PIETY AND DIPLOMACY
IN APOLLONIUS’ ARGONAUTICA

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The contrast between the diplomatic Alcinous and the tyrannical Aietes is pronounced in the Argonautica, but little scholarly attention has been paid to the question of whether and in what ways (if the answer is positive) the Ptolemaic conflation of religious and political authority is inscribed in the ethical polarization of leaders in this poem. The Ptolemaic synthesis of piety and diplomacy is certainly suggested by the poem’s representation of royal cult activity: Alcinous and the other monarchs who aid the Argonauts are associated with public sacrifices and in addition are shown to prefer mediation to aggression, to honor sworn agreements, and to respect the mandates of “straight justice.”1 Those kings and tribes who are suspicious of the Argonauts, on the other hand, are relatively dissociated from sacrifice and are likely to be violent and unstable in their allegiances.2 The following argument will accordingly seek the connections between the image of benevolent kings in the Argonautica and Philadelphus’ poetic self-representation, beginning first with a consideration of several issues that are fundamental for interpretation of the poem, namely, its date and relevance of the poem for the ideological program of the Ptolemies.

Apollonius is said to have lived in the time of Ptolemy III Euergetes (284–221) by several ancient sources: a brief passage from a second-century C.E. Oxyrhynchus papyrus, an entry in the Byzantine Suda, etc.

1 Examples of royal sacrifice by diplomatic kings include Hypsipyle (1.858–860), Cyzicus (1.966–967), Lycus (2.760–761). Alcinous (4.994–995), all of whom welcome the Argonauts with feasts, as does Phineus at 2.302–303 (though in this instance the Argonauts have provided their own sheep).

2 When the Argonauts encounter Amycus, the Bebrycian king, they are met with a pugilistic challenge rather than hospitality (2.11–18); in the Brygeian islands Jason suspects the Hylleans of plotting against them (4.404–407; see Green 1997, p. 314, n. 526), and indeed after Apsyrtus’ murder they abandon their Colchian sympathies and help the Argonauts (4.526–528); later the Argonauts manage to avoid the unfriendly Celts and Ligurians with Hera’s aid (4.645–648). On Aietes’ “welcome” feast for the sons of Phrixus, see further below.
and two biographical notes (possibly late first-century B.C.E.). These sources report that Apollonius went into exile in Rhodes because the first edition (proekdosis) of the *Argonautica* was badly received. Scholars continue to be divided regarding the veracity of this story, but most now agree that Apollonius probably served as Euergetes’ tutor, an honorific office held in association with the post of Chief Librarian, during the reign of Philadelphus. Apollonius probably composed the *Argonautica* between 270 and 260, revising it several times during Philadelphus’ rule, a period when the court poets Callimachus and Theocritus were also active. Yet while their works openly celebrate the Ptolemies in their encomiastic works, the *Argonautica* does not, presumably because the narrative is set in the generation before the Trojan War. Even so, the narrator frequently employs aetiological references and digressions to anticipate the future of the ancient sites and cultural practices that are mentioned, and it is likely that the entire poem was designed, as Stephens (2003, 173) has recently put it, to provide a “mythic historicity” for the Greco-Macedonian inhabitants of the recently founded Alexandria.

As a scholarly trend, connecting the *Argonautica* with the particulars of Ptolemaic Egypt is not especially new: it has been nearly forty years since Fränkel (1968, 514) observed that the narrator’s aetiological reference to the future cult of the Dioscuri (4.650–653) could be seen as an epic precedent for the cult of living rulers. Still, recent studies of the poem continue to be primarily concerned with the poem’s ties to other poetic works, from Homeric epic to Attic tragedy and contemporary poetry, and thus do not consider, for the most part, the implications of its larger political context. We should not be surprised, however, to find such associations in the *Argonautica*, given the practical dependence of Alexandrian scholar-poets on Ptolemaic patronage and the allusive character of Alexandrian poetry as a whole. For that matter,

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4 Hunter 1989, 1–9. This estimate is earlier than the previous estimate of 250–240 made by Vian (2002/1974, xiii). Vian posits Callimachus’ *Hymn to Apollo*, written after 246, as contemporary with a revised version of the *Argonautica*, but Hunter (1989, 7–8) suggests that similarities may be the result of earlier versions of the hymn, which were likely to have circulated in the Library.