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Black Medea: Colchians as ‘Aithiopes’ in Apollonius’ *Argonautica*

This paper argues that in the *Argonautica* Apollonius through various strategies subtly suggests that the Colchian characters are to be identified as ‘Aithiopes’. This identification is a both meditation on the

aesthetic impulse in Alexandrian art and literature toward realism as well as a turning away from an obsolete and overly simplistic Greek vs. Barbarian dichotomy. The presentation of ethnicity in the *Argonautica* reflects a sophisticated and complex framework for ethno-political relationships, one that admits the many shades of ‘racial’ and cultural plurality in the Mediterranean and Near East.

In the *Argonautica* the account of the foundation of Colchis draws directly on that of Herodotus who

conflates the mythical and historical Colchians (A.R.4.257-293 ~ Hdt.2.102-111); according to this account the Colchians were descended from an Egyptian army transplanted to the remote east by the legendary Pharaoh Sesostris whose empire extended to Ethiopia (Hdt. 2.110; cf. Strab. 17.1.5, Diod. 1.55.1-2). Herodotus ends his discussion by associating both groups ethnically with the Ethiopians, pointing out in particular that all three peoples have the same physical features, dark-skin (*melangchroes*) and woolly hair (*oulotriches*) and are the first to distinguish themselves ethnically by circumcision. Since Apollonius, who also conflates the mythical and historical Colchians, is clearly taking over Herodotus’ claims about the ‘racial’ and ethnic links between these people and Egyptians, it is reasonable to infer that he is also taking over Herodotus’ claims about their similar links with the Ethiopians.

This inference is strengthened by examining two strategies: Apollonius conflates the Colchians with the mythical ‘Aithiopes’: who according to Homer are a divided people who live at the edges of the world, one group where the sun sets and the other where the sun rises (A.R. 3.1191-92; cf. *Od.* 1.22-25), and he activates the descriptor function of word ‘Aithiopes’ by engaging the two competing ancient etymologies for the word (i.e. ‘with flashing eyes’ and ‘with dark skin’) in contexts where the appearance of Colchian characters is at issue: (1) the visit with Circe (A.R. 4.659-752), (2) the rescue of the shipwrecked sons of Phrixus (A.R.2.1090-1227), (3) and Aetes’ reaction to the Argonaut Augeias (A.R. 3.362-381).