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Writing a Roman Argonautica: the historical dynamic

by David Braund

“What age will *not* know of Varro and the first ship and the golden fleece sought by the Aesonian chief?”

The rhetorical question belongs to Ovid (*Amores* 1. 21. 51-2). But he was rather too sanguine: Varro Atacinus and his *Argonautica* are largely forgotten. If the *Cambridge History of Classical Literature* can be taken to indicate the current state of knowledge on Varro Atacinus, his fate is grim indeed: he is mentioned, in passing, for his slight influence on the *Aeneid*, for the admiration he won from Statius and for the lukewarm judgment bestowed upon him by Quintilian.¹ Only fragments have survived from Varro's substantial writings, so that we are in a poor position to make literary judgments of our own.²

This paper is not concerned to offer a literary appreciation of Varro, but to examine the interplay of literature and history in his case. The literature in question is Varro's Argonautic epic; the history is the end of the Republic, Caesar and, more broadly, Roman imperialist ideology. The principal interest of Varro's Argonautic epic is that, as far as we know, it was the first Argonautic epic written in Latin. In that sense, it was an innovation. In this paper it is argued that that innovation is better understood (and perhaps explained) in the context of developing Roman involvement in the east, not least in the Black Sea region, and especially as part of Caesar's claims to world-empire.³

I

The myth(s) of the Argonauts had been current in Italy for many centuries before the Late Republic, as vase-paintings, Italian cults and early Roman drama serve to indicate.⁴ But the Argonautic myth gained a startlingly new significance with the outbreak and pursuance of the Mithradatic Wars. Rome, like the Argonauts, now entered the Black Sea.

The tendency is illustrated by a famous passage in Cicero's speech on Pompey's command against Mithradates, delivered in 66 BC:

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Now perhaps it will be asked how, given that state of play, the rest of the war can be a major undertaking. The question seems reasonable, so discover, Quirites, the answer.

First, Mithradates fled from his own kingdom as that Medea is said once to have fled from the very same Pontus — she who, they say, in her flight scattered the limbs of her own brother in those places where her father threatened to catch her, so that the collection of the remains and a father's mourning slowed the speed of the pursuit. In such a way did Mithradates, in his flight, leave in Pontus all the vast abundance of his gold and silver and of the finest treasures which he had inherited from his forebears or looted from the whole of Asia in the last war and piled up in his kingdom. While our men were gathering all this, rather too carefully, the king himself escaped their grasp. Thus, in their keen pursuit, mourning slowed Aetes, rejoicing slowed our troops.

(Cicero, *On the command of Cnaeus Pompeius*, 22)

Cicero compares Mithradates fleeing before Lucullus with Medea fleeing before her father Aetes. The limbs scattered by Medea are the treasures left by Mithradates. As Aetes had stopped to gather his son's limbs, so Lucullus' forces had stopped to gather loot. In that way the sustained comparison is turned to become an elegant criticism of Lucullus himself, in the careful and understated manner that is characteristic of criticisms throughout the speech. If Lucullus' forces had been delayed by loot, that was not to their credit: the impropriety of their delay is heightened by the very proper delay of Aetes, concerned to bury his son. As commander, Lucullus bore the responsibility: implying a contrast, Cicero proceeds to expand upon Pompey's ability to control his troops.

Flight and delay are Cicero's themes, but other similarities between Mithradates and Medea might be claimed: for example that they each killed their brothers, that each took an interest in potions and poisons and that each ruled Colchis. Although Cicero's thrust is quite specific, as we have seen, it is likely enough that the comparison of Mithradates and Medea evoked broader similarities of that type and perhaps recalled, in particular, Mithradates' acquisition of Colchis, which had been a major bone of contention between the king and Rome. Mithradates seems to have claimed Colchis as a bequest, matching and possibly mocking bequests of kingdoms to Rome, much as Sallust presents him.⁵

Most important, however, for the present discussion is Cicero's allusion to unspecified accounts of Medea's flight: "is said", *dicitur*, "they say", *praedicant*. The allusion seems to be one which Cicero expects his audience to understand. No doubt, Cicero's audience

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would have thought first of Latin writers. Ennius had written a tragedy on Medea, apparently centred upon her time at Corinth, but also summarising her earlier activities, including her flight: some have suspected that he wrote two plays about her. Cicero knew Ennius' play(s) and two further tragedies by Pacuvius and Accius respectively. Pacuvius' play was concerned with Medea's experiences after Corinth and Athens and with her reunion with her son (Medus) back home in Colchis. Accius' tragedy seems to have dealt particularly with her fratricide, though one critic has properly complained that "the scene has been set by one scholar or another in practically every place mentioned in the stories about Medea."⁶

The Argonautic myth(s), and particularly the figure of Medea, offered rich opportunities for the writers and orators of the late Republic. In 56 BC, for example, Cicero's use of Ennius' version in his defence of Caelius illustrates the use of Medea as an archetypal female, there both powerful and immoral. Evidently, the prosecution had deployed the myth in a rather different fashion, characterising Caelius as a "pretty little Jason". And Caelius himself seems to have called the young prosecutor Atratinus a "Pelias in curls".⁷

Yet another use of the Argonautic myth(s) occurs in a letter of 54 BC, from Cicero to his friend Trebatius Testa. There, Cicero recalls lines from Ennius' *Medea* to meet Trebatius' complaints about his distance from home while in Gaul and Britain with Caesar, and to urge him to take care (*ad Fam.* 7. 6. 1).

In the decade which had passed since 66 BC, Mithradates had finally been defeated and triumphed over. In that triumph, Pompey had even displayed a Colchian dynast, leaving another, Aristarchus, to rule Medea's land. And Aristarchus may well have claimed descent from Aetes as did other rulers of Colchis. Pompey's campaign in Transcaucasia had been a highlight of his eastern successes. It was a real first for Roman arms, described in some detail by the likes of Theophanes of Mytilene and Varro of Reate, as both Strabo and the elder Pliny show. Appian, at least, imagined Pompey approaching Colchis with his head full of the images of the Argonauts and their myth. And Arrian's first-hand account of his own thoughts and actions in the region encourage belief in Appian's version of Pompey's psychology. Through the fifties Pompey fostered the memory of his achievements: his theatre, completed in 55 BC, was adorned with the statues of fourteen nations whose conquest he claimed.⁸

Of course, Medea and the Argonautic myth were particularly linked with Colchis but they also had a much broader range of connections and evocations. The Argonautic myth was a myth of conquest through exploration. And this was conquest of the sea and of nature at large. It was also conquest of the periphery and barbaricum and thus of nature in another guise. More specifically, it was conquest of the east. Accordingly, at the beginning of his *Histories*, Herodotus presents an account of the conflict between Europe and Asia in which the Persians claim the seizure (*sic*) of Medea as a principal episode in the development of the hostilities which culminate in the Persian Wars. After all, Medea's son, Medus, was the forebear of the Medes. Indeed, according to Probus, Varro Atacinus held that Parthian Media took its name from Medus, son of Medea.⁹

II

If, as I have argued, the Mithradatic Wars gave a fresh significance to tragedies about Medea, they also suggested a larger poetic undertaking. The plays had treated parts of the Argonautic myth, but they had not presented the whole: in Latin there had been no Argonautic epic before Varro Atacinus', as far as we know. After the Mithradatic Wars, the theme beckoned, all the more so in view of the intellectual stimulus which Rome had gained from the writers of Mithradates' court who now came to Rome in search of patronage.¹⁰

Ancient authorities have little to say about the poet's life. According to Jerome, Varro was born in Gallia Narbonensis in 82 BC. His Gallic origin helps to account for his connection with Julius Caesar, for whom he wrote an historical epic on the defeat of Ariovistus and his Sequanian allies, the *bellum Sequanicum*, which comprised at least two books. That poem was presumably written soon after Caesar's victory over Ariovistus in 58 BC, hardly later than about 55 BC.

Jerome also states that Varro studied Greek with the utmost diligence from the age of 35, that is (on Jerome's dates) 47 BC. Of course, Jerome's imprecision is well-known but in the absence of other evidence the date is not to be ignored. However, Jerome's meaning is less than clear: many scholars have thought it unlikely that Varro, a poet and from Narbo or close by, was entirely ignorant of Greek before 47 BC and have taken the date to indicate, if anything, a special interest in the language at that time.¹¹

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It is at least suggestive that 47 BC is precisely the year of Caesar's defeat of Mithradates' son and successor, Pharnaces II, at the battle of Zela. Varro had already written a *bellum Sequanicum* to laud a victory of Caesar in the west: might he not have written another poem to laud his patron's victory in the east? An Argonautic epic would suit an eastern victory very well, not least over a Black Sea ruler. If so, then Jerome's 47 BC would be explained: it would be the date at which Varro set about not the learning of Greek (implausible anyway), but the interpretation of Apollonius Rhodius' Greek into Latin, as Quintilian describes Varro's composition.

Varro seems not to have lived long after Caesar: Horace's reference to him is usually taken to show his death before 35 BC. Around 26 BC, Propertius also seems to speak of Varro as dead. And Propertius adds an important detail: the Argonautic epic was not Varro's last work, for it was only after its composition that Varro turned to love-poetry.¹² If Varro was dead by 35 BC and if he had written significantly after the Argonautic epic, then his Roman *Argonautica* cannot have been completed very long after 47 BC.

Caesar's four triumphs of 46 BC included a Pontic triumph. For a poet in Caesar's patronage the Argonautic theme will have seemed all the more apposite through these years as Caesar developed yet more ambitious plans for conquest. The Argonautic myth was very much a myth of world-conquest, while Caesar's defeat of Pharnaces was presented as but one episode in his conquest of the world: after the celebrations of 46 BC, a grand monument was erected on the Capitol, depicting the *oikumene* beneath the feet of a triumphant Caesar.¹³

Another work of Varro which seems to have been written in these years, the *Chorographia*, was similarly appropriate. As Nicolet has recently stressed, there was an intimate relationship between geography and imperialism, and not least under Caesar. Nicolet overlooks Varro (his usual fate), though on Nicolet's own account Varro's title might constitute the earliest use of the word *chorographia* in Latin. Here too then Varro seems to be breaking new ground, perhaps even doing so for Caesar. The poem was at least concordant with Caesar's concerns, for, as Nicolet and Wiseman observe, Caesar is said to have ordered a new map of the inhabited world in 44 BC.¹⁴ Also in 44 BC Caesar seems to have been preparing an expedition against the Parthians, the descendants of Medea on Varro's account. At the same time, as interpreter of Apollonius, Varro doubtless stressed Venus' power over Medea, that is the

dominance of Caesar's ancestor over that of the Parthians. It is perhaps no great surprise then to find that Caesar paid a fortune for a painting of Medea by Timomachus of Byzantium and that he displayed it before his temple of Venus Genetrix, mother of the Julian gens and of Rome.¹⁵

Already experienced in historical epic, Varro Atacinus wrote the first Argonautic epic in Latin in an atmosphere of world-conquest, enjoying the patronage of its latest proponent, Julius Caesar. After Caesar's victory over Pharnaces II in 47 and his fourfold triumph in 46, it was high time for a Roman Argonautica, which Varro duly provided.

Notes

*A version of this paper was read at the American Philological Association's Meeting at New Orleans, Dec. 1992: I am grateful to those who offered comments there, not least to Prof. E. Courtney. My colleague Peter Wiseman read an early draft, but should not be blamed for any shortcomings that remain.

1. For the judgments, *Silvae* 2. 7. 77; Quint. 10. 1. 87. See E. J. Kenney and W. V. Clausen (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature, II: Latin literature* (Cambridge, 1982) 39, 478, 580: Varro Atacinus is there also listed among the writers of didactic works.

2. The fragments of Varro Atacinus are now available in E. Courtney (ed.), *The fragmentary Latin poets* (Oxford, 1993), 236-53 [hence, simply Courtney].

3. On the latter, see T. P. Wiseman, "Julius Caesar and the *mappa mundi*", in his *Talking to Virgil: a miscellany* (Exeter, 1992) 22-42; cf. in general, M. G. Morgan, "Imperium sine finibus: Romans and world-conquest in the first century BC", in S. M. Burstein and L. A. Okin (eds.), *Panhellenica: essays in honour of Truesdell S. Brown* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1980) 143-54; C. Nicolet, *Space, geography and politics in the early Roman empire* (Michigan, 1991).

4. On vase-paintings: see R. Blatter, "Argonautai", *LIMC* II.1 (Munich, 1984) 591-9. On drama, A. Arcellaschi, *Médée dans le théâtre latin: d'Ennius à Sénèque* (Coll. École Franç. de Rome, 132, 1990). On Italian cults, see D. Braund, *Georgia in antiquity: a history of Colchis and Transcaucasian Iberia, 550 BC-AD 561* (Oxford, 1994), ch. 1.

5. Sall. *Hist.* 4. 1. 69, with D. Braund, *Rome and the friendly king* (London, 1984) 148-9; B. McGing, *The foreign policy of Mithradates VI Eupator, king of Pontus* (Leiden, 1986) 58-9.

6. So H. D. Jocelyn, *Ennius: Tragedies* (Cambridge, 1967), 346. For Medea in Roman drama, see also Arcellaschi, *Médée*

7. Quint. 1. 5. 61; on the case, T. P. Wiseman, *Catullus and his world* (Cambridge, 1985), ch. 3.

8. On Pompey's Transcaucasian adventures, see Braund, *Georgia* . . . , ch. 5; cf. D. Braund, "The Caucasian frontier: myth, exploration and the dynamics of imperialism", in P. Freeman and D. Kennedy (eds.) *The defence of the Roman and byzantine east* (Oxford, BAR 1986) 31-49. On the theatre, Pliny, *Natural History* 36. 41, after Varro of Reate.

9. Courtney, 1. 22 (Probus ad Verg. *Georg.* 2.126): *pars Parthorum Media est appellata a Medo, filio Medae et Aegae, ut existimavit Varro, qui quattuor libros de Argonautis edidit*; cf. Paus. 2.

3. 8. Despite Probus' mention of the Argonautic poem, Courtney prefers to attribute the etymology to Varro's *Chorographia*. Courtney is encouraged in his attribution by his broader conviction that Varro's poem (apparently entitled *Argonautae*) is a close translation of Apollonius' *Argonautica* (which does not have the etymology), though the few extant fragments of Varro can offer only limited support for that view and certainly show divergences from Apollonius' poem, which Courtney skilfully articulates.

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10. The influx to Rome from defunct hellenistic courts is a central theme of E. Rawson, *Intellectual life in the late Roman republic* (London, 1985).

11. Jerome's text reads: *P. Terentius Varro vico Atace in provincia Narbonensi nascitur, qui postea XXXV annum agens Graecas litteras cum summo studio didicit*, under 82 BC, with R. Helm, *Hieronymus' Zusätze in Eusebius' Chronik und ihr Wert für die Literaturgeschichte* (*Philologus*, Suppl.-Bd. 21.2, Leipzig, 1929), esp. 40-1; cf. G. Brugnoli, "XXXV annum agens Graecas litteras cum summo studio didicit", in *Studi di poesia latina in onore di A. Traglia* (Rome, 1979) 193-216. On Varro's probable acquaintance with Greek before 47 BC, see J. Granarolo, "L'époque néotérique ou la poésie romaine d'avant-garde", *ANRW* 1.3 (1973) 278-360, esp. 307-8, though Arcellaschi, *Médée* . . . , 198-9 seems more convinced by Jerome's claim.

12. Horace, *Serm.* 1. 10. 46-9; Prop. 2. 34. 85-6.

13. On the globe, Morgan *op. cit.* (n.3), 147. On Caesar's statue, Nicolet, *Space* . . . , 39.

14. Wiseman, "Julius Caesar . . .", 34; Nicolet, *Space* . . . , 95-8.

15. Arcellaschi, *Médée* . . . , esp. 217, wrings every possible drop of significance from Caesar's purchase, and more besides.