

Ὅμαρτήσαντες ἀφ' Ἑλλάδος: Spatiality and Exchange in Apollonius' *Argonautica*

Composed by Apollonius Rhodius in Ptolemaic Alexandria, the *Argonautica* maps out the epic quest of Jason and his Argonauts as they venture to Colchis in order to obtain the Golden Fleece. As the Argonauts come into contact with various groups of people along their journey—particularly the Colchians—ideas of cultural contrast and comparison arise. To understand better the ways in which identity is constructed within the text, as well as the impact of this act of construction, it is necessary to consider the context in which this epic was produced. Introducing modern scholarship regarding racial hierarchies and identity exchange sheds greater light on the significance of the *Argonautica* as a text produced within Ptolemaic Alexandria, a society stratified based on ethnic and cultural difference. By examining the role of spatiality and exchange in Apollonius' articulation of cultural identity, I elucidate the importance of literary production in the legitimization of the Ptolemaic rule of Alexandria.

When considered within the context of Ptolemaic Alexandria and the Library of Alexandria in particular, the presentation of cultural identity as it is created through interaction and exchange can be understood as serving a very particular purpose. As Jackie Murray asserts in her examination of the time and date of the *Argonautica*, the epic almost certainly served as one method through which Ptolemy III sought to solidify and legitimize his rule over Egyptian Alexandria (Murray 2014). While Murray argues that Ptolemy III's quest for legitimacy most especially pertains to his position as the successor of Ptolemy II and his interest in distinguishing himself amongst his forebears, this paper foregrounds literary production as one means through which Ptolemy III endeavored to affirm his position as a foreign ruler over his indigenous subjects.

The *Argonautica* develops specific parameters of belonging and of difference in service of the social and cultural interests of Ptolemy III, and the Ptolemaic empire more broadly. This paper focalizes spatiality and movement in Apollonius' constructions of cultural identity, in order to define more clearly the exchanging of identity that takes place within the text. Indeed, there has already been some scholarly discussion of the role which geographical space and movement play in delineating cultural and ethnic identity (Thalman 2011). In order to investigate the production of cultural identity as a means of promoting the aims of the Ptolemaic empire, I examine several passages in Book III which foreground movement and motivation in scenes of cultural exchange. The Ptolemies, as Macedonian Greek rulers in Egyptian Alexandria, had a vested interest in asserting and maintaining Greek cultural dominance amongst their multicultural population, without egregiously alienating their indigenous subjects. This negotiation of cultural identity is reflected in the text of the *Argonautica*, and the epic serves to underscore socially relevant notions of identity formation and exchange.

In expanding upon this exploration of spatiality in conjunction with cultural identity construction, I analyze Ptolemaic formations of cultural hierarchies rooted in ethnic difference as they relate to the interactions between characters within the *Argonautica*. Although modern notions of race and *racism* did not yet exist during the composition of Apollonius' epic poem, the use of scholarship discussing racial capitalism within the context of structural racism highlights the importance of ethnic and cultural identity exchange within the *Argonautica*. This exchange, in turn, plays an instrumental role in translating Ptolemaic systems of social stratification into the poem's ahistorical epic setting. Drawing upon the analytical frameworks presented by Nancy Leong (2013) and Cedric J. Robinson (1983) in their respective discussions of racial identity formation and negotiation, I aim to illuminate Apollonius Rhodius' interactions with the ethnic

and cultural hierarchies emerging in Ptolemaic Alexandria during his lifetime. While undoubtedly anachronistic, borrowing the analytical framework presented by modern scholars in discussions of racial capitalism serves to enrich understandings of Ptolemaic social stratification on the basis of cultural and ethnic difference. By examining the significance of spatiality in identity exchange within the *Argonautica* while utilizing modern ideas of racial capitalism, this paper investigates the relationship between textual and reified cultural hegemony.

Selected Bibliography

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