

## Orpheus the Philosophical Founder in Apollonius' *Argonautica*

Where the history of philosophy begins is a fraught subject. Diogenes Laertius claims that philosophy began with the Greeks, and that this means it cannot have begun with Orpheus because he was Thracian rather than Greek (D.L. 1.1, 5). Diogenes' *Lives of the Philosophers* is built on earlier philosophical biographies, going back to Aristotle's lost *Succession of Philosophers* and another lost work of the same name by Sotion (writing approximately 200-170 BCE). Between Aristotle and Sotion, Apollonius of Rhodes composed his *Argonautica*, which features Orpheus as a significant member of the Argonauts. I argue that, contrary to Diogenes Laertius, Apollonius portrays Orpheus as the founder of the Italian school of philosophy (while nuancing his background to make him more Greek). This reading of Apollonius' work allows us to fill in some gaps in the history of philosophy as it was understood in third-century Alexandria while at the same time deepening our understanding of the character of Orpheus in the *Argonautica*.

Orpheus' importance in the *Argonautica* is emphasized by his placement in the catalogue of Argonauts (he is first) and the length of his entry (he receives the most lines of any Argonaut). Apollonius spends many of those lines situating Orpheus geographically: although he is called Thracian at a later point in the narrative (4.905), and he is introduced as the son of Thracian Oeagrus, the narrator emphasizes that Calliope bore him in Pimpleia, and his distance from Thrace is emphasized: his music brings oak trees *to* Thrace, and his birthplace is given as Pierian (Thessalian) Pimpleia rather than Thrace (1.25; see Scherer 2006, 119-120). Thus Apollonius acknowledges the Thracian tradition for Orpheus but adds ambiguity to his origin by setting him in a group of Greek heroes who are addressed as "the best of all the Greeks" (Πανελλήνων

προφερέστατοι, 2.209). This reading is in line with recent discussions of the *Argonautica* as an exploration of Hellenic identity (Thalmann 2011; Clauss 2012).

As Karanika (2010) points out, Orpheus is also depicted as an *oikist* or founder of a colony. Orpheus is responsible for “ritual activity, communication with the divine sphere, and restoration of *homonoia* and order” (Karanika 2010, 395), which are all part of an *oikist*’s duties. We know that Apollonius wrote ktisis poems on the foundations of various cities such as Alexandria, Cnidus, and Rhodes (all now lost), so it would not be unusual for him to include a founding figure in the *Argonautica*.

Orpheus’ identity as a Greek *oikist* puts his philosophical connections in a new light: that of the founder of the Italian tradition of Greek philosophy. Ancient and modern scholars have noticed that Orpheus’ song in book 1 has elements of Empedoclean philosophy in it (Scholia to 1.496-8; Nelis 1992), but the song also references the work of Pherecydes of Syros, a sixth-century prose writer with an unusual cosmogony, by including Ophion (1.503). Furthermore, Apollonius references Pythagorean theories of reincarnation by including Aethalides in the catalogue of Argonauts (1.54) and discussing his eternal memory later in the work (1.640-652). Pythagoras claimed that he was once Aethalides in a previous reincarnation (D.L. 8.4-5), so including Aethalides is a way of including the Pythagorean tradition.

The figures of Pherecydes, Pythagoras, and Empedocles are connected in Diogenes Laertius’ account of the Italian tradition of philosophy: Pherecydes was the teacher of Pythagoras, whose students taught Empedocles (D.L. 1.15). Whether modern historians of philosophy agree with this tradition is irrelevant; it is likely that Diogenes is building on the work of earlier authors such as Sotion, who was a generation or two younger than Apollonius, so it is possible this conception of the Italian tradition was available in Apollonius’ time. Indeed,

Apollonius apparently engages with this tradition by setting up the same line of succession, but beginning it even earlier (with Orpheus rather than Pherecydes). As Orpheus takes on the role of *oikist* on the Argonauts' voyage, he also becomes the founding figure of the Italian school of philosophy: a tradition in which philosophy and poetry more easily co-exist than in the Ionian tradition.

### Bibliography

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