

The adventures of the Argonauts cut across space, time, and the world of myth in Apollonius' *Argonautica*. In one of the early episodes, the travelers stop off at Samothrace in order to undergo initiation into the cult of the *Megaloi Theoi*, important in this maritime epic as protectors of sailors. As a poem with strong aitiological underpinnings, historical fact is never far from fiction in the *Argonautica*. Aspects of the Samothracian episode are no exception.

Scholars have approached the Argonauts' initiation from different angles. In the interests of imperial ideology, Apollonius may have included the scene of initiation in order to flatter his patrons Ptolemy Philadelphus and Arsinoe II, who were well-known as devotees of the cult (Cameron, *Callimachus and his Critics*, 1995: 22). The possibility that Apollonius himself was an initiate in the mysteries has also been raised (Dickie, "Poets as Initiates in the Mysteries: Euphorion, Philicus and Posidippus," *A&A* 1998: 53). On the level of myth, the fragments of Aeschylus' *Kabeiroi* (*TrGF* 94–97a) indicate that interaction between the Argonauts and a mystery cult was a traditional element in their voyage as early as the fifth-century B.C.E. (Clauss, *The Best of the Argonauts*, 1993: 153). The narrative and temporal organization of the *Argonautica* discussed here reveals an important detail about the Samothracian mysteries which highlights Apollonius' approach to blurring the lines between the religious world of the past and the present.

In book two of the *Argonautica*, while the Argonauts are staying with Phineus after his deliverance, the dog-star Sirius becomes visible (*Argo*. 2.526–27). The helical rising of Sirius in *ca.* 250 B.C.E. was visible from Alexandria on the 12th of July, an astronomical observation surely known to Apollonius. This detail allows us to back-date the arrival of the Argonauts on Samothrace and the time of their initiation. Sirius appeared on the thirty-fifth day of the Argonauts' voyage, and so Apollonius must have intended that their journey began in early June. Since the Argonauts visited Samothrace on the eighth day of their voyage, their initiation must have taken place in the middle of June. This date is significant because inscriptional evidence points to a major annual festival of the Samothracian gods, perhaps the only one at which the level of *epopteia* could be reached, as falling in the month of June (Cole, *Theoi Megaloi: The Cult of the Great Gods at Samothrace*, 1984: 39–40).

It cannot be coincidental that the visit and initiation of the Argonauts takes place exactly at the same time as the sanctuary's major yearly festival. Apollonius' choice to include the Samothracian episode where he did is a poetic decision which demonstrates his familiarity with the inner workings of the Samothracian cult. As with the many *aitia* which Apollonius uses to trace present-day religious dedications back to the Argonauts, we see in the Samothracian episode how the Argonauts have become participants in the religious life of the Hellenistic world.