollonius also, Oceanus has accordingly changed into a realm *too* distant for the Argonauts: as the crew is about to set out in this direction, they are checked through the intervention of Hera. The poet (4.637–44) even adds that this was a close call, as the *Argo* otherwise surely would have perished and met an inglorious end in outer Oceanus.

Thus Apollonius' identification of the Argonautic itinerary with actual sites has placed the unplaceable. Reinterpreting the mythical passage as the creation of the very geography of his own Mediterranean world, he did not perceive how the mythical crew originally sailed so much further—far into landscapes that never can be placed anywhere but in the human imagination.

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⁴¹ Strab. 1.2.40, quoting *Od.* 12.70.

⁴² *Pyth.* 10.29f. Aristeas of Proconnesus, a legendary figure of the seventh century B.C., nevertheless did manage to venture this far. As we would expect, he does not move inconspicuously: inspired by Apollo (φοιβόλαμπτος), his spirit leaves his body and flies in the upper airs above all the world: Hdt. 4.13; Max. Tyr. 38.3.