



The Argonautica

By

Apollonius Rhodius

(fl. 3rd Century B.C.)

Originally written in Ancient Greek sometime in the 3rd Century B.C. by the Alexandrian poet Apollonius Rhodius (“Apollonius the Rhodian”). Translation by R.C. Seaton, 1912.

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INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the chronology of Alexandrian literature and the famous Library, founded by Ptolemy Soter, but the dates of the chief writers are still matters of conjecture. The birth of Apollonius Rhodius is placed by scholars at various times between 296 and 260 B.C., while the year of his death is equally uncertain. In fact, we have very little information on the subject. There are two “lives” of Apollonius in the Scholia, both derived from an earlier one which is lost. From these we learn that he was of Alexandria by birth,* that he lived in the time of the Ptolemies, and was a pupil of Callimachus; that while still a youth he composed and recited in public his “Argonautica”, and that the poem was condemned, in consequence of which he retired to Rhodes; that there he revised his poem, recited it with great applause, and hence called

*“Or of Naucratis,” according to Aelian and Athenaeus.

himself a Rhodian. The second “life” adds: “Some say that he returned to Alexandria and again recited his poem with the utmost success, so that he was honoured with the libraries of the Museum and was buried with Callimachus.” The last sentence may be interpreted by the notice of Suidas, who informs us that Apollonius was a contemporary of Eratosthenes, Euphorion and Timarchus, in the time of Ptolemy Euergetes, and that he succeeded Eratosthenes in the headship of the Alexandrian Library. Suidas also informs us elsewhere that Aristophanes at the age of sixty-two succeeded Apollonius in this office. Many modern scholars deny the “bibliothecariate” of Apollonius for chronological reasons, and there is considerable difficulty about it. The date of Callimachus’ “Hymn to Apollo”, which closes with some lines (105- 113) that are admittedly an allusion to Apollonius, may be put with much probability at 248 or 247 B.C. Apollonius must at that date have been at least twenty years old. Eratosthenes died 196-193 B.C. This would make Apollonius seventy-two to seventy-five when he succeeded Eratosthenes.

This is not impossible, it is true, but it is difficult. But the difficulty is taken away if we assume with Ritschl that Eratosthenes resigned his office some years before his death, which allows us to put the birth of Apollonius at about 280, and would solve other difficulties. For instance, if the Librarians were buried within the precincts, it would account for the burial of Apollonius next to Callimachus–Eratosthenes being still alive. However that may be, it is rather arbitrary to take away the “bibliothecariate” of Apollonius, which is clearly asserted by Suidas, on account of chronological calculations which are themselves uncertain. Moreover, it is more probable that the words following “some say” in the second “life” are a remnant of the original life than a conjectural addition, because the first “life” is evidently incomplete, nothing being said about the end of Apollonius’ career.

The principal event in his life, so far as we know, was the quarrel with his master Callimachus, which was most probably the cause of his condemnation at Alexandria and departure to Rhodes. This quarrel ap-

pears to have arisen from differences of literary aims and taste, but, as literary differences often do, degenerated into the bitterest personal strife. There are references to the quarrel in the writings of both. Callimachus attacks Apollonius in the passage at the end of the “Hymn to Apollo”, already mentioned, also probably in some epigrams, but most of all in his “Ibis”, of which we have an imitation, or perhaps nearly a translation, in Ovid’s poem of the same name. On the part of Apollonius there is a passage in the third book of the “Argonautica” (ll. 927-947) which is of a polemical nature and stands out from the context, and the well-known savage epigram upon Callimachus.* Various combinations have been attempted by scholars, notably by Couat, in his “Poesie Alexandrine”, to give a connected account of the quarrel, but we have not data sufficient to determine the order of the attacks, and replies, and counter-attacks. The “Ibis” has been thought to mark the termination of the feud on the curious ground that it was impossible for abuse to

go further. It was an age when literary men were more inclined to comment on writings of the past than to produce original work. Literature was engaged in taking stock of itself. Homer was, of course, professedly admired by all, but more admired than imitated. Epic poetry was out of fashion and we find many epigrams of this period—some by Callimachus—directed against the “cyclic” poets, by whom were meant at that time those who were always dragging in conventional and commonplace epithets and phrases peculiar to epic poetry. Callimachus was in accordance with the spirit of the age when he proclaimed “a great book” to be “a great evil,” and sought to confine poetical activity within the narrowest limits both of subject and space. Theocritus agreed with him, both in principle and practice. The chief characteristics of Alexandrianism are well summarized by Professor Robinson Ellis as follows: “Precision in form and metre, refinement in diction, a learning often degenerating into pedantry and obscurity, a resolute avoidance of everything commonplace in subject, sentiment or allusion.” These traits

*Anth. Pal. xl. 275.

are more prominent in Callimachus than in Apollonius, but they are certainly to be seen in the latter. He seems to have written the “Argonautica” out of bravado, to show that he could write an epic poem. But the influence of the age was too strong. Instead of the unity of an Epic we have merely a series of episodes, and it is the great beauty and power of one of these episodes that gives the poem its permanent value—the episode of the love of Jason and Medea. This occupies the greater part of the third book. The first and second books are taken up with the history of the voyage to Colchis, while the fourth book describes the return voyage. These portions constitute a metrical guide book, filled no doubt with many pleasing episodes, such as the rape of Hylas, the boxing match between Pollux and Amyeus, the account of Cyzicus, the account of the Amazons, the legend of Talos, but there is no unity running through the poem beyond that of the voyage itself.

The Tale of the Argonauts had been told often before in verse and prose, and many authors’ names are given in the Scholia to Apollonius, but their works have

perished. The best known earlier account that we have is that in Pindar’s fourth Pythian ode, from which Apollonius has taken many details. The subject was one for an epic poem, for its unity might have been found in the working out of the expiation due for the crime of Athamas; but this motive is barely mentioned by our author.

As we have it, the motive of the voyage is the command of Pelias to bring back the golden fleece, and this command is based on Pelias’ desire to destroy Jason, while the divine aid given to Jason results from the intention of Hera to punish Pelias for his neglect of the honour due to her. The learning of Apollonius is not deep but it is curious; his general sentiments are not according to the Alexandrian standard, for they are simple and obvious. In the mass of material from which he had to choose the difficulty was to know what to omit, and much skill is shown in fusing into a tolerably harmonious whole conflicting mythological and historical details. He interweaves with his narrative local legends and the founding of cities, accounts of strange cus-

toms, descriptions of works of art, such as that of Ganymede and Eros playing with knucklebones,* but prosaically calls himself back to the point from these pleasing digressions by such an expression as “but this would take me too far from my song.” His business is the straightforward tale and nothing else. The astonishing geography of the fourth book reminds us of the interest of the age in that subject, stimulated no doubt by the researches of Eratosthenes and others.

The language is that of the conventional epic. Apollonius seems to have carefully studied Homeric glosses, and gives many examples of isolated uses, but his choice of words is by no means limited to Homer. He freely avails himself of Alexandrian words and late uses of Homeric words. Among his contemporaries Apollonius suffers from a comparison with Theocritus, who was a little his senior, but he was much admired by Roman writers who derived inspiration from the great classical writers of Greece by way of Alexandria. In fact Alexandria was a useful bridge between Athens and Rome. The

*iii. 117-124.

“Argonautica” was translated by Varro Atacinus, copied by Ovid and Virgil, and minutely studied by Valerius Flaccus in his poem of the same name. Some of his finest passages have been appropriated and improved upon by Virgil by the divine right of superior genius.* The subject of love had been treated in the romantic spirit before the time of Apollonius in writings that have perished, for instance, in those of Antimachus of Colophon, but the “Argonautica” is perhaps the first poem still extant in which the expression of this spirit is developed with elaboration. The Medea of Apollonius is the direct precursor of the Dido of Virgil, and it is the pathos and passion of the fourth book of the “Aeneid” that keep alive many a passage of Apollonius.

*e.g. compare “Aen.” iv. 305 foll. with Ap. Rh. iv. 355 foll.; “Aen.” iv. 327-330 with Ap. Rh. I. 897, 898; “Aen.” iv. 522 foll., with Ap. Rh. iii. 744 foll.

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BOOK I

(ll. 1-4) Beginning with thee, O Phoebus, I will recount the famous deeds of men of old, who, at the behest of King Pelias, down through the mouth of Pontus and between the Cyanean rocks, sped well-benched Argo in quest of the golden fleece.

(ll. 5-17) Such was the oracle that Pelias heard, that a hateful doom awaited him to be slain at the prompting of the man whom he should see coming forth from the people with but one sandal. And no long time after, in accordance with that true report, Jason crossed the stream of wintry Anaurus on foot, and saved one sandal from the mire, but the other he left in the depths held back by the flood. And straightway he came to Pelias to share the banquet which the king was offering to his father Poseidon and the rest of the gods, though he paid no honour to Pelasgian Hera. Quickly

the king saw him and pondered, and devised for him the toil of a troublous voyage, in order that on the sea or among strangers he might lose his home-return.

(ll. 18-22) The ship, as former bards relate, Argus wrought by the guidance of Athena. But now I will tell the lineage and the names of the heroes, and of the long sea-paths and the deeds they wrought in their wanderings; may the Muses be the inspirers of my song!

(ll. 23-34) First then let us name Orpheus whom once Calliope bare, it is said, wedded to Thracian Oeagrus, near the Pimpleian height. Men say that he by the music of his songs charmed the stubborn rocks upon the mountains and the course of rivers. And the wild oak-trees to this day, tokens of that magic strain, that grow at Zone on the Thracian shore, stand in ordered ranks close together, the same which under the charm of his lyre he led down from Pieria. Such then was Orpheus whom Aeson's son welcomed to share his toils, in obedience to the behest of Cheiron, Orpheus ruler of Bistonian Pieria.

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(ll. 35-39) Straightway came Asterion, whom Cometes begat by the waters of eddying Apidanus; he dwelt at Peiresiae near the Phylleian mount, where mighty Apidanus and bright Enipeus join their streams, coming together from afar.

(ll. 40-44) Next to them from Larisa came Polyphemus, son of Eilatus, who aforetime among the mighty Lapithae, when they were arming themselves against the Centaurs, fought in his younger days; now his limbs were grown heavy with age, but his martial spirit still remained, even as of old.

(ll. 45-48) Nor was Iphiclus long left behind in Phylace, the uncle of Aeson's son; for Aeson had wedded his sister Alcimedea, daughter of Phylacus: his kinship with her bade him be numbered in the host.

(ll. 49-50) Nor did Admetus, the lord of Pherae rich in sheep, stay behind beneath the peak of the Chalcodonian mount.

(ll. 51-56) Nor at Alope stayed the sons of Hermes, rich in corn-land, well skilled in craftiness, Erytus and Echion, and with them on their departure their kinsman Aethalides went as the third; him near the streams of Amphrysus Eupolemeia bare, the daughter of Myrmidon, from Phthia; the two others were sprung from Antianeira, daughter of Menetes.

(ll. 57-64) From rich Gyrton came Coronus, son of Caeneus, brave, but not braver than his father. For bards relate that Caeneus though still living perished at the hands of the Centaurs, when apart from other chiefs he routed them; and they, rallying against him, could neither bend nor slay him; but unconquered and unflinching he passed beneath the earth, overwhelmed by the downrush of massy pines.

(ll. 65-68) There came too Titaresian Mopsus, whom above all men the son of Leto taught the augury of birds; and Eurydamas the son of Ctimenus; he dwelt at Dolopian Ctimene near the Xynian lake.

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(ll. 69-70) Moreover Actor sent his son Menoetius from Opus that he might accompany the chiefs.

(ll. 71-76) Eurytion followed and strong Eribotes, one the son of Teleon, the other of Irus, Actor's son; the son of Teleon renowned Eribotes, and of Irus Eurytion. A third with them was Oileus, peerless in courage and well skilled to attack the flying foe, when they break their ranks.

(ll. 77-85) Now from Euboea came Canthus eager for the quest, whom Canethus son of Abas sent; but he was not destined to return to Cerinthus. For fate had ordained that he and Mopsus, skilled in the seer's art, should wander and perish in the furthest ends of Libya. For no ill is too remote for mortals to incur, seeing that they buried them in Libya, as far from the Colchians as is the space that is seen between the setting and the rising of the sun.

(ll. 86-89) To him Clytius and Iphitus joined them-

selves, the warders of Oechalia, sons of Eurytus the ruthless, Eurytus, to whom the Far-shooting god gave his bow; but he had no joy of the gift; for of his own choice he strove even with the giver.

(ll. 90-94) After them came the sons of Aeacus, not both together, nor from the same spot; for they settled far from Aegina in exile, when in their folly they had slain their brother Phoeus. Telamon dwelt in the Attic island; but Peleus departed and made his home in Phthia.

(ll. 95-104) After them from Cecropia came warlike Butes, son of brave Teleon, and Phalerus of the ashen spear. Alcon his father sent him forth; yet no other sons had he to care for his old age and livelihood. But him, his well-beloved and only son, he sent forth that amid bold heroes he might shine conspicuous. But Theseus, who surpassed all the sons of Erechtheus, an unseen bond kept beneath the land of Taenarus, for he had followed that path with Peirithous; assuredly both

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