



A modern field investigation of the mythical “gold sands” of the ancient Colchis Kingdom and “Golden Fleece” phenomena



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ABSTRACT

According to Greek mythology and historical sources the ancient Georgian Kingdom of Colchis was rich of “gold sands” and the natives mined this metal from the rivers, using special wooden vessels and sheepskins. Modern geological research conducted by us in the Svaneti region (Greater Caucasus) has shown that this area is the province of the former Colchis Kingdom where it was possible to obtain abundant gold from the mountain rivers using the methods unique to this region. We think, from our investigations, that the bedrock and placer gold contents of this region give grounds to believe that there was enough gold in this region to describe Svaneti as “the country rich of this noble metal”. After comparing the geological data, artifacts, myths and historical sources, we share the viewpoint of the Roman historian Apian Alexandrine (90–170 AD) and suppose that the myth about expedition of Argonauts in quest of the “Golden Fleece” to the Colchis Kingdom was a real event and that the main purpose of this mission was to obtain gold and sheepskin (fleece) technique of gold mining.

Though there are a lot of variants of the explanation of the “Golden Fleece” phenomena in historical literature. According to one of the theories the “Golden Fleece” phenomena as a symbol of Colchian gold, was not confined solely to representations of actual gold mining. Other theorists saw the “Golden Fleece” as a symbol of the wealth of the Colchis, famed since antiquity for the abundance of their precious metals. The phenomena of the “Golden Fleece” according to our research, is connected with the sheepskin technique of recovering placer gold. The end result of this technique of gold recovery river gravels was a gold imprinted sheepskin, giving rise to the romantic and unidentified phenomena of the “Golden Fleece” in the civilized world.

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1. Introduction

The myth of the Argonauts' trip to the ancient kingdom of Colchis for gaining the “Golden Fleece” is one of the contentious issues of historical science. The Argonauts were a small band of heroes in ancient Greek mythology (Mycenyan myth) who, in the years before the Trojan War, accompanied Jason to Colchis in his quest to find the “Golden Fleece”. Their name comes from their ship, the Argo and the ship was named after its builder, Argus.

There are many contradictory legends, points of view or opinions about this mythical journey. This trip is described as a real story by Homer in his classic poems, the “Odyssey” (VIII-VII c. BC) and by Euripides' in his play “Medea” (Vc. BC). The Greek poet Apollo of Rhodes in the III century BC dedicated a poem “The

Argonautica” (Race, 2008) to this voyage. In this poem Apollo of Rhodes gave a detailed description of the kingdom of Colchis, the capital city – Aia (modern – Kutaisi) and the Georgian tribes Khalibi, Tibarenni and Mosinici. Since then, one can hardly find any fields of European history and art where the theme of the “Golden Fleece”, the Argonauts and Medea the sorceress is not more or less reflected.

The theories existed in 18 in modern science and literature, which try to explain the “Golden Fleece” phenomenon, are grouped about 18 direction. Among them, in our opinion, the most appropriate are as follows: 1. It represented gold extraction technology from gold bearing placers (Strabo, book-XII; Pliny the Elder I c. AD; Appian of Alexandria I-II c. AD; Tran, 1992, and others); 2. It was a sign of power of the Kingdom (Braund, 1994; Lordkipanidze, 2001; Newman, 2001, and others); 3. It was a sign of the Colchis' wealth and high technologies (Urushadze, 1964, 1984), 4. It represented a special breed of sheep (Ryder, 1991; Smith GJ, Smith AJ, 1992, and others).

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The theorists have seen the “Golden Fleece” as a symbol of the wealth of the Colchis, famed since antiquity for their precious metals. It is believed that Aetes and his kingdom reigned in Colchis at the time of Jason's journey. Tales of Aetes's daughter Medea, the sorceress, were known abroad, and yet the fame of the rumored wealth of the country in gold, silver and iron is likely to have been the basic motive for the Argonauts expedition. The mountain rivers of Colchis carried gravels impregnated with particles of gold. These gravels were washed through special pans with pierced holes and the fine gravels carefully strained over and through sheepskins or fleeces lying under the pans. This special system of gold recovery gave rise to the fable of the Golden Fleece, which according to legend came from a country with abundant silver palaces and golden chambers of ancient kings. The legend of this fabulous wealth of the Kingdom of Colchis, and the fame of their rulers riches, is said to have excited the enterprising avarice of the Argonauts.

In the last century this question was again a topical issue so in 1984 the British scientist Tim Severin sailed a “Modern Argo” ship along the same route traveled by the legendary Jason's on his “Argo” journey, more than three thousand years ago. Tim Severin and his crew of “New Argonauts” sailed from the city of Volosi in the Aegean Sea, into the Black Sea reaching the town Poti (Phasis) on the east coast. Tim Severin proved with this voyage that thanks to the ancient Greek mariners superb marine art and great vessels that they could have easily reached the kingdom of Colchis.

In order to form our own opinion, we decided to study the territory of the ancient Colchis kingdom geologically in order to find the areas where mining of gold from alluvial placers could be possible i.e. a place where the Argonauts could have extracted gold and come to know the ancient mining technologies of this particular region. For this purpose, our group has carried our research for more than 25 years in the western part of the Republic of Georgia around the regions of Abkhazia, Samegrelo, Imereti, Svaneti, Racha, Guria and Adjara. Our work has confirmed that Svaneti is a region, uniquely, where the locals still wash gold from alluvial placers through modern domestic, wooden vessels or pans with holes in the bottom and onto a sheepskin or fleece which collects the fine particulate - gold. Described below are the results of our recent research and our interpretations of the social phenomena of the “Golden Fleece”, which has fascinated countless generations since ancient times.

2. Material and methods

In 2007 we carried out research work in the Svaneti region, by using remote sensing for defining areas where ancient and modern placering of streams, for their gold content had taken place. The gold concentrations were studied both in alluvial placers as well as in the bedrock areas drained by the streams; more than 1000 samples were collected and analyzed. The gold content and other trace metals in these samples were determined by using ICP and MS instrumentation in the “ACME LABS” laboratory (Vancouver, Canada). In addition to geological materials, we gathered together a large collection of artifacts including the unique wooden vessels and the sheepskins still used today by the natives for gold-washing. In addition in various villages of Svaneti we collected numerous bronze sculptures of “sheep head” or “Ram Bird”, which in our opinion represent a stylized symbiosis of the golden fleece.

3. Colchis Kingdom

The eastern Black Sea region in antiquity was home to the well-developed Bronze Age culture known as the Colchian culture; this culture emerged towards the Middle Bronze Age. In at least some

parts of Colchis, the process of urbanization seems to have been well advanced by the end of the second millennium BC, centuries before any Greek settlement of the Black Sea coastline (Fig. 1). The Colchian Late Bronze Age (XV–VIII century BC) saw the development of significant skill in the smelting and casting of metals that began long before this skill was mastered in Europe. Sophisticated farming implements were made, and fertile, well-watered lowlands and a mild climate promoted the growth of progressive agricultural techniques (Braund, 1994).

Colchis was inhabited by a number of related but distinct tribes whose settlements lay along the shore of the Black Sea. The Kartvelian tribes differed so completely in language and appearance from the surrounding Indo-European nations that the ancients provided various “wild” theories to account for the phenomenon (Urushadze, 1984). For example, Herodotus states that the Colchians, with the Egyptians and the Ethiopians, were the first to practice circumcision, a custom which he claims that the Colchians inherited from remnants of the army of Pharaoh Sesostris III (1878–1841 BC). Herodotus thus erroneously regarded the Colchians as Egyptians (Herodotus, The History).

Ancient Colchis and Iberia (see Fig. 1) have been regarded as one of the world's important places for the early mining and processing of precious metals. Many archeologists and other scientists consider the area occupied by the Georgian tribes of the Khaldes, Tubales and Mosnikes, as the homeland of Metallurgy (Richardson, 1934; Wainwright, 1936; Forbes, 1950). H. Richardson (1934) believes that iron mining and steel making technology was discovered in the XIV century BC by a Georgian tribe the Khaldes, who lived in the Halys River Canyon. It is interesting, that the French scholar R. Dussaud (1930) relates the Greek term “chalkos”, which is designation of copper, to the Colchis tribe, the Khaldi. He thinks that the root of the word “khal” comes from the word “khaldi”, and the suffix “kos” in Greek language is an ending denoting the origin. In addition, excavated Early Bronze Age burial mounds in the region show that nonferrous and ferrous metallurgy was very well developed, and that noble metal mining also took place at that time in history (Courcier et al., 2008).

Gold products that can be tied to the ancient Colchis culture in western Georgia, do not exist or have not yet been found. The earliest gold implements known are those from the V century BC, and these were found mainly from excavations in Vani (Fig. 2). The high level of artistry exhibited by these artifacts suggests that utilization of this precious metal in the Colchis culture started much earlier than V century BC. However, in eastern Georgia (Iberia) unique gold objects are depicted dated back to the 2nd millennium, and belong to the world's masterpieces (Fig. 3) and shows that gold mining and its artistic processing was at a very high level, very early in the history of the old Georgian kingdoms.

4. Svaneti region

Svaneti (Suania in ancient sources) is a historic province of the ancient Georgian Kingdom of Colchis and was, and is inhabited by the Svans, a geographic subgroup of the Georgians. It is situated on the southern slopes of the central Greater Caucasus Range near the Black Sea (50 km); its rivers flow into the Black Sea (see Fig. 1). Currently more than 30,000 people live in Svaneti, and the region occupies the Enguri, the Kodori and the Tskhenistskali river sources (7500 km²). Before the creation of the Soviet Union the areas of the Kubani and Baksan river sources, on the north slope of the Caucasus, also belonged to Svaneti. Svaneti is the highest inhabited region in the Caucasus, and the village of Ushguli is the highest large settlement in Europe (2300 m).

The Enguri river valley, which, due to its geographic location is called the Upper Svaneti, is the historical center of the province

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