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Aitia in the Second Book of Apollonius' *Argonautica*

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One of the most unHomeric features of Apollonius' poem are its many aitia, a type of subject absent from the Homeric epics, though well-established elsewhere. In non-epic poetry aitia appear in the Homeric hymns (e.g. *h. Dem.* on the origin of the Eleusinian mysteries), Pindar (e.g. *O.* 10 on the institution of the Olympic Games), tragedy (Euripides' plays often end with the foundation of some Attic cult, e.g. in *Hipp.* 1425 ff.) and very often in Hellenistic poetry, above all in Apollonius' contemporary Callimachus, who devoted an entire work in elegiac verse to the subject.[1] Aitia are not lacking in earlier epic poetry, either, in Hesiod (e.g. *Aigimios* fr. 296, which explains the name Euboia, *Eoiai* fr. 233), Peisander of Cameirus (*Heracleia* fr. 7 Kinkel on the springs at Thermopylae) and Antimachus (*Thebais* fr. 35 on the cult of Demeter *Erinys*, frs. 44, 53).

Where Apollonius differs from such epic poets and reflects instead the interests of his contemporaries, especially Callimachus, is in the amount of space that he devotes to aitia. For he includes not only ones directly linked with the Argonauts (e.g. the hero-cults of crew-members who die at various stages of the voyage) but also a great many without any such link (e.g. some rather obscure Black Sea cults), which he manages to incorporate within the framework of a voyage to and from Colchis. The second book, which deals with part of the outward journey, contains more aitia and less narrative than the others, especially the more dramatic third book, to which it provides a contrast. Indeed at times, especially in the section 648–961, the lively, colourful aitia, combined with geographical and ethnographical details, seem more important than the heroes' rather dull, uneventful voyage.

Those aitia directly connected with the Argonauts generally concern cults founded by sailors or colonists but later given a more impressive and venerable origin and associated with the Argo's voyage to Colchis. They follow (with variations) a standard pattern—the heroes land, build an altar, offer sacrifices and thus institute a cult —except for one which is introduced in a speech and linked with a well-known episode on the outward voyage.

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[1] On aitia in Hellenistic poetry see G. Zanker, *Realism in Alexandrian Poetry* (London 1987) 120 ff.

When the Mariandyni are welcoming the Argonauts as victors over their
enemy Amycus, whose encounter with the heroes has been described in 1
ff., their king promises to found a cult of the Tyndaridae in order to honour
Polydeuces for killing Amycus (806 ff.).

Many of the other aitia are also connected with the main narrative in
some way. The Argonauts' construction of an altar to the Twelve Gods
(531 f.) takes up an earlier motif, Phineus' admonition to honour the Gods
before the passage of the Symplegades (336); and their institution of a cult
of *Homonoia* (715 ff.) develops ideas important throughout the poem,
concord among the crew and united efforts for a common goal (cf. 1. 336 f.,
1344). Idmon's death (815 ff.) has been foretold in a prophecy (1. 443 f.);
that of Tiphys (851 ff.) not only supplies an aition for another hero-cult but
also introduces a scene exploring the Argonauts' state of mind and Jason's
method of leadership when a new pilot must be chosen to replace Tiphys
(859 ff.). Later this theme of the death of two heroes, one of whom is
killed by a wild animal, is repeated in the deaths of Mopsus and Canthus (4.
1485 ff.).

These aitia vary greatly in length and tone. Apollonius' treatment
ranges from a bare statement (e.g. the cult of Zeus *Phyxios* 1146–47) to an
extended episode (e.g. the cult of Apollo *Eoios* 669–713). He tries to give
each aition an individual colouring by elaborating and enlivening the dry
facts offered by his sources, mainly local historians such as Herodorus of
Heraclea (mentioned several times in the scholia, e.g. on 684-87). For the
cults of Apollo *Eoios* and of Sthenelos he invents two striking epiphanies.
The first presents the sun god as a handsome, radiant youth passing by at
dawn on his own affairs (674 ff.). This motif leads into a joyful celebration
of Apollo by the Argonauts, with, quite naturally, a hymn of praise by
Orpheus (705 ff.); that gives Apollonius the chance to introduce other
aitiological themes (also in Call. *h.* 2. 97 ff.), the god slaying a monstrous
snake at Delphi and an explanation of the ritual cry ἰὴ ἰή. The second
epiphany is another silent, fleeting vision, but of a very different nature—a
lonely, feeble ghost who appears in all his old splendour as a warrior but
must soon return to the gloom of Hades, from which Persephone has
compassionately released him for a brief glimpse of his fellow-Greeks (915
ff.). Idmon's death is also presented in sombre tones, for it is decreed by fate
(815, 817) and forms part of a dramatic sequence of events in which the hero
is gored by a monstrous, terrifying boar (824 ff.). Apollonius may have
invented this manner of death to allude to a less colourful Homeric boar
hunt (*Od.* 19. 428 ff.), in the same way as he shapes the episode of Apollo
Eoios to recall Odysseus' landing on another deserted island (*Od.* 9. 116 ff.).[2]

Elsewhere too he seems to have boldly reshaped earlier traditions,
inventing details or carefully chosing between different versions (as far as we

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[2] Parallels in F. Vian, *Argonautiques* I–II (Paris 1976), pp. 216, n. 1, 275–76. Note
Complémentaire 698.

can tell, given that most of his sources are lost). The altar of the Twelve Gods was linked not only with the Argonauts but also with Phrixus' sons (in Timosthenes, according to schol. 531–32); and the cult of *Homonoia*, as founded from Heraclea, probably had a different emphasis, on political stability and concord within a city. In Promathidas, a local historian, Orpheus dedicated a lyre to Sthenelos (schol. 928–29) and thus gave a place the name of *Lyra*; but Apollonius feels that Apollo as patron of music and of the Argonauts' voyage is a more suitable recipient (928 f.). In one case his invention of a link between the heroes and a local cult had certain inconsistencies. The Tyndaridae were actually honoured as protectors of sailors at a sanctuary some distance from Heraclea, at whose site Apollonius sets the cult's founder, a local king. When he connects the cult instead with Polydeuces' victory over Amycus, he cannot explain why Castor should share in the honours too, although he does take care to locate the sanctuary not at Heraclea but more vaguely along the "Acherousian coast" (806).[3]

The second group of aitia, those not directly connected with Argonauts, concern place-names or local cults and are generally introduced in a smooth relative clause of the pattern "the heroes sailed past (reached/saw) a place where . . ." (e.g. 652), with two exceptions. In order to include topics not linked with places on the way to Colchis, Apollonius has the voyage delayed by Etesian winds (498), which gives him a chance to speak of Aristaeus and Cyrene (590 ff.—cf. Call. *h.* 2. 90 ff., *Aitia* fr. 75. 33 ff.); and he mentions the cult of Priolas in a speech (780–82), probably inventing Priolas' position as the speaker's elder brother.[4]

He often gives these aitia some slight connection with the main narrative. The story of Aristaeus (506 ff.) repeats the themes of divine punishment and atonement from the Phineus episode (178 ff.). The peaceful life of Dipsacus, an obscure local divinity whose shrine the heroes pass (658), contrasts with their strenuous exertions at the oars (660 ff.). They sacrifice at Ares' altar (1169 ff.), a sanctuary built by Amazons (385 ff.), and they actually meet Deimachus' sons (955 ff.), the legendary founders of Sinope, who have been left behind after Heracles' expedition against the Amazons; this meeting anticipates their later encounter with other stranded travellers, Phrixus' sons (1093 ff.).

This group of aitia is also extremely varied. The lengthy Aristaeus episode is distinguished by learned allusions and evocative proper names, and by its unfamiliar portrait of Cyrene as a virgin shepherdess whose peaceful existence is rudely disrupted by Apollo (500 ff.). Dipsacus also leads a placid pastoral life (ἐθελημός 656 recalls Hes. *Op.* 118 and the Golden Age), while Dionysus conducts mysterious nocturnal rituals in a cave (905 ff.) and Artemis bathes peacefully in the gently-flowing Parthenius (937 ff., cf. Call. fr. 75. 24 f.). In contrast, Ares' cult (385 ff.,

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[3] Vian pp. 162–63.
[4] Vian p. 277. N. C. 782.

1169 ff.) is a primitive barbarian rite involving horse-sacrifices to a black stone. Priolas is presented as an epic warrior fallen in defence of his country (ὅντινα λαός / . . . ὀδύρεται 781 f. may recall the Trojans lamenting Hector καί μιν λαοὶ . . . ὀδύρονται *Il.* 24. 740), not in his original role as a vegetation deity, a youth like Hylas or Bormus, whose death is honoured by annual ritual mourning (although this aspect is evoked by οἰκτίστοις ἐλέγοισιν 782).[5] Apollonius may have changed the legend in order to motivate neatly Heracles' campaigns against the enemies of Priolas' tribe (campaigns which anticipate the wars of the Greek colonists from Heraclea), for the hero can begin by taking revenge for this death (786).

Also innovatory may be his explanations of the place-names Sinope and Philyra. For the first he relates an amusing anecdote, probably a Hellenistic invention conflating earlier traditions (946 ff.).[6] The eponymous nymph Sinope is duly carried off from Boeotia to the Euxine by Zeus, but then outwits the god with a folk-tale stratagem, exacting a promise of anything she desires in return for her favours and choosing virginity; and she similarly discomforts Apollo, her seducer in another version. The island of Philyra, which probably derived its name from a local tribe, the Philyres, is linked instead with Philyra, Cheiron's mother, and her union with Cronus is located here (1232 ff.). Rhea's interruption of the guilty pair introduces a new, more subtle explanation of Cheiron's nature—in order to escape from his wife Cronus changes into a horse and conceives the centaur at the moment of transformation from human to equine shape (ἀμοιβαίη . . . εὐνῇ 1241); and it motivates Philyra's flight to Thessaly, where she can bear Cheiron at his traditional birth-place.

Two features of Apollonius' treatment of aitia deserve comment. In order to add more authority he often suggests that he is faithfully reporting ancient traditions, especially local ones, and hence uses expressions such as πεφάτισται (500), καὶ τὰ μὲν ὣς ὑδέονται (528), φάτις (854 ff.); although where two traditions disagree about which hero a tomb should be assigned to and he wishes to mention both while supporting one, he appeals for confirmation of the truth to the Muses, otherwise generally reserved for his epic narrative (844 ff.). This idiom is not new—φασί is used several times in Homer to introduce familiar traditions or beliefs (e.g *Il.* 2. 783, 19. 416), while variations on "they say," "the story goes," appear in Pindar (e.g. *O.* 2. 28, *N.* 3. 52 f.) and in tragedy (e.g. Aesch. *Eum.* 4). But it is especially typical of Hellenistic poetry (it introduces aitia in e.g. Antim. fr. 35, Call. *h.* 3. 210) and was taken up by some Roman poets, especially Virgil (e.g. *A.* 7. 735—see Fordyce ad loc.).[7]

Apollonius also emphasises the continuity of traditions reaching back to the distant past and still observed in his own day—so Κέῳ δ' ἔτι νῦν

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[5] Vian p. 278. N. C. 785.

[6] Vian p. 280. N. C. 953.

[7] C. J. Fordyce, *Aeneid* VII–III (Oxford 1977).

(526) priests sacrifice to Sirius, εἰσέτι νῦν (717) stands the shrine built by the Argonauts. This attitude, already present in Pindar and tragedy, is another characteristic of Hellenistic poetry (e.g. Call. fr. 59. 21 νῦν δ' ἔθ') and of Virgil (e.g. *A*. 7. 601–03 *Mos erat . . ., quem protinus urbes / Albanae coluere sacrum, nunc . . . / Roma colit*). Here too Apollonius is closer to contemporary non-epic poetry than to the Homeric epics, which stress instead the gulf between the Heroic age and men "as they now are."

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