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Perception of Medea According to Greco-Roman Visual Sources (Vases and Sarcophagus)¹

Perception of Medea in Greco-Roman world is closely connected with the perception of Colchis and Colchians. The Greeks and the Romans depicted Medea, Aietes and other Colchians from the myth either as they imagined Colchians in general or followed their own interpretation. Narrative sources give us a clue about their attitudes, however visual sources fill the gaps texts might leave. In general, it should be noted that, Medea and Colchians' images went under substantial metamorphoses through centuries. Medea is a barbarian for the Greeks and the Romans, even a children-slayer, later she is twice betrayed woman for Chaucer, she is cunning and deceitful again during the second phase of Renaissance (1400-1500 A.D.), and finally she is a witch during the 16th c. witch craze. The question is to what extent different authors and artists imagined Colchis and Medea in an individual way and how this imagination influenced the formation of Medea's image through centuries. We will focus our report on perception of Colchis and Colchians according to Greco-Roman visual sources (Greek vases and a roman sarcophagus) about Argonauts and Medea.² We will outline what the changes and continuities were in this perception and what were the reasons of these changes, do the narrative sources accompany these metamorphoses or not.

Visual imagination of Colchians and Medea depends on several aspects: 1) the knowledge and understanding the Greeks and the Romans had about Colchians at the specific time period; 2) the century the artisan lived, i. e. what

¹ Paper was presented on the 2nd International Symposium of Young Scholars in the Humanities, Tbilisi, Georgia, 2018.

² Visual sources are collected and published digitally by Classical Art Research Center at Oxford University. Available at: <https://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/index.htm>. Date of access: 30.08.2018.

were the tendencies in literature concerning the Colchians and Medea specifically and how much they influenced the author; 3) the attitude of the artisan – whether he wanted to keep authenticity of the story depicted by him or not.

The Greeks mostly were very well acknowledged about Colchians. At the beginning of the Greek colonization movement they treated this territory as a possible part of their economic system and thus understood it as Europe. As mentioned by Tedo Dundua Anaximander of Miletus “spread the term “Europe” upon northern spaces, regardless the catastrophic diversity of the ideas up there from the Hellenic one.”³ Border between Europe and Asia was on the river Phasis or on Tanais. Later, as some scholars presume, after the Greek-Persian wars, Colchis became Asia for them and was associated with the Persians. However, since the Greeks hoped to make this territory part of their economic system i.e. part of Europe, almost till the end of the Hellenistic age, they did percept Colchians as Europeans, although the region was culturally influenced by Persia and they knew it. Therefore, Colchians and specifically, Medea wearing Persian clothes on Greek vases should not be so easily interpreted as Greek view of Medea as a barbarian and/or Asian.⁴

Early Greek vases (№301685; №302037; №9029262; №9030813; №330832⁵) show Medea and Peliades in the same clothing, i.e. they all are understood as being part of the Greek world, or the Greeks did not have enough knowledge to specify what should her fashion style be. Other group of early Greek vases, specifically black-figure lekythoi (№330526; №330527; №330528; №330529;) show her as a healer between snakes, which stresses her image as a sorceress. Some vases supposedly show Medea (№41091; №206694; №214742; №216032; №217946; №276089). These disputed group of vases belongs to different period stretching from the end of the 6th century till the end of the 4th century. Despite the fact that Medea’s images in oriental costume had already appeared, her representation in Greek clothing did not prevent scholars from connecting these disputed content vases with Medea. At the end of the 5th century Medea shows up in oriental (Persian) clothing (№20172; №44064; №215394; №217518; №217595 (?); №220497; №9036835) however some other vases of 450-400 B.C. still depict her in Greek clothing (№5046; №5361; №28009).

³ For in-depth analysis about the formation of Europe and the meaning of the term for the Greeks and Romans see Tedo Dundua, Nino Silagadze, European industrial complexes of I cycle of Capitalism and the Georgian western affiliations. Tbilisi. 2005. pp.5-6

⁴ 44 Greek vases in total depict Medea according to Beazley archive, however, some of them are disputed. See Beazley collection at: <http://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/index.htm>

⁵ Numbers of the Greek vases follow Beazley archive numbering.

In our opinion, content itself, not just chronology determines her appearance. Extremely popular motif is the part of the myth connected with Theseus. This is not the major part of the stories connected with Medea, however this popularity seems to be logical since Greek black-figure and red-figure vases were produced mostly in Athens and Athenians preferred the motif connected with their city. She is not in oriental costume in the motifs connected with Theseus. According to every versions of the myth at the time Medea is in Athens, she had long ago arrived in Greece and it seems, this is a representation of her grecism concept – she was not a barbarian at the moment (№15220; №28009; №41091; №214742; №216032; №217210; №217946; №276089) and did not wear oriental clothes, instead followed Greek fashion. Only one vase dated back to the end of the 5th c. where she is depicted with Theseus shows her in oriental costume (№9016250). This is the period knowledge about Colchians especially increased (see below) and the Greeks tried to depict Medea as precisely as possible.

Early literary sources show Medea less brutal, one even interpreted her as a person who aided foreigners. The 5th c. B.C. saw her quick transition to evil one. Sophocles mentions her blame in Apsyrtus' death. Scholiast of Apollonius of Rhodes preserved this note (*Schol. Apoll. Rhod. IV, 223*).⁶ The same is in Pherecydes' work (*History, VII. 32 (73)*),⁷ however her other useful skills also are mentioned – Medea can make people younger (*History, VIII, 113-74*).⁸

Medea's image as a children-slayer began with Euripides. From this point onwards Medea is frequently seen as an evil for those who accept the myths, for instance Apollodorus (2nd c. B.C.) recounts all evil deeds Medea had committed according to the sources known before him (*bibliotheca, I, IX, 23, 13; I, IX, 26; I, IX, 28*).⁹ Nicolaus of Damascus had the similar opinion in the 1st c. B.C. (*historia, VI, 54 (55)*).¹⁰ Arian in roman age agrees with this interpretation (*Arian, PPE, 6*).¹¹ however the authors who attempt to rationalize myths, usually have an attempt to give reasonable explanation to her knowledge also. For instance, Palaephatus interprets Medea's ability to make people younger as a skill to dye

⁶ Akaki Urushadze. Ancient Colchis in the myth of Argonauts. Tbilisi, 1964, pp. 229-230 (in Georgian).

⁷ Akaki Urushadze. Ancient Colchis in the myth of Argonauts, pp. 254-255.

⁸ Akaki Urushadze. Ancient Colchis in the myth of Argonauts, p. 262.

⁹ The author of *Bibliotheca* was considered to be Apollodorus of Athens, however now scholars identify it as pseudo-Apollodorus.

¹⁰ Tinatin Kauhchishvili. Greek authors about Georgia. Vol. II. Tbilisi, 1969, pp. 104-105 (in Georgian).

¹¹ Tinatin Kauhchishvili. Greek authors about Georgia. Vol. V. Tbilisi, 1983, pp. 155 (in Georgian).

hairs into black with the use of some herbs (*peri apiston*, XLIII (44)).¹² Diodorus Siculus in the 1st c. B.C. compiled two images of Medea and for him early Medea was the kindest person in Colchis since she tried to spare foreigners from her father's unjust rage, who was killing foreigners without hesitation (*bibliotheca historica*, 46)¹³ and also she is a children-slayer. Byzantine age Medea is also rationalized (*Eudociae*, *Ionia* 647).¹⁴

Medea's rehabilitation started simultaneously with her accusation. As I have mentioned, Euripides made her a children-slayer. The same idea is in Theban cycle also, which is supposed to be written down between 750-500 B.C. however some fragments seem to be later. The fragment about Medea is written after Euripides, since the author tries to rehabilitate Medea as a children slayer (*Schol. Ad Eur. Med.* 273).¹⁵ Aristotle directly blames Euripides in making Medea children-slayer (*Arist. de arte poetica*, 1453^b 14).¹⁶

Based on literary sources, some scholars interpret her image change at the end of the 5th century as the sign of the change in their perception of her – she is more barbarian now, a foreigner. K. Nadareishvili thinks that replacement of Medea's cult by PanHellenic goddess Hera in Corinth argued by some scholars “played the major role in connecting Medea with the western world and therefore encapsulating the opposition Greek/barbarian within the heroine's soul in the early artistic interpretations of Medea.”¹⁷ In another article she assumes that Medea “becomes a paradigmatic outsider, from geographic stranger Medea turns into the cultural “other” in the land of Greece.”¹⁸ Medea's metamorphosis in literary sources from more positive character into a negative¹⁹ one is accompanied by gradual orientalization of her visual image at the first site, however, if we pay close attention, this is not the only reason Medea is clothed in oriental fashion.

Greek perception of Colchis was the following: before the 6th c. B.C, i.e. before Greek colonization, Greek knowledge is not as abundant, mostly depends

¹² Akaki Urushadze. Ancient Colchis in the myth of Argonauts, pp. 340-341.

¹³ Akaki Urushadze. Ancient Colchis in the myth of Argonauts, pp. 389-390.

¹⁴ Akaki Urushadze. Ancient Colchis in the myth of Argonauts, p. 490.

¹⁵ Akaki Urushadze. Ancient Colchis in the myth of Argonauts, pp. 185-186.

¹⁶ Tinatin Kauhchishvili. Greek authors about Georgia, vol. II, pp. 64-65.

¹⁷ Ketevan Nadareishvili. Medea in the context of the East/West relationships. Phasis 13-14, 2010-2011, p. 330.

¹⁸ Ketevan Nadareishvili. Medea as paradigmatic “stranger” in the context of Europe-Asia opposition. Phasis 15-16, 2012-2013, p. 182.

¹⁹ The earliest versions of the myth sometimes are quite different, for example, one version sees Medea as a person, who helped the foreigners, also one version of the myth supposedly did not even see Jason coming to seize Golden Fleece (see: K. Sikharulidze. An unknown version of the Argonaut legend. Phasis 10 (I), 2007. p.164).

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on reports about early voyages and they are quite few. The 6th c. B.C. saw Greek (especially Milesian) wide wave in the Black Sea. They are far more acquainted with the realities of Colchis,²⁰ however, their knowledge increased in the 5th c. B.C. enormously and now they know, for instance, that they pay a tribute to Achaemenids (Herodotus, 3.97),²¹ specifically 100 boys and 100 girls once in a five years. Pericles' expedition in the Black Sea region increased contacts and Milesian colonies in Colchis became part of Athenian union, as a result, the Greeks knew about Colchis even more. The idea of increased contacts may be supported by the evidences from Pichvnari settlement – majority of findings from Greek burials is of Greek origin. It seems colonists nearby had very intense contact with mainland Greece.²² This intensification of contacts starts in the second half of the 5th century and lasts at least a century.

K. Nadareishvili assumes that “evidences of Medea's withdrawal to the East come from the later sources, that of the 5th c. B.C. and the later ones... and this should be explained by changing of the political vectors in Europe/Asia relationship.”²³ In our opinion, Greeks still understood territories of Colchis as a part of Europe. The border between Europe and Asia is on river Phasis (Dem. 60 8)²⁴ or Tanais (Plb. 34.5; Strab. 1.4.7; Plin. Nat. 4.24).²⁵

Hellenistic Age depictions follow the tradition formed at the end of the 5th century. Red-figure Greek vases (№44064; №9022312; №9036835) again imagine her in an oriental costume. However, it should be stressed, that the

²⁰ Some scholars also connect this with the increased formation of Hellenic/Barbarian opposition. See: Maia Danelia. The myth of the Argonauts in the context of East-West relations. Phasis 15-16, 2012-2013, p. 56.

²¹ Herodotus, Histories. Translated into Georgian by T. Kaukhchishvili. Tbilisi, 1975, pp. 227.

²² Natia Phiphia, Hellenic Experiment in Western Georgian: Greek Colonies (genesis, history). Tbilisi, 2013 (in Georgian with an English summary).

²³ Ketevan Nadareishvili. Medea as paradigmatic “stranger” in the context of Europe-Asia opposition, p. 181.

²⁴ Demosthenes. Demosthenes with an English translation by Norman W. DeWitt, Ph.D., and Norman J. DeWitt, Ph.D. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1949. Online edition available at: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0080%3Aspeech%3D60%3Asection%3D8>. Last access: 11.09.2019.

²⁵ Histories. Polybius. Evelyn S. Shuckburgh. translator. London, New York. Macmillan. 1889. Reprint Bloomington 1962. Online edition available at: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0234%3Abook%3D34%3Achapter%3D5>. Last access: 11.09.2019; The Geography of Strabo. Literally translated, with notes, in three volumes. London. George Bell & Sons. 1903. Online edition available at: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0239%3Abook%3D1%3Achapter%3D4%3Asection%3D7>. Last access: 11.09.2019; The Natural History. Pliny the Elder. John Bostock, M.D., F.R.S. H.T. Riley, Esq., B.A. London. Taylor and Francis, Red Lion Court, Fleet Street. 1855. Online edition available at: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0137%3Abook%3D4%3Achapter%3D24>. Last access: 11.09.2019.

Greek knowledge about Colchis increased not decreased in the Hellenistic Age, especially at the end of it and therefore, the Greeks tried to show Medea as precisely as possible and this is the main reason artisans choose to depict her in oriental costume.

Medea is depicted on one roman sarcophagus. It should be noted that she can be distinguished not with fashion style but with the content of the representation. She is dressed like a roman. Medea's visual metamorphosis depending on ages and context starts from this point onwards. Later images, medieval as well as Renaissance show her according to their own age fashion. Romans are surprising in this case, since they were as well aware of the situation in Colchis as the Greeks were, however, it seems, Greek origin of the myth, and also, the purpose of the visual images (see below) made Romans not bother with the authenticity of representation.

Some scholars argue that message of the Roman sarcophagus include representation of *exempla*, which reflect “cardinal roman values, such as *virtus*, *pietas*, *clementia* and *concordia*.”²⁶ Since “Medea is not a character with an inherent abundance of admirable qualities like Alcestis... her entire tale is fraught with scandal and the bad behavior of all parties involved”²⁷ she does not reflect good examples, rather example which should serve as consolation for a grieving relative. Medea on roman sarcophagus is determined to remind the mourners, that even if someone did not live good life, it could be worse as seen on the example of Medea, G. Gessert assumes.²⁸ The function of such message could be well served even if the authenticity was not kept on visual images, that it why, author of roman sarcophagus did not try to preserve it. Common romans who never visited Colchis, would not understand the inaccuracy anyway.

To sum up, Medea's visual image for Ancient Greeks did not depend much on specific authors, or even not on literary tradition, rather on the knowledge the Greeks had about Colchis – the wider information they had, the more precise depiction is attained – she is dressed in oriental clothing. Romans had the same knowledge about Colchians, but they did not reflect this knowledge in visual sources as much. In this case, specific authors' negligence to follow the authenticity should be the reason.

²⁶ Genevieve Gessert, *Myth as consolatio: Medea on Roman sarcophagi*. Greece & Rome, vol. 51. No. 2, p. 218.

²⁷ Genevieve Gessert, *Myth as consolatio: Medea on Roman sarcophagi*, p. 226.

²⁸ Genevieve Gessert, *Myth as consolatio: Medea on Roman sarcophagi*, p. 226.



Appendix 1

Medea on Roman sarcophagus,
Vatican Museum
Photo credit – Natia Phiphia