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Sailing between the lines

Does Apollonius describe the construction of the Argo in his epic or does he not? This seemingly straightforward question and its poetical implications will be considered in my paper.

Recent scholarship on Apollonius Rhodius (e.g. Fusillo 1985, Hunter 1993; 2001, Cuypers 2004) has rightly emphasized the fact that he is a poet much concerned with the representation of his authorial persona. The choices the narrator faces as to which material to include are emphatically brought to the reader's attention. One of the instances in which this happens is the passage in i.18-19: *The ship, as former bards relate, Argos wrought by the guidance of Athena. But now I will tell the lineage and names of the heroes and the deeds they wrought in their wanderings*. These lines, which seem to constitute an deliberate passing over of the tale of the building of the Argo, have been read in the light of narratological devices such as the 'arbitraire du récit' (Genette 1969:92-3); the way in which a narrator overtly shows the choices he makes regarding his narrative. The abovementioned critics explain the passage by saying that Apollonius wants to demarcate his own terrain here, to signal that he does not merely repeat what others have said. True as this may be, there is another aspect to this passage, which seems to have gone unnoticed until now.

My contention is that if one reads between the lines of the epic, the conclusion must be that Apollonius does in fact describe the building of the Argo, and has done so for a good reason. In roughly a dozen passages consisting of similes, character-speech and narrator-text, the reader learns where and how the Argo's wood was cut, which devices were used to harden the beams, how they were fitted together and how the keel of the Argo got its voice. Verbal echoes and in one case the repetition of an entire line (i.527 = iv.583), ensure that the reader notices the motif. The passages I mention here will of course be interpreted and expanded upon in my paper.

The reader gradually learns from the narrator text (i.110-115; 367-371; 524-527; 721-724; iv 580-583) that the Argo was built under the guidance of Athena, that Jason and Argos participated in the building process, and the fact that the ship was fitted with a keel of oracular oak from Dodona, which speaks on two occasions. On the other hand, in the character-speeches, Athena's guidance in the building process is stressed, since her help ensures that the Argo is the best ship ever to have sailed. These speeches seem aimed at bringing home the fact that the Argonauts travel under divine protection (ii.611-614; 1187-1189; iii 340-344). The similes (i.1003-6; ii.79-83; iv.1682-6) are interesting from a poetological point of view, as they all occur in the descriptions of fights or killings, and respectively represent the hardening of the beams, their being bolted together, and the felling of a tree. Destruction of the Argonauts' enemies is thus connected with the theme of the construction of a ship.

Concluding: in a paradoxical way the narrator draws the reader's attention to the fact that he does describe the construction of the Argo; but not, of course, straightforwardly. In this way he shows his poetic skill: he refuses to repeat his predecessors, but manipulates their material in unexpected ways, in the process creating one of the *Leitmotive* of his epic. On a metapoetical level construction of the ship equals composition of the poem: a hidden yet slyly revealed process under divine guidance.