

History

The Caucasus-Caspian Region in the Sphere of Ancient Greek Colonial Interests (Based on Epic Tradition)

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(Presented by Academy Member Roin Metreveli)

Abstract. This interdisciplinary study proposes an innovative paleogeographic reconstruction of the Caucasus-Caspian region in antiquity. It presents a new reading of ancient written sources concerning the voyage of the Argonauts, juxtaposed with a reconstruction of the spatio-temporal changes in the geomorphology of the region. The central hypothesis posits that the legendary route of the Argonauts included a return journey via the river system of the Phasis (Rioni) and Ister (Kura), traversing the basins of the Hyrcanian and Caspian Seas into the Northern Ocean. Through a synthesis of the analysis of ancient written sources, data from archaeology, linguistics, and paleolandscape studies, a holistic model is constructed. This model demonstrates the correspondence between epic tradition and the objective paleogeographic realities of the region in the ancient era. © 2026 *Bull. Natl. Acad. Sci. Georg.*

Keywords: Argonauts, paleolandscape reconstruction, Caspian Sea, Caucasus historical geography

Introduction

Within the context of Greek colonization policy, epic poetry served not only as a literary genre but also as a medium for preserving and transmitting practical geographical knowledge. The central focus of this study is the myth of the Argonauts and its classical literary incarnation – the epic poem *Argonautica* by Apollonius of Rhodes.

The research methodology is based on an interdisciplinary synthesis. This includes source-critical and historical analysis of the text, examining mythological narratives in conjunction

with data from ancient historical-geographical traditions, archaeology, and paleogeography – specifically, reconstructions of the Caspian region's paleolandscapes.

The main objective of this study is to address the key question: what historical-geographical reality of the Caucasian-Caspian region during the Bronze and Iron Ages recorded in ancient sources and ancient Greek epic poetry, and how does its reconstruction help clarify the logic of the Argonauts' legendary route?

Paleogeographic Model of the Caspian Region in the Antique Era

The epic tradition concerning the Argonauts contains not only mythological narratives but also a valuable layer of ethnographic and historical-geographical information pertaining to the Caucasian-Caspian region. The question of identifying the rivers and seas in the sources remains a subject of scholarly debate, which calls for a re-evaluation based on an interdisciplinary approach. An analysis of the works of ancient authors reveals four consistent features in the description of the Caucasian-Caspian region.

Latitudinal orientation of the Caspian Sea. Contrary to its modern meridional elongation, ancient geographers often depicted the Caspian as elongated from west to east. As concluded by Bartold (1998), “The Caspian occupies a greater space from west to east than from south to north... in this, as far as is known, no geographer of antiquity had any doubt” (p. 15). Geophysical research indicates that the South Caspian Basin during the Pliocene was indeed elongated along a latitudinal axis: extending westward along the paleo-Kura riverbed to Mingachevir, and eastward along the paleo-Uzboi riverbed (Mammadov et al., 2017–2019, pp. 523–533; Muravyov, 1991). This shape of the South Caspian Basin fully corresponds to the description of the Hyrcanian Sea by ancient authors.

Mountainous frame to the north. The indications by ancient authors of the presence of mountains north of the Hyrcanian Sea (Scylax of Caryanda, see Pyankov, 1997, p. 194; Pliny the Elder, NH, VI, X, 28; VI, XV, 40; Strabo, Geogr., XI, 1) appear to contradict modern maps, according to which the Caspian's northern coast is a lowland. The only geological feature corresponding to this description is the Apsheron Sill. This submarine continuation of the Greater Caucasus, during the ancient period when sea levels were lower, could have been dry land, perceived as a mountain range dividing the water body.

Differentiation of the Caspian into several seas.

A number of ancient sources mention two seas located at the foot of the Caucasus. Aristotle (Met., I,13,18,29; II,1,10), Strabo (XI.1.7), Quintus Curtius (VII,3,21), Solinus (XXXVIII.11) (Aliev, 1987, p. 48), Dionysius (47) and Diodorus Siculus (XVIII,5,3,4), Basil the Great (IV, 4; M., XXIX, 88) list: the Northern Ocean, the Caspian Sea, the Hyrcanian Sea, corresponding to the bottom relief of the Caspian. The South Caspian Basin (the Hyrcanian Sea) was elongated from east to west and surrounded by a ring of mountains. In the west of the Middle Caspian (the Caspian Sea), according to Herodotus (I.204.1), there were mountains, and in the east, plains. The Apsheron Sill created a natural boundary between them.

Connection to the world ocean. The concept of a round Earth, surrounded on all sides by a single ocean, was mentioned by almost all ancient authors (Podossinov, 2020, p. 42). In Honorius's diagram of the “Orbis Terrarum,” the Caspian Sea is depicted at the junction of the Northern and Eastern Oceans (Elnitskii, 1961, p. 290). Strabo (XI.1.5; XI.2.1), Plutarch (Alexander, 44.1,2), Arrian (V.5.4), Pliny the Elder (VI.XV.36,37), Priscian (644-721), and Paulus Orosius (I,2,48) described the Caspian as a gulf of the ocean, open to the north (Aliev, 1987, p. 53).

The final element of the reconstruction is the Mangyshlak Sill, which separated the North Caspian from the Middle Caspian (Milanovsky, 1968, p. 129; Kotenkov & Galaktionova, 2019, p. 46). Astafiev and Bogdanov (2019) have proposed a version of a “land bridge” during periods of low Caspian Sea level (p. 34; see also Filipchenko & Kurochkin, 1960, p. 277). A major global trade route (the Great Silk Road) ran from China to Kangju (Khwarezm), the Ustyurt Plateau, to Alania (via Karakabak across the Mangyshlak Plateau) and into southeastern Europe. This route is marked by a concentration of Sarmatian tamgas from antiquity (early 1st to mid-3rd centuries AD) (Arkheologiya i istoriia kanguiskogo gosudarstva, 2020, p. 50) and

indicates connections between the Alans of the North Caucasus, Trans-Caspian region, and the inhabitants of Tanais (Kuznetsov, 1992, p. 19).

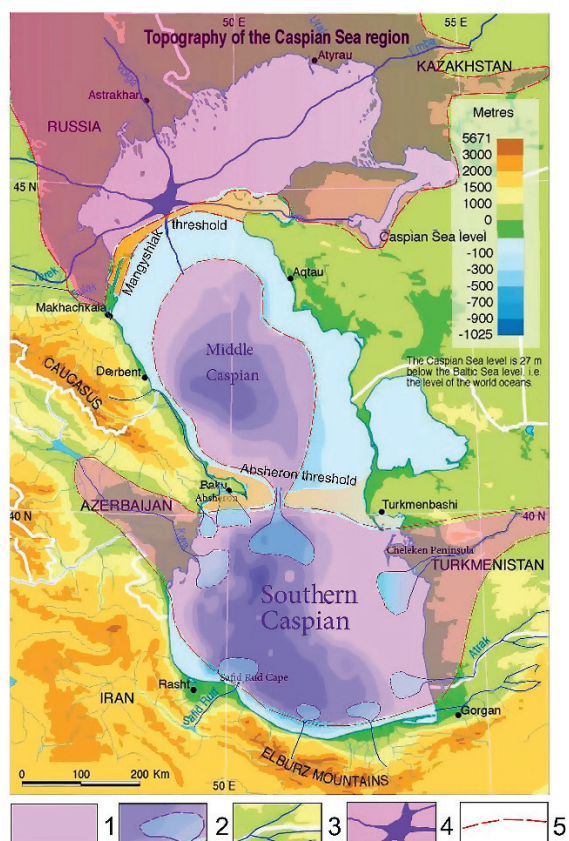


Fig. 1. Map-scheme of the paleogeographic reconstruction of the Caspian Sea in the ancient period (Authors: Khalilova T.Sh., Khalilov E.N.): 1 – basins of the Caspian Sea; 2 – river deltas; 3 – river beds; 4 – large river confluences; 5 – catchment boundaries.

Historical significance of the reconstruction.

This paleogeographic model of the Caspian Sea, consisting of three separate basins, creates a reliable foundation for reconstructing the route of the Argonauts across the Caucasus and the Caspian to the Northern Ocean:

- The North Caspian Basin – the “Ocean,” connected to the sea of Azov;
- The Middle Caspian Basin – the “Caspian Sea,” elongated in a meridional direction;
- The South Caspian Basin – the “Hyrcanian Sea,” stretching along a latitudinal axis and surrounded by a ring of mountains.

The Voyage of the Ship Argo along the Phasis to the Ocean: Route Reconstruction

Ancient notions of the Phasis River, rooted in the mythological era, describe it as a waterway connected to the World Ocean. The final link in this route was the Kura River, which flowed into the Caspian Sea, perceived in the ancient tradition as a gulf of the Ocean. This hydrographic model allows for a new interpretation of the Argonauts' return journey.

The purpose of the journey: the sacred meaning of the Golden Fleece. The primary goal of the Argonauts' expedition is traditionally considered to be the possession of the Golden Fleece, which holds sacred significance. This concept is reflected in the poem by Apollonius of Rhodes. Following the prophecy of Phineus, Jason sought the return route to Greece using a map imprinted on the Golden Fleece (Apollonius of Rhodes, 2001, IV, 282), as a carrier of geographical information.

Reconstruction of the route: from Phasis to Ister. Omitting the details of Jason's stay in Colchis, let us focus on the key issue – the Argonauts' return route. The variety of described routes can be explained by the fact that several ships participated in the expedition, with Jason and the main heroes being on the ship “Argo” (Latyshev, 2017, p. 941). This explains why the Colchians, organizing a pursuit, split up: one group rushed to the Black Sea (Pontus), while the other headed in the opposite direction and “entered the current of the Ister”. Crucial for our research is the version presented by Latyshev (2017): “From these words, it is evident that the Argonauts sailed along the Phasis River in the direction opposite to the Black Sea” (p. 1353).

From Phasis to Ister. The Ister as the key to the transcaucasian localization of the route. The identification of the Ister River is central to the entire reconstruction. The indication from the scholia to the *Argonautica* – “if one writes 'our

land,' then it will be said about the Ister: for it borders the Colchians" (Latyshev, 2017, p. 284) – directly testifies in favor of its Transcaucasian, rather than Danubian localization. The hydrological basis of this hypothesis is clarified by a fragment from Apollonius of Rhodes (2001, IV, 131-135): "The river Lycus... diverting from the noisy Araxes River, merges its sacred waves with the Phasis; both of them, uniting into one river, flow into the Caucasian Sea." The Kura (Ister), receiving the waters of the Araxes, flowed into the Caspian Sea, which connected it both with the Phasis and the Ocean. Thus, Philostratus mentions Cyrus's campaign "beyond the Ister River against the Massagetae and Issedones" (Latyshev, 2017, p. 707). The Kura served as a natural boundary between the Achaemenid Empire and the Massagetae.

The River Lycus, Ligia, Lycia, Libia: The Caucasian Realities of the Argonauts' Route.

Key to reconstructing the further route is the identification of the River Lycus, mentioned by Apollonius Rhodius. The left tributary of the Kura, the Great Liakhvi River, presents a compelling candidate for this role. The phonetic similarity between the names "Lycus" and "Liakhvi" is reinforced by the geographical and ethnographic context: the region is historically associated with the Likhi (Surami) Range and the people of the Ligs (Leks) who inhabited it. Thus, the ancient name "Lycus" could have combined both a hydronym (Liakhvi) and an ethnonym (Ligs). This localization is supported by local mythological tradition: according to Georgian legends, Jason and the Argonauts reached precisely Shorapani (the area of the Kvirila River, a tributary of the Rioni in Imereti) during their journey through Colchis. This identification allows for a novel interpretation of one of the most enigmatic episodes of the Argonauts' return – the carrying of the ship "through the Libyan Desert." The Byzantine scholar John Tzetzes, in his Commentary on Lycophron's "Alexandra," writes: "...from Colchis they sailed on the outer sea and the Adriatic and through the

Phasis entered the Ocean, having previously carried the Argo on their shoulders for 12 days through the Libyan Desert beyond the Ocean..." (Latyshev, 2017, p. 252). This appears to be an epic exaggeration of a real, albeit arduous, crossing of the mountainous Surami Pass and the region of Ligia/Libia. The crucial point here is the clarification "before reaching the Ocean". This indicates that the carrying of the ship occurred before entering the Ocean, during the voyage via the Phasis-Kura river system. Logistically, this was the path from the Rioni River (Phasis) to the Kura River across the Surami Pass. The route then proceeded along the Lycus (Great Liakhvi) River into the land of the Ligii, and from there into the Kura and, subsequently, into the Caspian Sea, which was considered a gulf of the Ocean. This completely rules out its traditional localization in Africa. Thus, in this context, "Libya" refers not to the African continent, but to a territory in Transcaucasia inhabited by the Ligian people (Lygia/Libia).

Mythological context: the Ophrian Mountains and the Titans.

This hypothesis finds indirect confirmation in the data provided by Pliny the Elder. In his *Natural History*, he mentions, near the Caucasus range, the river Lagus and its tributary the Opharus, alongside which dwelled the tribe of the Opharitae (NH, VI, 21). The names "Lagus"/"Lycus" and "Opharus"/"Opharitae" show a clear similarity to the hydronym Liakhvi and, possibly, to the Ophr Gorge located in the same area. Significantly, Apollonius Rhodius in his poem *Argonautica* (2001, IV, 131–135) calls the region of the Lycus River "Titanian Aeëa," which directly connects it to the complex of Titan-related myths localized in the Caucasus. The mention by Pliny of the river "Opharus" and the Ophr Gorge echoes the Ophrian Mountain from ancient Greek mythology – the dwelling place of the Titan gods, Zeus's father Cronus, which ancient authors localized in the Caucasus. "The glorious Titan gods – from the highest Ophrian mountain, / Gods, born of fair-tressed Rhea from Cronus... Bestowers of all good

things – from the snow-clad peaks of Olympus...” (Hesiod, 2001, 39). Thus, the myth of the Argonauts fits into a broader paradigm – the origin of key elements of the Greek mythological system from this region.

The Ethnic Mosaic of the Region. The Sindi by the Caucasus Range

The complex ethnic composition of the region, as reflected in Strabo (XI, 5, 2), includes Gargareans, Amazons, Thracians, and Euboeans (Yaylenko, 2016, p. 252). The presence of Thracian (Mushki) and Scythian-Thracian (Agathyrsi) elements in Transcaucasia, whose localization is traced in Ptolemy (III, 5, 22), confirms the reality of those ethnographic details used in the mythological description of the Argonauts' route. The final element in reconstructing the Transcaucasian stage of the voyage is the identification of the Sindi people, mentioned by Apollonius Rhodius in the context of their dwelling “by the Caucasus Range, in narrow Erytheia”.

Etymology and localization of the Sindi.

Kretschmer linked this name to the Old Indian *sindhavas* (pl.) – “river dwellers,” derived from *sindhu* – “river” (as cited in Trubachev, 1999, pp. 20-21). In the text of the *Argonautica*, the Sindi are characterized as inhabitants of the “Laureian plain” (Latyshev, 2017, p. 949). The Sindi were literally a “river people” dwelling near the Kura – the ancient Ister.

Ancient testimonies of the “Caucasian India”.

The account of Herodotus (I, 104): “...from Colchis it is no great distance to cross to Media; the only people between are the Saspis, and after passing them you would be in India” (Latyshev, 2017, p. 96) and the testimony of Socrates of Constantinople: “For then the tribes of Inner India and the Iberians began to believe in Christ...” (Latyshev, 2017, p. 1293) localize this region between Colchis and the Caspian Sea, along the route of the Argonauts.

Synthesis of data: reconstruction of the Sindi's location.

- According to Apollonius Rhodius: the Sindi lived along the Ister (Kura) on the Laureian plain, in the area where the river branches, “by the Caucasus Range in narrow Erytheia.”
- Toponymic correspondence: “Erytheia” demonstrates a phonetic and geographical correspondence with the historical region of Imereti in Western Georgia.
- According to Strabo: the Indi (Sindi) are located on the Caucasian isthmus, neighboring the Iberians and Albanians, “above the Hyrcanian (Caspian) Sea” (Latyshev, 2017, p. 376). The route of the Argonauts, as described by Apollonius Rhodius, gains geographical coherence: proceeding directly from Colchis into the Hyrcanian (Caspian) Sea, which in antiquity was considered a gulf of the Ocean.

Identification of the Seas: Ionian, Trinacrian, and Cronian

After navigating the Rhipaeon defiles along a narrow channel, the Argonauts find themselves in the Cronian Sea, which is also referred to as the “Dead” Sea. However, within the context of the paleogeographic model proposed here, this route acquires clear logic, and the mentioned “seas” find convincing localization within the Caspian basin.

Hydrographic model: localization of the Ionian Sea.

In Latyshev's (2017) translation we read: “...when it (the Ister) enters the lands of the Thracians and Scythians, then, dividing into two branches, it pours one part of its waters here into the Ionian Sea, and sends the other... into a deep gulf projecting from the Trinacrian Sea” (p. 275). The mention of “Ionia” in Transcaucasia finds confirmation in the inscriptions of the Urartian king Sarduri (750–733 BCE): “...the land of Ionia, located to the northwest of Urartu” (Latyshev, 2017, p. 15). This localization is confirmed by another source: “There is a large and rich island,

which lies before the strait / Called Ionian, in the midst of the Ceraunian Sea” (Apollonius of Rhodes, 2001, p. 75). Given that Strabo (XI, 4,1) refers to the Caucasus mountains lying by the sea as “Ceraunian,” it is logical to identify the Ceraunian Sea with the Middle Caspian, and the Ionian Sea as a part of it.

Localization of the Trinacrian Sea. According to ancient authors, one branch of the Ister (the Kura) flowed into a “deep gulf projecting from the Trinacrian Sea” (Latyshev, 2017, p. 275). Within the context of the paleogeographic reconstruction, the mouth of the Kura River, which flowed into the Hyrcanian Sea (the southern basin of the Caspian), was located in the area of present-day Mingachevir. Thus, the western coast of the Caspian Sea, stretching along the course of the Kura approximately as far as the area of Yevlakh, could have corresponded to the ancient description of this deep gulf, which was part of the vast Trinacrian Sea.

Localization of the Cronian Sea. The Cronian Sea, mentioned by Apollonius, was placed by commentators “in the innermost part of the Ionian Gulf” and identified with the Dead Sea (Latyshev, 2017, pp. 552–553). In the Scholia to Dionysius: “The poet supposes the Caucasus to be near the Cronian Sea, considers the Rhipaeon Mountains as part of it, and thinks that the Caucasus is a spur of the Taurus” (Latyshev, 2017, p. 949). The triad of the Caucasus – Rhipaeon Mountains – Cronian Sea within our model corresponds to the Middle and Northern Caspian, whose shallow waters were described as the “Dead Sea.”

From myth to geographical reality. The myth of the Argonauts allowed for the search of a route to the Ocean both to the east and to the west (Elnitskii,

1961, p. 9). However, mythography began to reject the oceanic route of the Argonauts, as by that time an exit to the ocean from the eastern part of the Pontus (Black Sea) was impossible (Elnitskii, 1961, p. 17). The reconstruction of the route through the Caspian Sea basin restores historical and geographical logic to the earliest layer of the legend.

Apollonius's Hydrographic Model: the Exit to the Ocean. Rhodanus and Eridanus

A key description of this stage is the lines: “they entered the deep streams of the Rhodanus. It flows into the river Eridanus” (Apollonius of Rhodes, 2001, p. 70). Muravyov's (1991) scheme regarding the connection of the Volga and Don riverbeds in the area of the Mangyshlak Sill (a land bridge during the ancient period) perfectly corresponds to the picture drawn by Apollonius of Rhodes. Within this model, the Rhodanus can be identified with the Don (Tanais), and the Eridanus with the Volga. The exit from the Middle Caspian to the North Caspian (the Ocean) via the Mangyshlak Sill was not fantastical but reflected the real hydrographic network.

Conclusion

The conducted interdisciplinary study enables a reconstruction of the historical-geographical core of the Argonaut myth. It demonstrates that the epic work serves as an invaluable source for the paleogeography and ancient ethnic history of the Caucasus-Caspian region.

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თ. ხალილოვა

ახიის მეცნიერებათა აკადემია, ჩინეთი, ვენჭოუ

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ნაშრომში მოცემულია ინტერდისციპლინური კვლევა კავკასიურ-კასპიური რეგიონის ანტიკური პერიოდის ინოვაციური პალეოგეოგრაფიული რეკონსტრუქციის შესახებ. იგი წარმოადგენს არგონავტების მოგზაურობასთან დაკავშირებულ ძველი წერილობითი წყაროების ახალ ინტერპრეტაციას, რომელიც ეყრდნობა კავკასიურ-კასპიური რეგიონის გეომორფოლოგიის სივრცით-დროით ცვლილებებს. ნაშრომში ხაზგასმულია, რომ არგონავტების ლეგენდარული მარშრუტი მოიცავდა დაბრუნების გზას მდინარეთა სისტემით ფაზისი (რიონი) – ისტრი (მტკვარი) ჰირკანიისა და კასპიის ზღვების აუზით ჩრდილოეთის ოკეანემდე. ძველი წერილობითი წყაროების ანალიზის, არქეოლოგიური, ლინგვისტური და პალეოლანდშაფტური კვლევების მონაცემების სინთეზის მეშვეობით აგებულია ჰოლისტური მოდელი, რომელიც ადასტურებს ეპიკური ტრადიციის შესაბამისობას რეგიონის ობიექტურ პალეოგეოგრაფიულ რეალობებთან ანტიკურ ეპოქაში.

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