The Ljubljanica — *a River and its Past*

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The Ljubljanica and the myth of the Argonauts

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The Argonauts would belong to the generation before the Trojan War, which the *Chronicle* of St Jerome placed in 1270 BC. They were called after the miraculous boat the Argo (Fig. 123), which was built by Argos, one of the participants in the expedition, with the help of the goddess Athena. A bough of oak was built into it from the holy grove of Zeus's oracle in Dodona, and hence the boat could speak and prophetically warned the heroes of danger. This mythic tale was most exhaustively recorded by the learned poet Apollonius of Rhodes (3rd century BC); however it had already been mentioned by Greek writers from Homer onwards.[1] Poetic freedom and imagination as well as the gradual broadening of geographical horizons, caused it to be known in numerous versions, as poets and mythographers constantly changed and supplemented it in reference to new geographical knowledge and cultural or political conditions; hence it is impossible to seek actual historical events and genuine itineraries in it. As early as Aristotle a clear distinction was made between historiography and poetry: the historian describes the acts of real people in real places and times, while the poet tells what could have happened (*Poetics*, 9), describes "eternal" figures, great loves, and tragic and cruel murders. In

the narrated events, which were otherwise often placed in actual places, we find the interference of higher powers, deities, and monsters, fabulous elements, and numerous inconsistencies and inventions. Myths are not history, but they were not created entirely without inspiration from real life, and because of this, commentators from ancient times to the present day have attempted to explain them rationally.

The story of the Argonauts was created among the Minyans in Boeotia around Orchomenus and in Thessaly around Iolcus. King Pelias of Iolcus (today Volos) wished to get rid of the legitimate heir to the throne, his nephew Jason, and sent him to search for the fleece of the golden ram, on which the royal children from Orchomenus, Phrixus and Helle, had fled from their step-mother Ino to Aea (Colchis on the Black Sea), the kingdom of the sun, ruled by Aeëtes. Jason was joined by around 50 of the greatest heroes of the age (the lists differ), including Hercules, Orpheus, Zeus's sons the Dioscuri, Achilles' father Peleus, and Theseus. After various adventures they reached their destination, where Aeëtes set Jason difficult tasks to accomplish before he would hand over the Golden Fleece. Jason successfully carried them all out with the help of the king's daughter, the

Figure 123. **The mythic ship Argo, as it was drawn by the painter Ivan Vavpotič (Ekonomska šola Ljubljana).**

sorceress Medea, killed the dragon and seized the fleece, after which the heroes together with Medea fled from Aeëtes' revenge. The tale reflects poor knowledge of the coast and hinterland of the Black Sea in the Mycenaean period (the end of the 2nd millennium BC); however, this changed completely after the period of the major colonization of this area in the 7th century BC, when it became familiar to the Greeks.

Advanced geographic knowledge is also well reflected in the varying descriptions of the return of the Argonauts.[2] If all the variants of their route back were collected and analyzed, it would result that their travels had carried them almost everywhere in the then known world. According to the earliest writers (Hesiod, Pindar, and Hecataeus), they would have returned along the Phasis River (Rioni in the south-west Caucasus), the Ocean or Red Sea, Libya, and the Aegean Sea. According to Sophocles, Euripides, and Herodotus, the route of their return would more or less correspond to the route taken to Colchis. Apollonius took as his starting point the description of the return of the Argonauts according to the Sicilian historian Timaeus (4th–3rd centuries BC and the geographer Timagetus (4th century BC), the author of "On Harbours". According to their variant, the Argonauts would have returned along a large river that empties into the Black Sea (the *Tanais* = Don or the *Hister* = Danube) and arrived at the Pillars of Hercules (Gibraltar), whence they continued their route through the western Mediterranean, the Tyrrhenian Sea, Corcyra, and Libya (Fig. 124). Apollonius united various versions in his own manner, as he wished to

demonstrate all of his geographical knowledge; and since their route was subsequently illogical, he thought up various divine interventions to connect the tale into a poorly constructed whole. The point of interest for us is that the Argonauts would have sailed from the Black Sea along the Danube and reached the Adriatic Sea along its second branch. He included in his poem the Adriatic legends connected with the murder of Medea's brother Apsyrtus by Cres and Lošinj (the Apsyrtian islands), which reflect the early contacts of the Greeks with the Liburnians who lived there, and also with places along the tip of the northern Adriatic and its

Figure 124. **A schematic depiction of the routes along which the Argonauts would have returned.**[7]
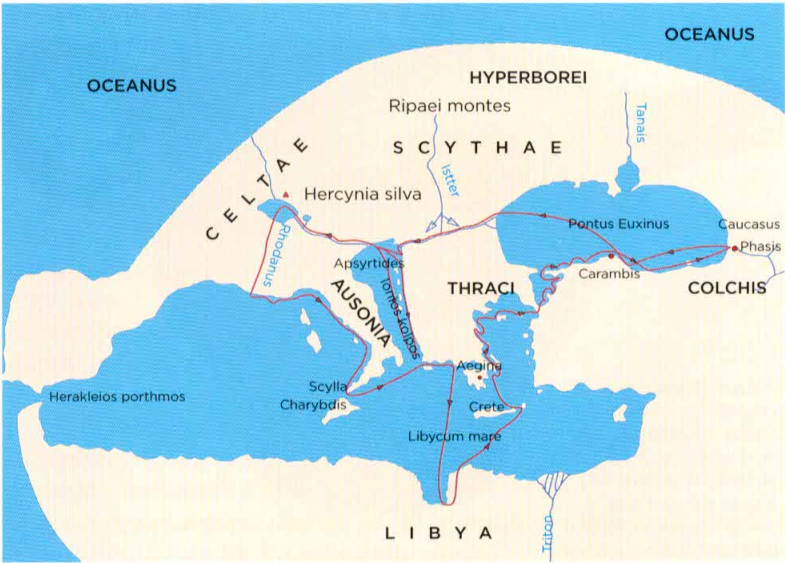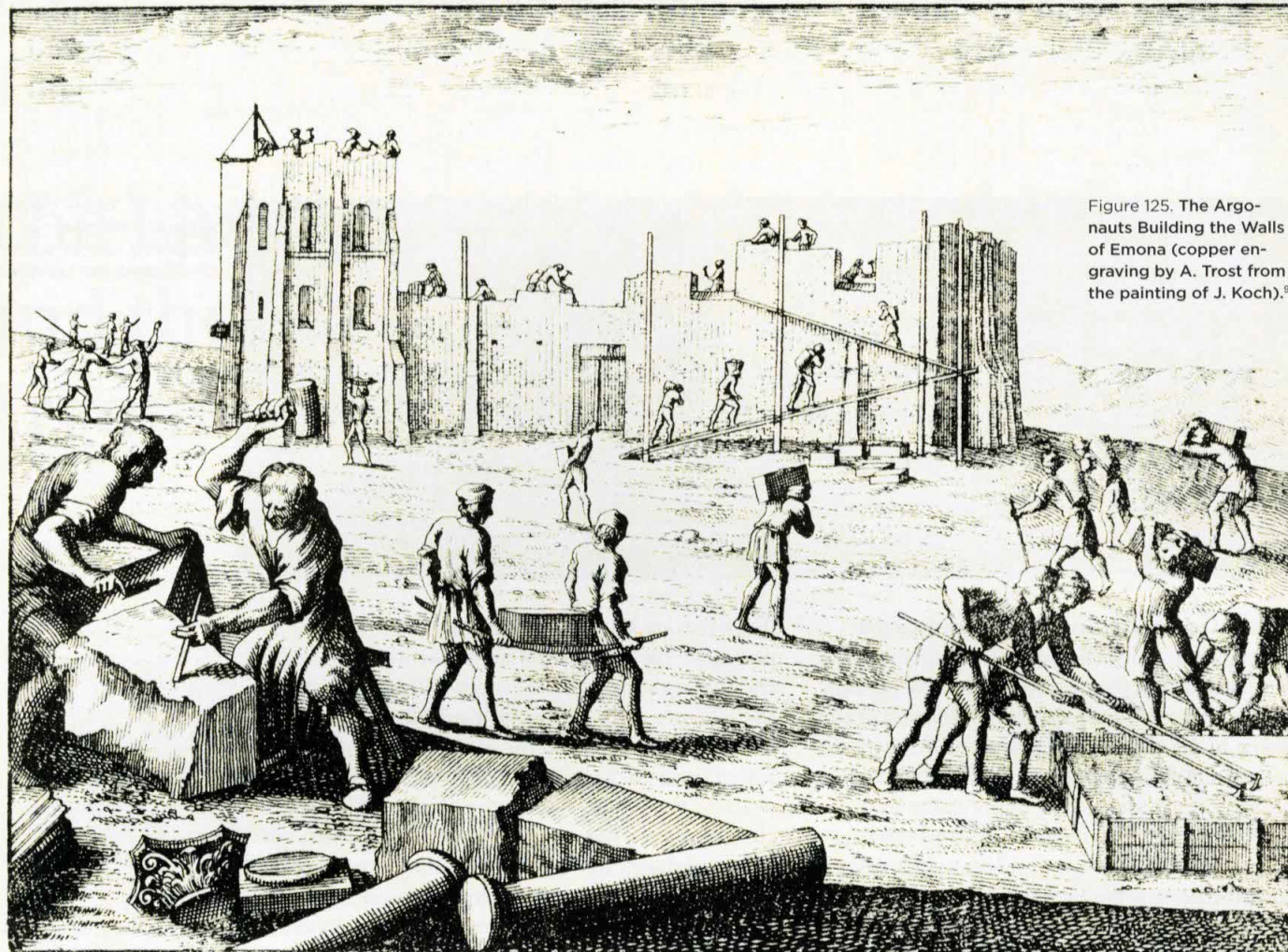
Figure 125. The Argonauts Building the Walls of Emona (copper engraving by A. Trost from the painting of J. Koch).[9]
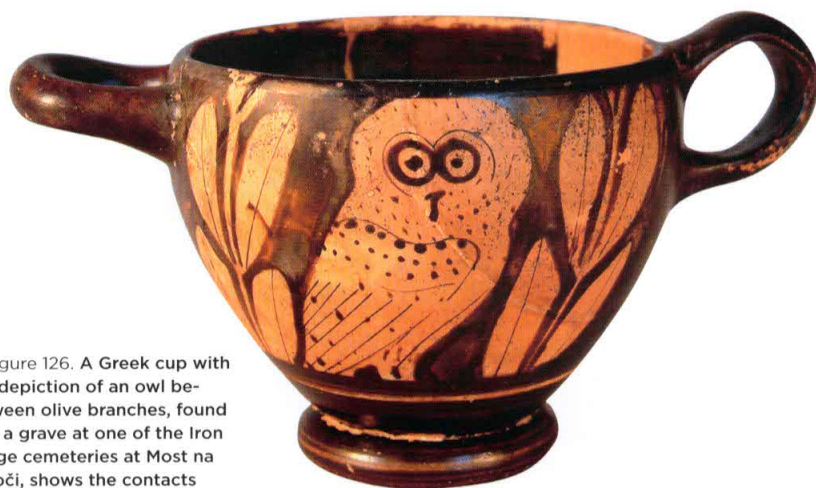
Figure 126. A Greek cup with a depiction of an owl between olive branches, found in a grave at one of the Iron Age cemeteries at Most na Soči, shows the contacts between the Greek world and the hinterland of the northern Adriatic in the 5th century BC.[8]

immediate hinterland.[3] It is clear from Apollonius' descriptions that his data concerning this area must also be taken with all due caution.

Pliny the Elder, the author of the most important encyclopaedia from antiquity, critically commented on the incorrect introduction of a second branch of the Danube (which does not exist!): "*No river flows from the Danube into the Adriatic Sea. I think that the writers were deceived by the report that the boat Argo descended by river into the Adriatic Sea not far from Tergeste, although they did not know by what river. More reliable writers state that they carried it on their shoulders through the Alps; it arrived there from the Danube, then along the Savus and along the Nauportus, which has its source between Emona and the Alps and received its name for this reason.*" (*N. h.* 3. 128). Pliny namely erroneously deduced the name Nauportus from *navis*, 'ship' and *porto*, 'to carry', *i.e.* a river that carries a ship. This part of the sentence

should have referred to the name of the settlement, which was perhaps unintentionally left out from the sentence by Pliny (...*"the Navportus, which has its source at Navportus ..."*), as it seems more logical to relate the name of the settlement than the name of the river with the 'Argonauts' etymology. The second part of the name, *portus*, has the meaning of 'port, storehouse', which might indicate a Celtic (Tauriscan) toll station at Nauportus.[4] Pliny's criticism of Apollonius is justified; however, three hundred years before his time, in the period of Apollonius, the courses of these rivers were still not exactly known; the sources of the Danube were discovered only as late as the Augustan period. Pliny did not attempt to identify the river flowing into the Adriatic Sea, along which the Argonauts would have travelled: the river could have been the *Arsia* (Raša), *Ningus* (Mirna), or *Timavus* (Timava), each possibility being merely hypothetical. Before him, the historian Diodorus (1st century BC; 4. 56. 7–8) and the historian and geographer from the period of the emperor Augustus, Strabo (7. 5. 9 C 317) also rejected opinions about uninterrupted river connection between the Danube and the Adriatic.[5]

In the period when the myth of the Argonauts originated (certainly before the 8th century BC), the Pannonian and south-eastern Alpine regions were still very poorly known to the Greeks. This is also confirmed by archaeology, as throughout all the prehistoric periods imported objects from the Greek world are rarities (Fig. 126) and do not indicate that more intensive contacts would have existed between this area and the Greek regions, to say nothing of the Greek cities along the Black Sea coast. The Danube variant of the return of the Argonauts originated as late as the end of the classical period, perhaps somewhat before Alexander the Great. It is interesting how it changed throughout time. When the Greeks became conscious of the existence of Nauportus (perhaps in the 2nd century BC), they included it in the mythological story about the Argonauts; at that time they also found out that the river route from the Black Sea ended here. Nauportus was an old settlement, perhaps older than Emona, and up to the Augustan period it was more important, although later (after the 1st century AD), when Nauportus gradually lost

Figure 127. **Wolfgang Lazius (1514-1565, physician and antiquarian in Vienna) published a map in 1545, with a note by Oberlaibach (Vrhnika) that the Argonauts from that point onwards sailed along underground rivers.**[10]

its significance because of the increasing prosperity of Emona, the founding of Emona was linked to the Argonauts (this was first mentioned by the Greek poet Pisander of Laranda, from the 3rd century AD). Who included Emona in this Greek myth? Each age has amateur historians who falsify historical facts to make the past of their country more prestigious. Zosimus (5th–6th centuries AD) stated that the king of the Visigoths, Alaric, placed his camp in Emona, which had been founded by the Argonauts to mark the place from which they had to transport the ship Argo to the sea on special contraptions (5. 29. 1–3; Fig. 125).

The tendency to explain rationally the tale of the return of the Argonauts evidently continued up to the modern period, as on maps of Carniola by Wolfgang Lazius (Lazius was a well-known Viennese physician and antiquarian of the 16th century) a brief explanation is added near the place-name Oberlaibach (Vrhnika) that from there onwards

the Argonauts sailed along an underground river (Fig. 127). The idea was probably given to him by his friend, the cartographer Augustin Hirschvogel, who between 1536 and 1543, just before the first version of Lazius' map was printed in 1545, lived in Ljubljana, which was traditionally connected with the Argonauts. It is also interesting that the map of Sebastian Münster from 1550 shows an underground connection between the Ljubljanica and the Mirna River in Istria; the Mirna is (incorrectly) drawn so that after a brief 'underground interval' it would be a continuation of the Ljubljanica.[6] At that point several karst phenomena and the existence of large caves from which rivers emerged were already known, while at the same time, with the advancement of cartography, it became clear that mountains hinder any river connection between the Ljubljanica and the Adriatic on the surface. Even as early as Pliny something was known about karst phenomena; Aristotle (*Hist. anim.* 598b. 11–19) and he (*N. h.* 9. 52–53) mention that a certain type of sardine was the only fish noted in the Black Sea that travels up the Danube, but not also down the Danube; it was therefore assumed that sardines travelled along the Danube to the Adriatic. Aristotle explains this by the division of the Danube into two branches, while Pliny specifically states that the fish travel along underground channels. Regardless of the travelling of sardines, it is certain that the Argonauts could not have journeyed along an underground karst river.

Notes

1. Dräger 2001.
2. Delage 1930.
3. Vian 1974, 1980, 1981.
4. Šašel 1966; Šašel Kos 1990.
5. Šašel Kos 2006.
6. Shaw, Macqueen 1998.
7. After Vian 1981.
8. Kept in the Tolmin Museum.
9. From Valvasor 1689, IV/XIII, 9, fig. 87.
10. From Shaw, Macqueen 1998, 377, fig. 3.