

FIELD INVESTIGATION OF THE MYTHICAL “GOLD SANDS” OF THE COLCHIS KINGDOM (ANCIENT GEORGIA) AND THE PURPOSE OF THE ARGONAUTS’ EXPEDITION

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According to ancient Greek mythology and historical sources, the ancient Georgian kingdom of Colchis, generally located in the Caucasus region of western Georgia, was rich in gold sands. Here, the natives extracted this noble metal by working the gravels in the rivers, using special perforated wooden vessels and sheepskins in a process known today as gold placering. The Argonauts were a band of heroes in ancient Mycenaean myth who, in the years before the Trojan War, accompanied Jason to Colchis in his quest to find the “Golden Fleece” (Urushadze, 1964; Castleden, 2005).

In order to form our own opinion on this subject, we decided to carry out geologic studies in the territory of the ancient Colchis kingdom in order to find those areas where placering or extraction of gold from alluvial placers was, or could have been, possible at the time of the Argonauts. For this purpose, a group of geologists including the authors carried out research for more than 20 years in western Georgia in the following areas: Abkhazia, Samegrelo, Imereti, Svaneti, Racha, Guria, and Adjara. Our work has confirmed that the Svaneti area uniquely fits the likely place that was most important in ancient times for placer gold; this was the likely destination of the Argonauts. In the Svaneti area today, the locals still wash gold from the alluvial placers in domestic, perforated wooden vessels that are identical to those of legend and they still collect the fine gold that passes through the holes, on sheepskins placed beneath the wooden vessels. Alternatively they also place the sheepskins, alone in streams, in order to catch the gold being eroded today from bedrock occurrences.

The geological field work in the Svaneti area was carried out during the years 1998-2008 (Okrostsvaridze and Bluashvili, 2009). The gold concentrations in alluvial placers, and in the outcropping rocks of this region were tested in more than 1000 samples. Gold and other elements were determined by using ICP-MS instrumental analysis at “ACME LABS” (Vancouver, Canada). In addition to the geological material, we also collected a large body of artifacts including wooden vessels (Fig. 1) and sheepskins from this district that were still used by the natives for gold washing.

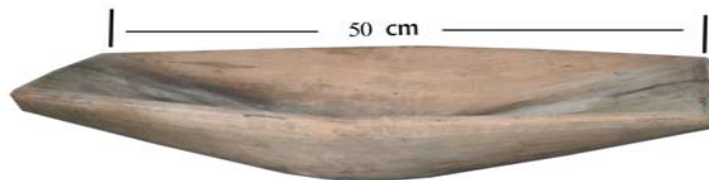


Figure 1. Unique vessel of ash wood from the Svaneti region (Sgurishi village).

Modern geological research conducted by us in the region has shown that the auriferous river gravels in the streams of the Svaneti region, on the south flank of the Greater Caucasus Range, probably represent the principal area in the

ancient Colchis kingdom where it was possible to obtain abundant gold from the mountain rivers (Enguri, Tviberi, Lasili, Arshira, Dolra, Hokrila, Chuberi, and others) by using the special wooden vessels and sheepskin methods that were unique to this area. We think that the gold content of the rocks and the river gravels of this region as determined by our investigations give ample grounds to believe that there was enough reason for the legends which describe Svaneti as a country rich in this noble metal. After examining the results of our own and other modern geological investigations, as well as viewing ancient and modern artifacts of gold and placer equipment, we share the viewpoint of the Roman historian Apian Alexandrine (A.D. 90-170) who related that the so-called myth about the expedition of the Argonauts to the Colchis kingdom in quest of the “Golden Fleece” was a real event. We further suggest that not only was the purpose of the Argonauts’ mission to obtain gold but also to obtain knowledge of the local and unique technology for the extraction of gold from the river gravels.

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