Summar. ‘The Golden Fleece’ figures in Greek mythology as the principal objective of the expedition of the Argonauts. The question of the essence and real meaning of the Golden Fleece is widely discussed in the Classical world and modern specialist literature as well. It can be hypothesized that in Greek stories about the Argonauts the Golden Fleece was a symbol of a protector of royal power. The country where the Golden Fleece was preserved, i.e. Aea/Colchis, is identified with modern Western Georgia. The richness of Colchis in metal, mainly gold, became a basis for the euhemerizing, i.e. rationalist explanation, of the Golden Fleece.

PREFACE

The Golden Fleece — the objective of the expedition of the Argonauts — has already been the subject of discussion in the Oxford Journal of Archaeology. Attention was focused on how ‘to explain why Jason’s fleece of Greek mythology should have been described as Golden’ (Ryder 1991, with references). The hypothesis was advanced ‘that it is just possible that “golden” might refer to genetically “tan” fibres’ (Ryder 1991), or ‘to favour the liver-damaged sheep hypothesis for the use of the epithet “golden” is applied to Jason’s fleece of Greek mythology’ (Smith and Smith 1992).

I am not in a position to debate the physical essence of Jason’s fleece with biologists. However, I shall venture to doubt that the miraculous ram, which according to Greek mythology could fly and speak and for whose fleece such a perilous expedition, celebrated in Greek literature, was undertaken, was ‘liver-damaged’. From the mythological viewpoint it is more important to determine the ideological or symbolic sense of the Golden Fleece.

THE MYTH OF THE GOLDEN FLEECE

The stories of the Argonauts are based on the conflict between Pelias, reigning in Iolcus, and his nephew Jason. The latter demanded the return of the royal throne which Pelias had perfidiously seized from Jason’s father. Pelias lays down the condition: the return home of the fleece of the wonder-working flying ram that once had saved Phrixus and had been sacrificed. The fleece was in the distant country of Aea, in possession of the mighty king...
Aeetes and was guarded by a formidable dragon. The way to that country lay through numerous deadly perils, including the ‘clashing rocks’ or Planctae.  

The objective of the expedition of the Argonauts — to secure the fleece of the miraculous ram — is referred to in ancient Greek literary sources under the following names (Campbell 1994, 84: ad 88 δέρας), δέρμα, νάκος (Braswell 1988, 158: ad 68c), mostly in combination with the definition ‘golden’. Occasionally additional epithets are added:


c) ‘τό πάγχρυσον νάκος κριόν’ (Pind., P.4, 68; cf. Braswell 1988, 158: ad 68a–c) or, ‘τό πάγχρυσον δέρας’ (Eurip., Med., 5): ‘all-golden (or “of pure gold”) fleece of the ram’.


f) ‘δέρμα λαμπρόν’ (Pind., P.4, 242): ‘radiant hide (fleece)’.


What did the Golden Fleece stand for in ancient Greek mythology? Or in other words, what did the Golden Fleece symbolize?

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1 The contents of the stories of the Argonauts in the extant Greek sources are set forth most comprehensively (in editions with an English translation) in Pindar (Sandys 1968; Braswell 1988, 40–52), Apollonius of Rhodes (Seaton 1967) and Apollodoros (Frazer 1967, 75–125).

2 The word κόας is first recorded in Homer (Il., IX, 661; Od., III, 38; XVI, 47, XIX, 97; XX, 3) but with the meaning of merely ‘fleece’ (cf. Liddell and Scott 1996, s.v. κόας). It is assumed that the same word in the ko-wo form (i.e. kowos = κόας) was already recorded in Mycenaean texts (Morpurgo 1963, 166). With the meaning of golden fleece (i.e. of the gold-fleeced ram of Phrixus) we find the first mention in Mimnermus, fr. 11, Allen (cf. Naupactia, F. 8: Davies 1988, 148 = Sch. ad. Apoll. Rhod., Arg., IV, 87, see also Herod., VII, 103).

3 According to Greek commentators, some ancient authors, e.g. Simonides (fr. 21) and Acusilaos (Genealog., fr. 37, Jacoby 1923, 56) considered the fleece ‘purple’ — Sch. ad Euripid., Medea, 5: τὸ δέρμα. τούτο οἱ μὲν ἀνήλικοι εἶναι ρασιν, οἱ δὲ πορφυρών. και Σιμώνιτις ἐν τῷ εἰς Ποσειδώνη ἐμφαί ὑπὸ τῶν ἐν τῇ θαλάσσῃ πορφυρών κεφρόσθη αὐτῷ λέγει — Dindorfus 1863, 7; cf. Sch. ad Apoll. Rhod., Arg., IV, 1147: ‘περὶ δὲ τοῦ δέρας ὅτι ἦν χρυσοῦν οἱ πλειστοὶ ἵστοροίσιν. Ἀκουσίλαος δὲ ἐν τῷ περὶ Γενεαλογίων πορφυρωθῆναι φησίν ὑπὸ τῆς θαλάσσης’ Wendel 1958, 307).
WHAT DID THE GOLDEN FLEECE SYMBOLIZE?

The key to this most involved question should, I believe, be sought in the ancient notions — attested by many peoples — about the magic power of the ram, especially its skin or fleece.

In ancient Anatolia, for example, the skin or fleece of a ram (as well as of a goat) was considered an object of worship — a ritual symbol personifying a god-protector. The fleece played an especially important role in Hittite religion. It is mentioned under the name KURŠA, often with the determinative KUŠ, in particular DINGIR, i.e. ‘divine’. In Hittite ritual and magic texts, KURŠA — fleece emerges as an object of cult — an object of worship, with a place assigned to it in temples. It was considered an attribute of a god-protector or a god-protector itself — a protector worshipped in the shape of a fleece. In Hittite religious texts KURŠA figures as a god-protector of some cities, as well as a royal god-protector. Sometimes the divine fleece was adorned with a gold disk (Popko 1978, 108–15; 1994, 47–9; cf. Haas 1975, 1978).

The ancient Anatolian notions of the divine essence of the fleece are relevant to our understanding of the Golden Fleece of the Greek legends of the Argonauts (Popko 1978, 114). After all, the Golden Fleece — the objective of the expedition of the Argonauts — was occasionally used with the epithet ‘µέγας θεός’, ‘great’, ‘mighty’ (Mimnerm., Nano, F.11; Apoll. Rhod., Arg., IV, 171, 184, 439), i.e. it is accompanied by the epithet of Gods (see Liddell-Scott 1996, s.v. µέγας θεός). In addition, ‘gold’ as well as all χρυσό-compounds in the Greek literature (including Homer’s poems) were epithets of Gods or divine beings (Lorimer 1936, esp. 20–1, 24; cf. also Euripid., Hyps., F.1, II, 23: ‘τό χρυσόσωμα ιέρος’).

In ancient Greece, where the golden ram (or lamb) also belongs to a very ancient stratum of religion, notions about the magic power of the skin of a ram are attested in the most diverse ways (Cook 1914, esp. 403 ff.). Thus, in Thessaly — the home of most of the Argonauts — skins of a ram were used in rituals against drought (Nilsson 1957, 6). On Mount Pelion in Magnesia there was a sanctuary to Zeus Aktaios, to which once a year a peculiar procession using thick and fresh fleeces wended its way (Cook 1914, 420).4

But particularly interesting are traditions concerning the golden lamb in the house of the Pelopides: it caused eclipses of the sun and affected kingdoms (Herodotos, fr. 57 = Athen., VI, 231, Jacoby 1923, 226), and whoever possessed the golden lamb had the right to the kingdom (Apollod. Epit., II, 10–11; Sch. ad Il., II, 106; Erbse 1969, 200–1; for details see Cook 1914, 405 f.; cf. Gernet 1968, 120–1). Atreus, through Seneca, declares in Thyestes: ‘There is within Pelops’ lofty folds a lordly flock, a wondrous ram, the rich flock’s leader. Over all his body a fleece of spun gold hangs, and from his back (i.e. from the golden fleece upon it — translator) the new-crowned kings of the house of Tantalus have their sceptres wreathed with gold. His owner rules, him does the fortune of the whole house follow’ (Miller 1953, 109).

Thus, the Golden ram (or its fleece) in the Royal House of the Pelopides was its protector and symbol of royal power. The Roman writer Varro equated Atreus’ Golden lamb

4 According to Cook (1914, 420): ‘...those who take part in the procession were originally endeavouring to assimilate themselves to Zeus the ram-god. Zeus scaled the sky as a ram with a golden fleece, and his worshippers put on thick new fleece when they mounted to his abode. If I am right in holding further that the golden ram came to symbolise the sun, it is easy to see why the procession made the ascent of the mountain at the hottest season of the year.’
and the Golden Fleece with the voyage of the Argonauts: ‘...some sheep actually had fleeces of gold — as at Argos the one which complains that Thyestes stole from him; or as in the realm of Aeetes in Colchis, the ram in search of whose golden fleece the Argonauts of royal blood are said to have fared forth...’ (On Agriculture, II, 1, 6; Hooper 1967, 47).

It may be assumed from the foregoing that the Golden Fleece in Greek mythology was a protector of the royal house and symbolized royal power (cf. Gernet 1968, 123: ‘talisman royal’).\(^5\) Indeed, the conflict between Pelias and Jason was for ‘the sceptre of single rule and the throne’ (Pind., P.4, 152: ‘σκάπτον μονάρχον και θρόνον’ — cf. Braswell 1988, 235: ad 152 c–e. On the sceptre as a royal symbol of Greek mythology and epic see Gernet 1968, 127 with references). It is, therefore, easy to understand why Pelias sent Jason to recover the Golden Fleece: whoever owned the Fleece could reign! Pelias says to Jason: ‘go to the halls of Aeetes to bring back his [Phryxos’] soul and carry off the deep-fleeced hide of the ram... and I swear that I will hand over the sole rule and kingship’ (Pind., P.4, 160–6). But the Colchian king Aeetes is very reluctant to part with the Golden Fleece (Pind., P.4, 215–40; Apoll. Rhod., Argon., III, 405–30), since it is a warrant of his royal might and of the prosperity of his land. Nor is it fortuitous that the Golden Fleece in Aeetes’ possession is guarded by a terrible dragon — an ever-awake serpent (Pind., P.4, 244–6, cf. Braswell 1988, 333 f.; Apoll. Rhod., II, 268–9), so often depicted also on Greek vases (LIMC II, 1, 596, Nos. 20–1). In Greek mythology, as well as in the religious beliefs of many ancient peoples, the serpent was a guardian of the family property — the most valuable treasures (Nilsson 1960).

Notions of the Golden Fleece as a symbol of royal power and guardian of the royal house\(^6\) must be considered archaic — doubtless an ideology of pre-polis times. Traditions about the Argonauts are also very old — created in pre-Homerian oral poetry. This is shown by the occurrence of the Argonautica in both of the poems of Homer. In the \textit{Iliad} we find mention of Jason, the leader of the Argonauts, and of his son Euneus by Hypsipilae (II. VII, 468–71; XXI, 41; XXIII, 747). The \textit{Odyssey} mentions all the characters of the legends of the Argonauts: Jason, his father Aeson, King Aeetes and his sorceress sister Circe, as well as ‘the Argo famed of all’ (‘Αργότα μέλουσα’); and the main exploit of the Argonauts — their sailing past the deadly clashing rocks, the Planctae (\textit{Od.}, X, 135–9; XI, 256–9; XII, 59–72).

WHERE WAS THE COUNTRY WHERE THE GOLDEN FLEECE WAS KEPT?

According to Mimnermus, a seventh century BC lyric poet (\textit{Nano}, fr. 11: Allen 1993, 87 f.), the Golden Fleece was kept in Aea lying on the shore of Oceanus (‘Ὡκεανοῦ παρὰ χεῖλεξ’). Aea, as the location of the Golden Fleece, is named by other Greek authors (cf. Pherec., fr. 105: Jacoby 1923, 88), who usually, however, identify it with Colchis (cf. Herod., I,

\[^5\]\ The alternative hypothesis of Cook (1914, 419) is also noteworthy: ‘I am disposed to see in the golden ram of Athamas [= ram of Phrixus], as in the golden lamb of Atreus, as theriomorphic epiphany of Zeus.’ This, in fact, is definitely stated by the first Vatican mythographer, who says that Pelias sent Jason to Colchis ‘in order that he might fetch thence the golden fleece in which Zeus climbed the sky’. Cf. above, n. 4.

\[^6\]\ The idea of the Golden Fleece as a protector (or even symbol) of royal power was apparently current among other ancient peoples as well. Very interesting is the representation on a magnificent gold pectoral from one of the Scythian royal barrows of the fourth century BC: two men, one of whom would seem to be wearing a royal crown and is holding a sheepskin (= Golden Fleece ?) (Rolle \textit{et al.} 1991, 314, n. 104).
2, 2; VII, 193; Apoll. Rhod., Arg., II, 417, 422, 1094, 1141, 1185, 1267; III, 306, 1061; IV, 255; Strabo I, 2, 10). Most other Greek authors, beginning with Eumelus of Corinth (Corinth., fr.2A = Davies 1988, 97), named the country where the Golden Fleece was preserved (or where Aeetes, the owner of the Golden Fleece, reigned) as Colchis (Pind., P.4, 212–14; Eurip., Medea, 1–2; Ps. Scyl. Asia, 81; Arist. Peplos, 43; Theocr., Id., XIII, 74–5; Polyb., Hist., IV, 39, 6; Apollod., Bibl. I, 9, 1 and 23; Diod. Sic., Bibl., IV, 40, 3; IV, 41, 2; Strabo, I, 1, 10; I, 2, 39; Plut., Thes., XXIX, 3; Paus., I, 18, 1; I, 24, 2; II, 3, 10; V, 17, 9; IX, 34, 8).

Here a rather complex question arises: did Aea represent, from the very beginning, the country known later as Colchis (Wilamowitz 1924, 237; Urushadze 1964, 6–10; Gordeziyan 1978, 201 ff.; Allen 1993, 88–9; Lordkipanidze 1996a, 31–4), or did Aea, in the original legends about the expeditions of the Argonauts in quest of the Golden Fleece, imply some unreal, mythical place at the back of beyond, e.g. Oceanus (as contended by some researchers, basing themselves on the fragment cited above from Mimnermus’ Nano), which was later, from the beginning of Greek colonization in the Black Sea, applied to Colchis (Lesky 1966; Dräger 1993, 312–15, esp. n. 75). In the present context there does not seem to be much sense in debating the question which, no matter how many witty arguments are adduced, will still remain at the level of speculation.7

I shall, however, venture to question whether Aea was placed precisely in Oceanus by Mimnermus. It seems to me that there are some contradictions in the evidence of Mimnermus which are preserved only in the account of Strabo (I, 2,40). On the one hand (F.11, line 5 = Allen 1993, 87), Aea, where Jason went in quest of the Golden Fleece, could be placed in


a) Though the land of the Ethiopians is the land of sunrise and Aea of Mimnermus was also in the east (cf. Strabo, I, 2,40: ‘Mimnermus places the home of Aeetes in Oceanus, outside the inhabited world in the east’ = Jones 1969, I, 171). Lesky’s opinion seems to be very interesting: Zwei miteinander auswechselbare Vorstellungen werden kenntlich, beide dem gleichen mythischen Weltbilde zugehörig: Helios hat in Aia seinen goldenen Thalamos, schläft dort offenbar zu Nacht und nimmt bei der Auffahrt die Strahlen, die im Gemache bereitliegen, oder aber Helios schläft während der Umfahrt im Sonnenbecher, landet im Osten bei den Aithiopen und fahrt von dort am Himmel empor’ — fr. 10D (Lesky 1959, 31). The relationship of the Ethiopians of epic to the Ethiopians of history must also be taken into account (cf. Allen 1993, 107).

b) The identification of Aea with Colchis might well be traced back to Eumelos (F.2H, Davies), i.e. it had taken place already by the eighth century BC, long before Greek colonists settled the shores of the Black Sea (cf. Allen 1993, 90).

c) The idea that Aea was allegedly identified with Kytaia is wrong. The latter is considered a city of AeolColchis (cf. Apoll. Rhod., Arg., II, 1267: ‘..Κύταιοι … τε πόλιν Αἴης.’ Cf. also Tzetz. ad Lycoiph., 174: ‘Κύταια, πόλις Κο λχιδος’; Sch. ad Apoll. Rhod., Arg., II, 399: ‘Κύταια γάρ πόλις Κόλχιδος …’.

d) To declare Kytaia a ‘Greek colony’ is also an error. As is known, Greek colonies were situated on the seashore, and none of the authors includes Kytaia in the list of Greek cities in Colchis, namely Phasis, Dioscurias and Gynenos (cf. Ps. Scyl., 81). As to Kytaia the residence of King Aeetes and the home country of Medea (according to pseudo-Scylax, 81, ‘πόλις μεγαλή θάβατον’), it is located in the environs of the modern city of Kutaisi (for details see Lordkipanidze 1996b, 243 f.). The author of the cited article ‘Aea’ (in DNP) must have confused Kytaia in Colchis with a city with the same name — a Greek colony in the northern Black Sea littoral, on the Kerch peninsula (cf. Ps. Scyl., 68; Plin., IV, 68; — Kacharava and Kvirkvelia 1991, 139). Although Greek commentators warned: ‘Κύταια γάρ πόλις Κόλχιδος. ἄστι δέτι δέ καὶ ἐπέμειν πόλις τῆς Εὐρώπης Κύταια ὁμώνυμος τῆς Σκυθικῆς’ (Sch. ad Apoll. Rhod., Arg., II, 399).
Oceanus — ‘To the city of Aeetes, where the rays of the swift Sun (Helios) lie in a gold palace beside the lips of Oceanus, whither divine Jason went’ (‘Αἰήταο πόλιν, τόθι τ’ ὀκέας Ἡλίοιο ἀκτίνες χρυσῶν κεῖται ἐν θαλάμῳ Ωκεανοῦ παράξειλοσ’, ἵν’ ἄγιε αὐτός Ἰήσουν’). On the other hand (F.11, lines 1–4), it is evident that Jason reached Oceanus on his way home — ‘Never would Jason himself have brought back the great Fleece from Aea, accomplishing his mind-racking voyage and fulfilling the difficult labor for insolent Pelias, nor would they have come even to the fair stream of Oceanus’ (‘...οὕδε κατ’ ἄν μέγα κόσμος ἀνήγαγεν αὐτός Ἰήσουν εἴς Αἰής, τελέσας ἀλγιόνεσαν ὅδον ὑβριστῇ Πελίῃ τέλεων, χαλεπηρέξ, ἠθλον, οὕδ’ ἄν ἐπὶ Ωκεανοῦ κυλόν ἱκοντο ρόν’). Here some commentators add: ‘if he [Jason] had not been helped by Medea who loved him’ (cf. Allen 1993, 88: ad F.11, 1). Thus, in the above-cited fragment from Mimnermus (F.11, lines 1–4, Allen; F.11, West 1992, 88) Jason reached Oceanus after fulfilling the labour for Pelias. According to Mimnermus, it must mean that Jason reached Oceanus on his way back from Aea, i.e. while returning home. This interpretation seems to have been attested in the early Argonautica, preserved long before the time of Mimnermus, in Hesiod (F. 241: Merkelbach and West 1987, 118), and later in Pindar (P.4, 25 f. — cf. Braswell 1988, 346; ad 251–2), and by other authors (Sch. ad Apoll. Rhod., Arg., IV, 2, 57–62b: Wendel 1958, 273–4). According to them, the Argonauts had returned home by sailing from Phasis through Ocean to Libya and then carrying the ship Argo overland to the Mediterranean.

A strikingly precise statement of the country where, according to Mimnermus, the Golden Fleece was preserved (i.e. on the shore of Oceanus, or the Pontus (the Black Sea)), was given by Strabo — the only author to preserve the cited fragment from Mimnermus’ Nano (Strabo, I, 2, 40). Strabo believed that Homer was aware of the expedition of the Argonauts to Colchis: ‘...And likewise it was on the basis of Homer’s actual knowledge of the Colchians, of Jason’s expedition to Aea ... The men of Homer’s day, in general, regarded the Pontic Sea as a kind of second Oceanus, and they thought that those who voyaged thither got beyond the limits of the inhabited world just as much as those who voyaged far beyond the pillars of Heracles; the Pontic Sea was thought to be the largest of the seas in our part of the world, and for that reason they applied to this particular sea the term “The Pontus” — just as they spoke of Homer as “The Poet”. Perhaps it was for that very reason that Homer transferred to Oceanus things that were true of the Pontus’ (I, 2, 10 = Jones 1969, 77).

It may reasonably be assumed that at the time of the creation of Homer’s poems the Argonautica was associated with a real country lying in the Black Sea area. This is attested in the earliest Argonautica by the visit of the Argonauts to the island of Lemnos (Iliad VII, 467–71, XXI, 39–41; cf. Kirk 1990, 291: ad VII, 467–9). The Argonauts, whose sea voyage began from the city of Iolcus in Thessaly, would have to visit Lemnos (Figure 1) if they were heading for the Black Sea (Gordeziani 1978, 205). And, indeed, the Odyssey already celebrates the main exploit of the Argonauts — the sailing past the Planctae, i.e. ‘clashing rocks’ (Od., XII, 70; cf. Heubeck and Hoekstra 1989, 121: ad XII, 55–72) or the Symplegades of other authors (Eurip., Medea, 2 and 1263–4; Eurip., Androm., 745; Apollod., Bibli., I, 9, 22; Strabo, I, 2, 10; II, 2, 12) or Cyanei (Eurip., Androm., 861–5; Aris., Incred., 105; Theocr., Id., XIII, 21–23; Strabo, I, 2, 10; III, 2, 12. On the relationship of the Planctae to Symplegades s.v. Braswell 1988, 290: ad 208–9), located at the entrance to the Black Sea (Gisinger 1950, 2187 f). Even in the time of Homer, this country in the Black Sea region must already have been called Aea. This is attested by the mention in the Odyssey (X, 137, XII, 70) of Aetes, the ruler of the country where the Golden Fleece was kept. Soon after the time of Homer, this name is mentioned by Hesiod
Figure 1
The route of the Argonauts.
According to ancient commentators, Aeetes signified ‘a man from Aea’ (cf. St. Byz., s.v. ‘Ἄια’). In the Classical and Hellenistic periods Greek authors identified Aea and Colchis with each other, using these two designations as synonyms: ‘Ἄια η Κόλχις’ (Herod., I, 2; VII, 193; VII, 147; Apoll. Rhod., Arg., II, 417).

These synonymous designations, Aea and Colchis, presumably reflect two chronological levels, of which Aea seems to be older, dating back to the period of oral, pre-Homeric poetry. The designation Colchis appears in literary texts: Eumelus (fr. 2A: Davies 1988, 97) was the first to mention it in the eighth century BC and, at the same time, Colchis (in the Qulha/Qolha form) appears in Urartian cuneiform texts (Melikishvili 1960, 437: s.v. kur|qulha). As we have noted above, in the Classical and Hellenistic periods, almost all authors refer to the country where the Golden Fleece was preserved as Colchis.

The location of Colchis causes no problem. All Greek and Roman authors are unanimous in believing that Colchis was situated on the eastern shore of the Euxine — the Black Sea — near the mouth of the river Phasis (Herod., I, 2 and 104; IV, 37; Ps. Scyl., Asia, 81; Strabo, XI, 2, 17–18; Plin., NH, VI, 13, etc.). The Phasis, mentioned by almost all Greco-Roman authors both in describing Colchis and in the context of the Argonautica, is identified, with fair certainty, with the lower reaches of the modern river Rioni and with its tributary, the Qvirila. Thus the country where the Golden Fleece was kept lay in the territory of modern Western Georgia (Lordkipanidze 1996b, 67–75, 97–106, 153–6).

But why were the legends of the expedition of the Argonauts applied to the eastern Black Sea littoral and why was Colchis chosen as the place where the Golden Fleece was preserved? I believe that Strabo answered this question some two thousand years ago. ‘...The words, “the Argo that is in all men’s minds”, are also properly used, inasmuch as the expedition is supposed to have taken place in well-known and populous regions. But if the facts were as Demetrius of Scepsis maintains, on the authority of Mimnermus (Mimnermus places the home of Aeetes in Oceanus, outside the inhabited world in the east, and affirms that Jason was sent thither by Pelias and brought back the fleece), then in the first place, the expedition thither in quest of the fleece would not sound plausible (since it was directed to

8 The evidence for Aea in ancient Greek sources is contradictory. In the original works of Classical and Hellenistic times Aea emerges as the name of a country (Herod., I, 2; VII, 193; here Άε and Κόλχις are synonymous names; in the Argonautica of Apollonius Rhodius Aea is also quite definitely used as the name of a country (a synonym of Colchis) — II, 417; 422; 1094; 1141; 1185; III, 306, 1061; IV, 255; especially interesting is II, 1267: ‘...αἰτήριται Κυταίδε τε πτόλιν Αἰήν’, from which it is clear that Κυταίδε is a city of the country of Άε (see also Lycohp., Alexandr., 1024: ‘[Αἰτήτης] Άείς Κορίνθου τ’ άργος’). The situation is not quite clear with Mimnermus (F.11, Allen) and Euripides, Med., 2 (‘...Κόλχιος ἔς Αἴν’); Callimachus Aetia, I, fr. 7, 34 is interesting: ‘Κόλχοι δὲ Καλοῦνται οἳ ἐν τῇ Αἰή πολίταινε, ἦ δὲ ὕθη χώρα Κο λχίς’. Later authors, however (e.g. Plin., NH, VI, 13) and Greek commentators name Aea as a city (cf. St. Byz., Eihm., s.v. Άε πόλις Κόλχων ...; ad Euripid., Med., 2; Alkest., 112, Dindorf; ad Apoll. Rhod., Arg., III, 1074, 1093, IV, 1217 — Wendel; ad Lycohp., Alexandr., 1024 — Scheer 1958). Special mention should be made of the reference to Άεα in Strabo’s Geography: on one occasion it is a city (‘... η τε γάρ Άεα διεκινεται περι Φάσιν πόλις’ — I, 2, 39). In other cases it seems to be the name of a country (I, 2, 102; I, 240). According to Strabo (I, 2, 39): Άιτήτης (i.e. a native of Άεα) ‘... is believed to have ruled over Colchis, and the name Aeetes is still locally current among the people of that region’. And indeed (cf. also: Xenoph., Anab., V, 6, 37; Plin., NH, XXIII XV), in the sixth century AD a historical person, who is known in Colchis, called at the Lazica as Aeetes (Ἀίτητης: Agath. Just., III, 8–11).
unknown and obscure countries), and in the second place, the 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” (Geogr. I, 2, 40 = Jones 1969, 171).

An acquaintance with the demographic situation in the Black Sea area convinces one of the correctness of Strabo’s views (however, I am far from the view that Strabo could have had an idea of, or possess any reliable source on, the demographic situation in the Black Sea area): at the end of the second and the beginning of the first millennia BC, before the start of Greek colonization in the northern and western Black Sea littoral (and possibly on the south-eastern shores as well), there was practically no population and the coastline of these regions appears to have been devastated. It is only on the eastern Black Sea littoral that numerous settlements have been attested archaeologically, both in the coastal zone and in the hinterland regions, i.e. throughout the entire territory of present-day Western Georgia — called by Greco-Roman authors Colchis (Lordkipanidze and Mikeladze 1980). Already from the mid-second millennium BC, there is archaeological evidence for a highly-developed Bronze culture in this territory, characterized by very numerous and varied bronze items (Figure 2), highly distinctive pottery and timber buildings. In the eighth to seventh century BC a demographic explosion is observable, resulting from a rapid development of iron metallurgy (for details on the period of the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages in Colchis, see Lordkipanidze 1991a, 95 ff., 114 ff., with references).

However, another difficult question arises: if the Argonautic expedition was mounted in Homer’s day, i.e. prior to the commencement of Greek colonization in the Black Sea area, and aimed at Colchis, i.e. the eastern shores of the Black Sea, then is there any evidence of Greek contacts with the Black Sea area in the precolonial period?

IS THERE ANY EVIDENCE OF GREEK CONTACTS WITH THE BLACK SEA AREA IN THE PRECOLONIAL PERIOD?

According to ancient Greek tradition, the expedition of the Argonauts in quest of the Golden Fleece took place one generation earlier than the Trojan War (Herod., I, 3). The participants of this war were sons or grandsons of the Argonauts (Lordkipanidze 1996a, 30 ff., 35). If it is assumed that the legends of the Argonauts are based on an historical fact relating to the first successful sailing past the Planctae (modern Bosphorus) to the Black Sea

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9 It is acknowledged at present that before the start of Greek colonization almost the entire northern Black Sea littoral was uninhabited, thus accounting for the success of Greek colonization in this region: as far back as the sixth to fifth century BC numerous Greek farming settlements arose here, belonging to Greek poleis (for details see Lordkipanidze 1981). In the western Black Sea littoral, too, the existence of a local population in the entire coastal zone in the opening centuries of the first millennium BC is somewhat problematic. The presence of a local population is presumed on the basis of toponymic evidence (Foll 1996). In Mesembria (the modern town of Nesebhr) a ‘protopolis’ with fortification system, two ports and stone anchor assemblages is dated to the eleventh and eighth centuries BC (Ognenova-Marinova 1991,135; Foll 1996,4; cf. Lazarov 1974, 109). Late Bronze and Early Iron Age settlement is known from ‘Malkoto Kale’, situated in 14 km SO of Apollonia-Sozopol (Domaradzki et al. 1991). An analogous picture seems to take shape in the coastal zone of the south-eastern Black Sea area (cf. Bittel 1949, esp. 2498 f., 2510 f.; Burney 1955, esp. 191 ff.; Akurgal 1955, 119–20). So no significant settlements of the end of the second and the first third of the first millennia BC have been identified (cf. French 1982; Joukowsky 1996, esp. 234, fig. 7,1; Hawkins 1995; Hill 1995, 219 f.; see also Gates 1995–1997). To date, finds are known of separate items bronze axes in the area of Amisos (Bilgi 1993).
Figure 2
shores, then on the basis of that tradition it could be assumed that the first voyages of the Greeks, and consequently their first familiarization with the eastern Black Sea littoral, occurred in the Mycenaean age. Unfortunately, at present we have no direct archaeological evidence of such an advent. The finds of Mycenaean pottery at Mashat in Turkey, within 130 km of Samsun — ancient Amisus (Özgüç 1978, 66, pls. 83–4; 1982, 102–3, pl. 46) are doubtless of enormous interest; however, the route by which the pottery arrived still remains debatable (French 1982, 22), whether through the continental route via Cyprus, Cilicia and Kizzuwatna (Özgüç 1982, 102) or through the Dardanelles (Mellink 1985, 558). The question of Greek navigation to the Black Sea shores in the Mycenaean period is, for the time being, best left open, though a number of researchers actively support the idea (Hiller 1991; Lordkipanidze 1996a, 36–7).

The great popularity of the legends regarding the voyage of the Argonauts, in Greek literature in the eighth to seventh century BC (Eumelus, Hesiod and Naupactica, Mimnermus) (Lordkipanidze 1996a, 22), in the initial stage of Greek colonization, may be taken as indirect evidence for, or a reflection of, Greek maritime contact with the eastern and south-eastern Black Sea littoral prior to the beginning of the colonization of these regions. The appearance of a number of geographical names in Greek literature of the eighth to seventh century BC may be viewed as a result of contact and hence acquaintance by Greeks with this region and, as we have already said, Eumelus mentions the name Colchis (Corinth., fr. 2A: [Ἀίητης] δ ἑκτὸ Κολχίδα γαῖαν: Davies 1988, 97).

In Hesiod’s *Theogony*, in which the Argonautica are represented fairly broadly (956–62, 992–1002), the Colchian Phasis is named among the great rivers born of Thetis and Oceanus (*Theog.*, 337–40). Unless this is a later interpolation, it may be considered as further proof of Colchis having been included in the genealogical system of Greek mythology at least at the end of the eighth and the beginning of the seventh century BC. In the *Odyssey* (X, 135–9) King Aeetes and his sister Circe ‘are sprung from Helius who gives light to mortals, and from Perse, their mother, whom Oceanus begot’ (Murray 1966, 355). In Hesiod’s *Theogony* (956–62) King Aeetes and his sister Circe are also children of Helius and Perse, while Medea, the daughter of Aeetes, is borne by Idæa, through the blessing of Aphrodite. Interestingly enough, the so-called Corinthian version of the Argonautica made its appearance in Greek literature as far back as the eighth century BC. In Eumelus’ *Corinthiaca*, Aeetes (unlike in Homer and Hesiod, his mother here is Antiope) is initially the ruler of Corinth, and then he becomes King of Colchis (Eum., F. 2A; cf. Lycoth., *Alexandra*, 1924; Paus., II, 3, 10). How should one

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10 Already Homer had mentioned one of the main exploits of the Argonauts: the sailing past the ‘clashing rocks’, i.e. the Planctae, rising above the entrance to the Black Sea: ‘... And thereby has no ship of men ever yet escaped that has come thither, but the planks of ships and bodies of men are whirled confusedly by the waves of the sea and the blasts of baneful fire. One seafaring ship alone has passed thereby, that Argo famed of all...’ (*Od.*, XII, 66–70 = Murray 1966, 437).

Even after Homer, steering clear of the Planctae, i.e. sailing the Bosporus, was perceived as the beginning of navigation in the Black Sea which had till then been called Pontus axenos, i.e. ‘inhospitable sea’ (Pind., IV *Pyth.*, 203; cf. Strabo, VII, 3, 6–7). The contribution of the Argonauts was clearly expressed by Pindar (IV *Pyth.*, 206–12) ‘that voyage of the demigods brought them their end. After that they came to the Phasis’ (Braswell 1988, 49).

Thus, the Argonauts were considered the trail-blazers of the Black Sea straits (with a very powerful underwater current hindering ships). Hence they were the first to open the way to the shores of the Black Sea, which was of vital importance for Greek society of the Great Greek Colonization period. Recently the idea that the Achaean campaign against Troy was undertaken with the objective of establishing control over the approaches to the Black Sea has again become popular.
account for the fact that Aeetes whose name, as already said, means ‘native’ of Aea (Colchis) then becomes first a Corinthian, and later King of Colchis? Is this not a kind of manifestation of the ideology of Greek colonization implying that all colonized lands belonged originally to Greeks; it offered legitimacy and the justification of colonization, so clearly reflected in the numerous foundation stories (Malkin 1987, 5 f.)? Could it be an ingenious claim to Corinthian prehistoric interest in the far eastern Black Sea coasts, whose promises of riches, it seems, were already being reported in Corinth during the time of Eumelos, long before Greek colonists permanently settled thereabouts (Huxley 1969, 63)?

If our interpretation of the eighth century Corinthian version of the Argonautica is near to the truth, then there could be more indirect evidence for the inclusion of Colchis in the colonial interests of the Greeks already by the eighth century as a result of early contacts.

The mention of a number of geographical and ethnic names, found in the so-called ‘Catalogue of Trojans’, is doubtless of major interest for the history of the early contacts of Greeks with the south-eastern Black Sea area although it is considered, and not without good cause, to be a later interpolation in the *Iliad* (II, 851–7). The mention of Kytoros (according to Strabo, XII, 3, 10 the emporion of Sinope), as well as of Aigialus, Sesamos and Kromna, raises strong doubts as to whether they originally belonged to the *Iliad* (Kirk 1985, I, 258–9: ad II, 853–5; for recent studies, see Ivantchik 1998, 318–320), unless they are merely local Grecized designations of places, given later to cities founded there by the Greeks. Special attention should doubtless be given to the mention in the ‘Catalogue of Trojans’ not only of Paphlagonians and the river Parthenios, identified with modern Bartin-Su, but also to the mention of Halizones (Ἀλιζώνων) (‘from Alybe, where is the birthplace of silver’) (Murray 1971, 115, as well as II., V, 39). Alybe (Strabo, XII, 3, 20–1; XIV, 5, 24), identified with Halitu in the Urartian cuneiform inscriptions, was located in eastern Asia Minor, in the region of the Cilician Taurus, also rich in silver, according to the ancient Assyrian and Urartian sources (Melikishvili 1962; Lordkipanidze 1996a, 40–1, n. 106).

I shall venture to address once again the oft-debated evidence for the foundation of Sinope from the so-called *Periplus* of pseudo-Scimmus (an anonymous work of the end of the second to first century BC; Diller 1952, 175): ‘...the city (Πόλις) of Sinope, called after the name of one of the Amazons, near their [Amazons’] fortified place. It was once inhabited by the noble Syroi, then as they say, (there lived) those of the Hellenes who went on campaign against the Amazons, Autolicon and Phlogius with Deilonus, Thessalians; then Habrondas, a Milesian by origin, who seems to have been killed by the Cimmerians; after the Cimmerians, again Coos and Cretines, refugees from the confines of Miletus. They jointly founded it [Sinope] when the Cimmerian army attacked Asia.’

Let us put aside the question of the foundation of Sinope by the Argonauts, Autolicon and his brothers, which is most probably a local tradition, consonant with the stories of many other cities the foundations of which were ascribed to the Argonauts or other heroes of Greek mythology (Ivantchik 1998, 305 f.). Of special interest for our present topic is the evidence for the founding of Sinope by the Milesians on two occasions: first by Habrondas, and then Coos and Cretines. Both foundations occur at the same time as the campaigns into Asia of nomads called ‘Cimmerians’ in the text. Their presence in the region of our interest is also reported by Herodotus (IV, 12).

In the above-quoted passage from the *Periplus* of pseudo-Scimmus, Coos and Cretines are apparently mentioned by Phlegon of Tralles, as is implied by Stephanos of Byzantium (*Eth.*, s.v. Συνώπη). The lack of reference to Habrondas, as well as of Cimmerian inroads, must be
indicative of some source (based, it is believed, on the chronological system of the Olympiads) other than the one used by the author of the *Periplus*, the source of which is considered to be Demetrius of Callatis, an author writing at the end of the third century BC (Ivantchik 1998, 313 f. and 321).

It is presumed that the foundation of Sinope by Habrondas, and later by Cretines and Coos, took place almost simultaneously, within one generation, and this time should be synchronized — by analogy with Istria (pseudo-Scimnus: 766–70; Diller 1952, 167) — with the rout of the Cimmerians by the Scythians. Hence, it is possible to link the date of the foundation of Sinope, according to Eusebius’ chronology (631–630 BC), to the beginning of the first quarter of the seventh century BC, a suggestion which is corroborated by archaeological data. But if one accepts this clearly stated and, one would think, cohesive theory (Ivantchik 1998, esp. 326–30), it could, I believe, be applied only to the foundation of Sinope by Cretines and Coos. This — according to the *Periplus* of pseudo-Scimnus — was preceded by the *ctisma* of Habrondas. The text of the *Periplus* gives no grounds for considering Habrondas, on the one hand, and Coos and Cretines, on the other, to be contemporaries (cf. Ivanthchik, 1998, 311). If the view is accepted that Coos and Cretines founded Sinope for the second time immediately after the killing of Habrondas by the Cimmerians, then the second *ctisma* would appear to have taken place under Cimmerian occupation, which is unlikely. A definite chronological gap should rather be assumed, which is indicated by the *Periplus’* author himself. Having said that Habrondas was killed, he reports: ‘…μετὰ Κιμμερίων Κόδος πάλιν δὲ Κρετίνης’…’ The mention in the next phrase ‘…οὔτοι συνοικίζουσι δ’ αὐτήν ἡμῖν, ὅ Κιμμερίων κυτέδραμε τὴν Ἀσίαν στρατός, οἱ Κίμμερίων κυτέδραμε τὴν Ἀσίαν στρατός’ by ‘Cimmerians’ would indeed allow the assumption of an invasion by the Scythians. The tradition of the foundation of Sinope towards the end of the last quarter of the seventh century, recorded by Eusebius, probably refers to the foundation of a polis, by Cretines and Coos, and is supported by two independent sources, as well as by other data (Ivantchik 1998, 307–13). Therefore, I shall venture to join the researchers who place reliance on the report of the foundation of Sinope by Habrondas in the eighth century BC (Maksimova 1956, 42–6; Drews 1976; Courtils and Rémy 1986, 64).

It may be that the settlement at Sinope by the Ionians (Milesians) was at first, perhaps, a temporary base for preliminary reconnaissance of the Black Sea area to investigate the feasibility of bringing out colonies to exploit regions rich in metal, such as north-eastern Anatolia — the so-called Pontic and Giresun-Trabzon copper-rich deposits (De Jesus 1977).

Perhaps it was from this first Milesian settlement that information about the Black Sea area, discussed above, was transmitted to the Greek world (on possible contacts of Milesians with the south-eastern Black Sea area in the somewhat later period see Asheri 1972, 20–1).

Archaeological evidence for the existence of Greek contacts with the eastern Black Sea area in the eighth to the first half of the seventh century BC, prior to the establishment of Greek colonies, is very difficult to find. So far there is no direct and unquestionable evidence. The earliest Greek imports into the Black Sea area date to no earlier than the mid-seventh century BC and more precisely to the last quarter of the century. These are found in the western (in Istria — Alexandrescu 1978, 19 f.), north-western (on the island of Berezan — Kopeikina 1973, 1982), and south-eastern Black Sea area (in Sinope — Akurgal and Budde 1956). However, the arrival of Greek imports here is connected with the foundation and continuance of Greek colonies. In the territory of Colchis, however, finds of the earliest Greek pottery date to the first half of the sixth century BC, and so far number only a few items (Kacharava 1995, 63 f.). However, a number of innovations in the material culture of Colchis demand attention.
These have come to light in a number of burial grounds exhibiting a very peculiar custom of collective burials dated to the second half of the eighth to the early sixth century BC (Figures 3–4). Among the great variety of items found in these burials (Figure 5), are traditional and typical items of the Colchis region (bronze and iron weapons, farming implements, clothing, weapons and farming tools, ornaments, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic statuettes, stone beads). The burial area formed a kind of large wooden vault (Papuashvili 1999a).

A notable feature of these burials is the abundance and diversity of burial gifts (clay vessels, bronze and iron weapons and farming tools, ornaments, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic statuettes, stone beads). The exceptionally large number of farming implements is worth noting (bronze and iron ploughshares, hoes, axes, segment-like tools, knives for pruning — Figures 4–6) pointing to the leading role of farming in the country’s economy. And perhaps it is not fortuitous that in the stories of the Argonauts, Aeetes, the king of the Colchians, challenged the leader of the Greek heroes that had come to Colchis in quest of the Golden Fleece not to cross swords but to till the land. The Colchian king was capable of harnessing ‘fire-breathing’ and ‘copper-footed’ oxen to plough the soil in straight and deep furrows in one day and sow it and finish the harvest (Apoll. Rhod., Arg. III, 412–424; cf. Pind., P.4, 224–30).

11 These are very specific collective burials — so far attested only in Colchis (both in the coastal zone and in the hinterland). They have so-called ‘cultic platforms’. Strong traces of fire, numerous fragmented bones, and deliberately smashed jugs and bowls point to the holding of funeral feasts on these ‘cultic platforms’ or, generally, of rituals connected with the funeral rites and funeral repasts. The burial pits, dug in the soil for collective burials, are rather large in size (occasionally up to 60 sq m). The remains of human bones are scattered and bear strong traces of a large fire, pointing to the custom of secondary interment with partial cremation or use of ritual fire. The presence of bones of many corpses and their simultaneous interment together with their belongings have given ground to assume (Mikeladze 1995) that we are dealing with the rite of secondary interment, preceded by the Colchian custom, recorded by Apollonius Rhodius, of hanging up the corpses wrapped in skins (Arg. III, 200–209; cf. Nymphodoros, Nom. Barb., F.17 = Möller 1848, 2, 380; Nic. Damas. F. 124 = Möller 1849, 3, 461; for the discussion Vian 1980, 117: ad 209; Campbell 1994, 178: ad 200–9 with references; Glei and Natzel-Glei 1996, 181, n. 19).

On the basis of archaeological evidence and its juxtaposition with written sources, the burial process is reconstructed in the following way: first, the deceased were wrapped up in animal skins and suspended in a tree; then special parts of the corpse, without firing, together with the inventory (possibly also wrapped in a skin or fabric) were taken through a specially made corridor (i.e. a kind of dromos) into a large-sized burial pit and placed there. The sides of such pits were faced with wooden walls, and probably had a wooden roof. Thus, the burial area formed a kind of large wooden vault (Papuashvili 1999a).

To make his ‘conclusions’ convincing, G. Tsetskhladze bases himself only on the so-called ‘younger’ group of burials discussed by Mikeladze (1995), and on this basis conclusions were reached relating to the appearance of iron in Colchis only from the end of the seventh century BC (Tsetskhladze 1995, 34) and the settlement of Colchis by the Scythians (Tsetskhladze 1995, 314; cf. Tsetskhladze and Treister 1995, 11). Adduced as proof is the large quantity of Scythian objects encountered in this period (akinakes, craft articles, bronze bridle, bone cheek-plates, etc, figs 12–16: ‘Scythian objects from Colchis. After Pirtskhalava 1978’). Actually, the tables borrowed by Tsetskhladze from Pirtskhalava represent Scythian objects from the entire Georgia. Thus, of the 7 akinakes in Tsetskhladze’s fig. 12 actually only 3 are from Colchis, and of the 14 ‘Scythian bronze arrowheads’ in his fig. 14 only one was found in Colchis, while all the 7 Scythian objects in fig. 15 derive from Eastern Georgia. It should be noted also that only Scythian-type akinakes and arrow-heads have been found on the territory of Colchis, occurring as single finds in complexes with hundreds of Colchian objects in the above-discussed ‘collective burials’ (n. 11, above). These burials are characterized by an abundance of agricultural implements, doubtless belonging to a farming population among whom one can hardly find Scythians.

Figure 4
Figure 5
Inventory of the burial ground from Ergeta. Pottery: 1–11; Bronze: 12–19, 23, 31–6, 38–62, 64–71; Iron: 14–22, 26, 28, 37, 63 (Papuashvili 1999a).
ornaments and pottery), but also new elements whose presence is hard to explain as a result of internal cultural development. Nor can their appearance be accounted for by contacts with the Near Eastern world, for they have no direct parallels there either.

Anthropomorphic figurines (Figure 6) are among the most interesting novelties in the so-called ‘older group of burials’ dating to the second half of the eighth to the first half of the seventh century BC. Of special interest is a bronze statuette of a charioteer from the village of Mukhurcha (Figure 6 no. 1) (Gogadze 1984, fig. I, 131; Mikeladze 1995, 21, fig. 22). It has no analogies either in the local material culture or among Near Eastern figurines (Seeden 1980, 109, pl. 103: 1725). The bronze figurine of the charioteer calls to mind the well-known Greek late Geometric bronze figurines of charioteers (Schweitzer 1969, 156–8; Heilmeyer 1982, 47; Byrne 1991, 43 f.). The charioteer from Mukhurcha also wears a helmet but in the form of a capsized boat and differing somewhat from the familiar figures found at Olympia and Delphi yet his forearms extended forward to hold the reins are in the same position as in Greek late Geometric examples. Similar, too, is the type of chariot with an openwork frame which has analogies among the chariots depicted on late Geometric vases (Greenhalgh 1973, 20 f., type G2). It may be assumed that the bronze figurine of the charioteer from Mukhurcha is an eighth century Greek import or, less likely, a local interpretation of a late Geometric motif. Clearly, in the form of the Mukhurcha figurine we are dealing with a purely Greek phenomenon. A single charioteer in late Geometric Greek art may be a competitor in chariot-racing, which was included officially in the Olympic games, or it may be a representation of a participant racing in honour of a dead hero.

However, the bronze statuette just discussed is not the only evidence of a late Geometric Greek element in Colchis. Two bronze female statuettes are also of considerable interest. Both are nudes, with their arms raised, knees slightly bent and disproportionately short legs. One of them has a magnificent headdress (Figure 6 no. 2), and the other, a splendid necklace (Figure 6 no. 6). Representations of naked female figures with headdresses are also typical of late Geometric bronze and terracotta models (Byrne 1991, 23–4; Müller 1929, pl. XXV, 306, pl. XXVI, 313; Ohly 1941, 2–7, 16). A series of male statuettes (Figure 6 no. 4), quite different stylistically from Near Eastern ones (Negbi 1976; Seeden 1980; Moorey 1984) also finds parallels, in the nakedness, spread arm position, and belt probably for the armament, in late Geometric Greek so-called warrior figurines (Byrne 1991, 111 f.)

Other innovations in the material culture of Colchis are also worthy of notice for the light they may throw on contacts with the Greek world in the eighth to the first half of the seventh century BC; these include terracotta animal figures with two heads on a single body with four legs. After the Cretan-Mycenaean period, this image flourished in the late Geometric period on Greek soil (for details, see Lordkipanidze 1995).

The widespread distribution of dress ornaments is also a novelty in the culture of Colchis, especially the bronze fibulae (Figure 7). These are bow-shaped, made in a single piece, and may occasionally be adorned with herring-bone ornament, like Greek fibulae, or even with representations of fish. These latter are comparable to Boeotian fibulae, though the Greek versions differ typologically from their Colchian counterparts. Special mention should also be made of a fibula with boat-shaped bow bounded by astragals, with a quadrangular-sectioned pin (Figure 7 no. 8), which has good parallels in the Greek world (Bouzek 1997, 190; Sulava 1999).

When considering possible late Geometric Greek inspiration in Colchis, one should not overlook a definite tendency towards geometrization, found not only in zoomorphic figurines (cf. Figure 8) but in the rich geometric ornamentation, appearing for the first time in Colchian pottery (Figure 9). This is especially interesting in view of the fact that, represented for the first

THE GOLDEN FLEECE

OXFORD JOURNAL OF ARCHAEOLOGY

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Figure 6
Bronze figurines from Mukhurcha (1, 4–9), Ergeta (2–3, 10), Ureki (12) and Samos (11).
time in ceramic complexes of the eighth to the early seventh century BC alongside shapes traditional and widespread throughout Colchis, there appear for the first time new Greek type kantharos- and kalathos-like vessels (Figure 10 nos. 14–15). The most characteristic designs of Greek geometric art — meanders and swastika (Boardman 1994, 15) — are also very popular

13 Of course one could presume the spread of this design (swastika and meander) to Colchis from Western Asia. The swastika is indeed a very ancient ornament of the artistic culture of the Ancient East but, as far as I know, it does not occur at the end of the second and the beginning of the first millennia BC either in the culture of Iran or of Anatolia. It is noteworthy that the ‘swastika’ does not appear in the ornamentation of Iranian pottery, related chronologically and stylistically with Late Geometric types (cf. Medvedskaya 1986). In Phrygian culture the meander is believed to have spread under Greek influence (cf. Anabolu 1994).
Figure 8
Bronze figurines from Ureki (1–2), Dghvaba (3–4), Ergeta (5–8).
Figure 9
Figure 10
in the ornamentation of Colchian bronze axes (Figure 11 nos. 1–3). The swastika ornament is also found on a seventh century BC gold pendant from Nosiri (Figure 11 no. 7) (Gagoshidze 1976, 17).

On the other hand, again from the viewpoint of contacts between the Greek world and Colchis in the eighth to seventh century BC, the finds, on Samos, of a number of bronze items, including small bells, belt buckles, and a statuette of a female rider seated side-saddle and holding a baby (Figure 6 no. 11), are very important. When discovered they were acknowledged to be Caucasian (Jantzen 1972, 80–4) but, on the basis of many more recent
discoveries of analogous items in Colchis, they have now been recognized to be of Colchian origin (Mikeladze 1995, 18).

The figurine of a female rider seated side-saddle (Figure 6 no. 11) — often debated in the specialist literature — deserves special consideration. The Samian rider differs from the other four bronze examples of female riders seated side-saddle, so far known in Greece, in that she is holding a baby. They were recently studied by Mary Vojatzis (1992, 270–2) who suggests that the eighth century BC Greek side-saddle riders reflect an iconographic tradition derived from the Bronze Age. She calls the Samian rider ‘enigmatic’, emphasizing that this figurine ‘appears to possess a mixture of traits, but has a predominantly Caucasian appearance. This apparent combination of influences speaks for a workshop situated somewhere where Greek, Orientalizing and Caucasian elements were all present, possibly on Samos.’ Mary Vojatzis also observes that ‘a number of examples of female riders seated side-saddle and holding a baby are known from necropoleis in modern Western Georgia (ancient Colchis) . . . But there are some important differences too. The Georgian example . . . has neither saddle nor necklace’ (Vojatzis 1992, 271).  

Of major importance, in this context, is a recent find from Mukhurcha in Colchis of a bronze figurine of a female rider with an angular face, long hair, very long neck, and elaborate necklace, who is holding a baby (Figure 6 nos. 9 and 10). All these elements are similar to those of the Samian rider. In the same style is a throned female figurine with a baby, from Ureki in Colchis (Figure 6 no. 12). Thus, the late German archaeologist, Jantzen, seems to have been right in suggesting that the rider from Samos was a Caucasian import (Jantzen 1972, 83 f.) — let me add, an import from Colchis.

The archaeological material discussed above, along with the written literary tradition, would on the whole seem to corroborate the reality of Greek contacts with Colchis in the eighth to the first half of the seventh century BC. In that period, as mentioned above, the expedition of the Argonauts in search of the Golden Fleece — a symbol of a protector of royal power — was firmly linked with Colchis.

Following the foundation of Greek colonies on the Colchian littoral of the Black Sea, Greek contacts with Colchis assumed a more regular character, as is clearly demonstrated by archaeological finds of Greek imports (Kacharava 1995). Active Greek trade with Colchis contributed to the Greeks a deeper familiarity with Colchis.

It may be assumed that in the Archaic and Classical periods notions of the Golden Fleece as a divine symbol of a protector of royal power had already been forgotten. Then, approximately from Early Hellenistic times there arose new, ‘rational’, explanations coming from representatives of euhemeristic philosophy.

14 I adduce such long quotations from the studies of Vojatzis because her conclusions have not been fully and precisely conveyed by some researchers who deny all pre-colonial contacts between the Greek world and Colchis and assert that ‘it is possible that the figurines from Samos and Ureki were both produced somewhere in the Near East’ (Tsetskhladze and Treister 1995, 4; Tsetskhladze 1995, 309). Unfortunately, the authors failed to name a single analogue from the Near East (but cf. Vojatzis 1992, 267).

15 The custom of suspending the corpses of the deceased on trees among the Colchians, reported by Apollonius Rhodius (Arg., III), implying secondary burial, is not attested in Colchis in the Classical and Hellenistic periods. But, as we saw above, the custom would seem to find confirmation in the so-called collective burials of the eighth to seventh century BC. Perhaps Apollonius of Rhodius used in this case some earlier, no longer extant, source in which such evidence might have appeared on the basis of information obtained as a result of pre-colonial contacts.
A rationalistic explanation of the Golden Fleece, its essence and the basis of the legends concerning it, appeared in the Greek world in the Hellenistic period. This new conception was offered by representatives of the so-called euhemeristic philosophy — followers of Euhemerus, a philosopher from Messene (c.340–260 BC). They sought to find a factual basis for the explanation of myths.

Their reasoning about the Golden Fleece was extremely interesting. As far back as the fourth century BC Palaephatus (or a person writing under this name), author of the book 'Iērī ἀτικτον' (‘On the Incredible’), questioned the voyage of Jason and the sons of the Hellenes in quest of the Golden Fleece. In fact, the author contends that Phrixus, having married Halciope, gave her father Aeetes a gold statuette as ransom from the treasury of Cos, and that Jason sailed in the Argo in search of Cos’ gold rather than the skin of the sheep (XXX/31 = Festa 1902, 41 f. Palaephatus).

The following evidence, preserved in a mythological treatise of the second century AD, is presumed to have originated from Palaephatus’ work: ‘... (the skin) preserved among the Colchians was in reality not a golden fleece (Χρυσοτόν δέρματι) — this is a poetic invention — but a book written on skins, containing a description of the technique of obtaining gold by means of chemistry. Accordingly, contemporaries called it “golden”, proceeding from its actions’ (Excerpta vaticana: vulgo Anonymus De incredibilibus III = Festa 1902, 89).

An author, known under the name of Haraxes of Pergamum (floruit c.first to sixth century), was convinced that, according to Eustathius, the golden fleece (τὸ Χρυσοτὸν δέρματι) was a technique of writing in gold (χρυσογραφία) on parchment, for which, they say, the expedition of the Argo was sent forth (Jacoby 1923, II A, 490, fr. 37; see also Suid., s.v. δέρματι).

Thus, the authors of the above passages link the Golden Fleece in one or another form with the gold of Colchis or with the method of obtaining it. Still more graphically the Golden Fleece as a means of obtaining gold is represented in Strabo and Appian:

‘...it is said that in their country gold is carried down by the mountain-torrents, and that the barbarians obtain it by means of perforated troughs and fleecy skins, and that this is the origin of the myth of the Golden fleece (Strabo XI, 2, 19 = Jones 1969, V, 215).

‘... Many streams issue from Caucasus bearing gold dust so fine as to be invisible. The inhabitants put sheepskins with shaggy fleece into the stream and thus collect the floating particles; and perhaps the golden fleece of Aeetes was of this kind’ (Appian, Mithr., 109 = Horace White 1955, 435).

Strabo, follower of a rationalistic explanation of myth, goes even further: the Golden Fleece is a symbol of the richness of the country in the metal, in which it was preserved: ‘... the wealth of the regions about Colchis, which is derived from the mines of gold, silver, iron, and copper, suggests a reasonable motive for the expedition, a motive which induced Phryxus also to undertake this voyage at an earlier date’ (I, 2, 39 = Jones 1969, I, 167).

The question naturally arises: do the attempts at a rationalistic explanation of the Golden Fleece linking it with the obtaining of, or richness in, gold (according to Strabo, metal in general) of the country in which the Golden Fleece was preserved (Colchis) constitute theoretical speculations or do they have any real basis?

First, a few words about the plausibility of Strabo’s assertions regarding the richness of Colchis in metals other than gold (e.g. copper and iron), in search of which the expeditions of Phryxus and Jason were organized.
The richness of Colchis in copper (Figure 12) is well-known in the specialist literature. There are rich deposits of copper in the mountains of the Greater and Lesser Caucasus (Janelidze 1933, 531 f.), and the discovery of numerous galleries, with remains of mining, points to intensive mining of copper from the middle of the second millennium BC.
up to the Middle Ages. Further, the exceptional abundance of bronze items of the third to first millennia BC (Lordkipanidze 1991a, 95 f.), made with local resources, is also clear proof of the country’s richness in copper, mentioned by Strabo in the context of the Argonauts’ expedition. Similarly, the abundance of iron, which Strabo included in the list of metals — the objective of the voyage of the Argonauts — can be convincingly demonstrated archaeologically. Numerous remains of iron foundries (furnaces, slags, etc) have been discovered throughout Colchis (Khakhutaishvili 1987). Use was made of both iron ore, such as haematite, deposits of which have been recorded in some districts of present-day Western Georgia (Janelidze 1933, 244 f.) and the so-called magnetitic sands occurring all along the Black Sea shore (Figure 12). The presence of rich resources of iron accounts for the exceptional abundance of iron objects, reliably attested in burials of the eighth to the fifth century BC and represented by hundreds of items found also in the cultural layers of the eighth to sixth century (Lordkipanidze 1991a, 119 f., fig. 15) and the sixth to fourth century BC (Dsidsiguri 1994, 106 f.).

However, the Golden Fleece, in its rationalistic interpretation presented in the passages quoted from the works of Greek authors, was linked mainly to Colchian gold. Indeed, in Greek literature, gold was one of the most striking features of Colchis. The richness of Colchis in gold was given stress by various poetic devices. Thus, according to Mimnermus, there was a ‘gold palace’ in the city of Aeetes (Nano, fr. 11; Allen 1993, 92; ad 6, χρυσέωι θαλάμωι). The Colchian princess Medea boiled her concoctions in ‘gold cauldrons’ (according to the author of Νοστοτ, ‘Returns’, a non-extant post-Homeric epic work — F 6; Davies 1988, 69) and sends a ‘gold wreath’ to Glauceus (see Hypothesis of Medea of Euripides; Diggle 1984, 88). In Lycophron of Chalcidice Medea presents Triton with a ‘gold crater’ (Alexandra, 886–7), while in the Argonautica (III, 1228) of Apollonius Rhodius, King Aeetes wears a ‘gold helmet’, and so on. But particular interest attaches to the ‘Epitaph’ of King Aeetes buried in Colchis, which was for long ascribed to Aristotle but is now considered a work of an unknown author of the third century BC: ‘The ruler of Colchis, rich in gold was buried here by the almighty fate of gods’ (Diehl 1924, 178). Noteworthy here is the Homeric epithet for cities ‘rich in gold (πολυχρυσως)’ applied to Colchis, used in Greek literature also in reference to Mycenae (Il. XI, 46; Sophocl., Elect., 9), Sardis and Babylon (Aesch., Pers., 45 and 53) reflecting their fabulous wealth in gold.

According to Pliny: ‘…Saulaces the descendant of Aeetes had already reigned in Colchis, who is said to have come on a tract of virgin soil in the country of the Suani and elsewhere and to have dug up from it a great quantity of gold and silver, his realm being, moreover, famous for Golden Fleece’ (NH XXXIII, XVI, 53 = Rackham 1952, 43).

But was Colchis really so rich in gold as to give ground for a rationalistic explanation of the myth of the Golden Fleece?

The reports of Strabo and Appian on the gold-bearing rivers of Colchis and obtaining gold by means of sheepskins have already been mentioned. These could have hardly arisen without some basis. Yet let us trace the veracity of the evidence of Strabo and Appian in the context of explaining the essence of the Golden Fleece.

The winning of gold from Colchian rivers is reported by European travellers visiting Georgia in the seventeenth to nineteenth century (Reineggs 1797, 138; Dubois de Montpéreux 1839, 18). In the Public Library of Saint-Petersburg, in Russia, a manuscript is preserved entitled: ‘Conditions of the Location of Gold in the Inguri and Rioni Valleys’ (i.e. in rivers of Western Georgia — Figure 12). Dated 1879, the manuscript is in Russian (Lordkipanidze 1979, OXFORD JOURNAL OF ARCHAEOLOGY © Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 2001
n. 150). It presents information about the mining of gold in Colchis and its scale: ‘Gold is mined in the lower reaches of the Inguri and the Rioni, while gold-fields at the mouth of the Tskhenis-tsqali river were leased in the last century by the Imeretian kings. Subsequently, the explorations carried out by Messrs Tomilev and Gilev (1850–1863) demonstrated beyond doubt that at definite points in the middle and upper reaches of the valleys of the Inguri and the Rioni gold is found in the sediments. The same was shown by the exploratory work of Mr. Kasten who was even granted a mining area for the development of the gold-bearing sands. In any case, all the work done along these lines was restricted exclusively to washing out the sediments, without any attempts at more comprehensive study of the question. Gold, largely in the shape of extremely thin scales, occurs in all types of drift. Occasionally gold is found in grain form whose size sometimes reaches that of a maize grain. More valuable ingots also occur, though rarely.’

The ‘Accounts’ of the Russian engineers Tomilev and Gilev, mentioned in the manuscript, report that in some places one ton of sand contains, on average, 5.3 g of pure gold which is considered a fairly high index (Kochlavashvili 1962, 258–66).

Prospecting for gold in Western Georgia continued into the Soviet period. All the rivers issuing from the Greater Caucasus were found to contain gold. In some rivers the thickness of the gold-bearing layer reaches up to two metres. Gold grains of 2–4 g occur. Larger finds are also noted: on one occasion 340 g, and in another case 450 g (Janelidze 1933, 273–82 with references; Zukhbaya 1995, 14–15). Thus, there can be no doubt about the presence of gold, as reported by Greek authors, in a fairly large quantity in Colchian rivers.

Furthermore, in mountain regions of Western Georgia the technique of obtaining gold with the help of sheepskins (about which Strabo and Appian wrote) was preserved until recently. According to ethnographers’ descriptions, in Svaneti (i.e. a mountain region on the south-western slope of the Greater Caucasus from where the gold-bearing river Inguri flows): ‘gold is obtained by means of sheepskins. A sheepskin, stretched over a board or flattened in some other way was placed in the river, fixing it so as not to be carried away by the stream, with the fleece on the upper side. The soaked fleece trapped the gold particles. After some time the skin was withdrawn and spread on the ground to dry; the dried skin was beaten to shake out the grains of gold …’ (Bochorishvili 1946, 285). In 1984, the well-known traveller-experimentalist Tim Severin, who retraced the way of the Argonauts in a 20-oar boat, witnessed the obtaining of gold in Svaneti with the help of sheepskins, describing it in his book (Severin 1985, 220–223).

The richness of Colchis in gold, so assiduously stressed by ancient Greek authors, is also corroborated by finds of numerous gold items in the rich burials of the local aristocracy, especially of the first half of the fifth to the third century BC including magnificent diadems adorned with scenes of fighting animals, many types of earrings and temple with rich granulation, as well as necklaces. The art-and-style unity of these items, as well as their genetic links with ornaments of the preceding period (especially the diadem-ornaments with rhomboid plaques — Figure 13), points to their local manufacture. The originality of form, the stylistic, iconographic and technical peculiarities of the earrings (rosette, bird, granulation in the shape of pyramids and triangles, small holes for clasps — Figure 14), and so on (Chqonia 1981; Nadiradze 1990; Lordkipanidze 1971, 1991b, 165–72), differentiate them sharply from both Greek and Achaemenid ear ornaments. The exceptionally large number of gold ornaments — occasionally hundreds in a burial — is noteworthy (Lordkipanidze 1971; 1979, 84-100).
The foregoing is, I believe, clear proof of the authenticity of the reports of those Greek writers — adherents of the rationalistic interpretation of myths — who sought to link the myth of the Golden Fleece to the richness in, and obtaining of, gold in Colchis.

**CONCLUSION**

Two levels are identifiable in ancient Greek notions of the Golden Fleece:

1) Primordial — archaic — mythological, when the Golden Fleece was taken for a symbol of a protector of royal power;

Figure 13
Colchian diadems: Bronze from Ergeta, eighth-seventh century BC (1), and Sukhumi, seventh–sixth century BC (2); Silver (3–4) and gold (5–6) from Vani, first half of the fifth century BC.

The foregoing is, I believe, clear proof of the authenticity of the reports of those Greek writers — adherents of the rationalistic interpretation of myths — who sought to link the myth of the Golden Fleece to the richness in, and obtaining of, gold in Colchis.
Figure 14
Colchian gold earrings of the first half of the fifth century BC.
2) Rationalistic (euhemeristic) — from the Hellenistic period, when the Golden Fleece symbolized the richness of Colchis in gold, a country where, according to the myth, the Golden Fleece was preserved.

Figure 15
Archaeological sites of Colchis mentioned in the text.

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