

Mitja Guštin

Ljubljana, Emeritus Professor University of Primorska, Koper

ORCID: 0009-0005-8449-139X

Did the Argonauts reach ancient *Corcoras*, the modern Krka River valley?

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Czy Argonauci dotarli do starożytnego *Corcoras*, współczesnej doliny rzeki Krka?

Podróż Argonautów nie tylko odkrywa starożytne szlaki i wymiary znanego świata, ale także daje nam wgląd w fizyczny i niedostępny świat wschodniej części Morza Śródziemnego. Apolloniusz z Rodos w jednej z ostatnich wersji tej legendy dostarczył pierwszych użytecznych informacji geograficznych na temat podróży przez dolinę rzeki Istros (Dunaj) i terytoria w głębi Zatoki Triesteńskiej w północnej części Adriatyku. Wiedza ta została poszerzona przez rzymskich autorów dwieście lat później, w pierwszej połowie I wieku naszej ery.

Region Dolenjska (Dolna Carniola), położony w pagórkowatym krajobrazie między dolinami rzek Savus i Corcoras na skraju Alp Wschodnich, był miejscem rozwoju kultury halsztackiej wczesnej epoki żelaza. Cechą charakterystyczną dla tej społeczności było wznoszenie ufortyfikowanych grodzisk obronnych oraz niezwykłych kopców grobowych, w których grzebano członków klanów i rodzin. W ich centralnej części znajdowały się najczęściej grobowce o kamiennej konstrukcji, zawierające cenne dary, w tym naszyjniki z bursztynowych koralików. Przedmioty te świadczą o roli tego obszaru jako ważnego ośrodka handlu bursztynem bałtyckim i jego obróbki.

Abstract

The journey of the Argonauts not only reveals the ancient routes and dimensions of the known world but also gives a glimpse into the material and intimate world of the eastern Mediterranean. In one of the latest versions of this legend, Apollonius of Rhodes supplied the first useful geographical information on the route through the Istros (Danube) river valley and territories in the hinterland of the Gulf of Trieste in the northern Adriatic. Two hundred years later, this knowledge was expanded by Roman authors in the first half of the 1st century CE.

Dolenjska (Lower Carniola), a region located in the hilly landscape between the *Savus* and *Corcoras* river valleys on the edge of the Eastern Alps, was home to one of the most important Hallstatt societies of the Early Iron Age. This community is characterised by its fortified hillforts and remarkable clan and family burial mounds, often with central tombs with stone constructions and precious gifts, including necklaces from amber beads. These artefacts attest to the area's role as an important centre for the Baltic amber trade and amber processing.

According to the legend, Greek warriors, led by the hero Jason, sailed on the famous ship *Argo* in search of a bride and her dowry – the Golden Fleece of Zeus' sacred ram. The tale is apparently linked to the earliest Mycenaean explorations of the Black Sea coast, before its Greek colonisation by Miletus and other Greek *poleis* from the seventh century BCE onwards.¹ The distribution of early Mycenaean finds in the Danube river valley and on the eastern Adriatic coast confirms that the story of Jason and the Argonauts contains knowledge of ancient, prehistoric trade routes between the Black Sea, the western Mediterranean and Central Europe in the last third of the 2nd millennium BCE, well before the Trojan War in 1270 BCE.

Trade, trackers, adventures, clan movements and so on are amply reflected in archaeological artefacts which can be understood thanks to the distribution of early Mycenaean ceramic finds in the Danube river valley and on the eastern Adriatic coast.²

Jason's journey gives us insight into historical routes and the then awareness of the known world and its limits, but it also furnishes us with the ability to recognise the material and intimate world of the Eastern Mediterranean. It is possible to reconstruct the distances that Jason and his crew may have travelled from such literary sources, but foremost from the distribution of objects important in that period. The principal facts of the legend of the Argonauts, which literally means "Argo sailors", have been briefly surveyed by Marjeta Šašel Kos.³

Pelias of *Iolcus*, king of a Mycenaean settlement in Thessaly, sent its legitimate heir, Jason, to retrieve the Golden Fleece from the famous winged (*chrysomallos*) ram in a ruse to remove Jason from the picture. Prior to this, *Phrixus* and *Hele*, the children of *Athamas*, one of the previous Thessalian or perhaps Boeotian kings, had fled their stepmother *Ino* to *Aia* atop the winged ram. Ruled by king

¹ Mitja Guštin, Pasko Kuzman, *The Chrysomallos from Lychnidos* [in:] *Science and society. Contribution of humanities and social sciences*, ed. Radko Duev, Skopje 2021, pp. 73–91.

² Martina Blečić Kavur, *Caput Adriae in kultura mediteranstva. Egejski elementi pozne bronzaste dobe na severnem Jadranu in v njegovem zaledju* [Caput Adriae and the Mediterranean culture. The Aegean elements of the late bronze age in the northern Adriatic and its hinterland] [in:] *Potopljena preteklost. Arheologija vodnih okolij in raziskovanje podvodne kulturne dediščine v Sloveniji*, eds. Andrej Gaspari, Miran Erič, Ljubljana 2012, pp. 101–107.

³ Marjeta Šašel Kos, *A Few Remarks Concerning the archaologia of Nauportus and Emona: The Argonauts* [in:] *Mediterranean Myths from Classical Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century/ Mediteranski miti od antike do 18. stoletja*, eds. Metoda Kokole, Barbara Murovec, Marjeta Šašel Kos, Michael Talbot, Ljubljana 2006, pp. 13–20.

Aeetes, *Aia* was the kingdom of the sun and has long been associated with *Colchis* at the eastern end of the *Pontos Euxenos*/ Black Sea.

To aid Jason's quest, the shipbuilder *Argus* – aided by the goddess *Athena* – built the miraculous *Argo*, a 'talking' ship which flew like an arrow through the air. The *Argo* was crewed by greatest Greek heroes of the time, many with supernatural powers, including *Hercules*, *Hylas*, *Orpheus*, the *Dioscuri* *Castor* and *Pollux*, *Peleus* (father of *Achilles*), the flying *Boreads* (sons of *Boreas*, the North Wind), *Philoctetes*, *Telamon*, *Atalanta*, *Meleager* and *Euphemus* and *Theseus*.

The passage through the *Symplegades*/ Clashing Rocks at the entrance to the *Pontos Euxenos* en route to *Colchis* on the Black Sea's eastern coast was witness to a number of adventures by this point. King *Aeetes* compelled Jason to complete difficult tasks for the Golden Fleece, including steering a plough drawn by fire-breathing bulls and slaying the dragon that guarded it. Jason achieved these supported by *Aeetes*' daughter, the sorceress *Medea*, with whom he later fled *Colchis*.

Various legends and other tales of their journey to the Black Sea, through the Eastern Alps and across half the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as Homer's famous tale of *Odysseus*' journey from the Aegean to the Tyrrhenian Sea, demonstrate the long-distance seafaring skills of the time. Long-distance seafaring depended on a reliable ship, which is why *Athena* was involved in the *Argo*'s construction. Focussing on the trying and complicated return home, these stories make the importance of continental and maritime waterways in prehistory clear. The same is confirmed in the voyages of the Greek navigator *Pytheas* of *Massalia* in the 3rd century BCE, which were extreme despite his competence as astronomer and geographer. Jason's heroic saga was present in Greek and Roman mythology and related visually as well as in literature. Ancient people were extremely interested in the navigation of the *Argo*, and the legend of the *Argonauts* was retold in many different versions from the off (fig. 9).⁴

For the purposes of this contribution – being an exploration of knowledge concerning contact with the "Greek World" in *Corcoras*/ the Krka River valley in eastern Slovenia – one of the youngest versions of the legend is most useful, especially the description of the return of the *Argonauts* after leaving *Colchis* with the Golden Fleece. This key source is the *Argonavtiká*, written in Alexandria by Apollonius of Rhodes in the second half of the 3rd century BCE. This recounts how they crossed the Black Sea and entered the mighty *Istros*/ Danube River and made an epic journey through the Balkans, the Eastern Alps and into the central Mediterranean before making the long journey back to *Iolcos* in Thessaly instead of sailing directly home through the Bosphorus and the well-known *Symplegade* (fig. 1).

⁴ Wolfgang Lazius (1514–1565, physician and antiquarian in Vienna) published a map in 1545 with a note next to Oberleibach (Vrhnika) that the *Argonauts* sailed along underground rivers from that point on. Marjeta Šašel Kos, *The Ljubljana and the myth of the Argonauts* [in:] *The Ljubljana – a River and its Past*, eds. Peter Turk, Janka Istenič, Timotej Knific, Tomaž Nabergoj, Ljubljana 2009, p. 123, fig. 127.



Fig. 1. Argo's Return Voyage from Apollonios Rhodius, *The Argonautica. The Story of Jason and the Quest for the Golden Fleece*, translated with introduction and glossary by Peter Green, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1997, Map 5 (after Šašel Kos 2016)

Apollonius' tale is the first to provides useful geographical information about travelling through the *Istros* river valley and the hinterland of the Gulf of Trieste. This was subsequently updated by Roman authors two hundred years later, in the first half of the 1st century CE. We can thank Pliny the Elder (CE 23–79) for an exact interpretation of the geography of the Argonauts' route. Pliny was the first to use Apollonius' text to outline Jason's itinerary following his crossing of the *Pontos Euxenos* and entering of the *Istros*. Following its course would have brought them to its confluence with the River *Savus*/Sava, on whose banks stood *Sigidunum*, modern Belgrade, the centre of the Celtic tribe *Scordisci*.

The Argonauts would have followed the *Savus* upstream, passing near the Celtic town of *Segestica* associated with the *Colapiani* tribe located in modern Sisak at the confluence with the *Colapis*/Kupa (Cro.) or Kolpa (Slov.). This would have brought them to the mouth of the *Nauportus*/ Ljubljana River, from whence they must have followed it to its source near modern Vrhnika on the south-western edge of the vast Ljubljana Basin.⁵ Waterborne travel ended here: it was well known in antiquity that no river connected the vast Danube Basin

⁵ Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia* 3, 128; see Šašel Kos, *A Few Remarks*, p. 16.



Fig. 2. Etruscan amber ships pectoral pendants from the 6th century BCE: 1 (after Causey 2011, fig. 9, J. Paul Getty Museum), 2 (Archaeological Museum Naples)

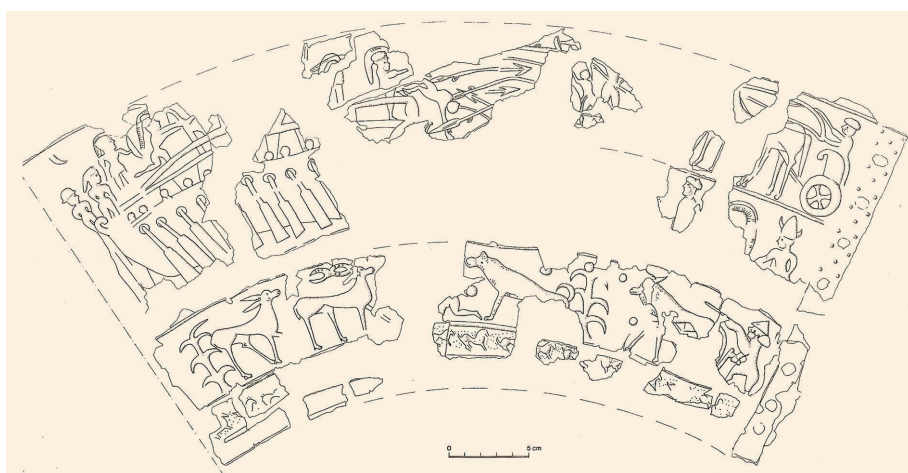


Fig. 3. A maritime battle scene from Nesactium, depicted on the walls of a bronze situla, 5th century BCE (after Mihovilić 1992, Beil. 2)

and its tributaries with the Adriatic Sea. To reach the Adriatic, they had to travel overland through the wilderness and across hills, including the so-called Italo-Illyrian or Postojna Gate transcontinental pass below Mount Nanos.

Moving across land, the Argonauts were forced to disassemble the *Argo* and carry its component parts on their shoulders through the Postojna Gate. At the coast, the *Argo* was rebuilt and course set for the sacred island of Elektris (*Ambra*) at the mouth of the *Eridanus* / Po River in modern-day Lombardy. The Adriatic has never been an insurmountable geographical barrier and has certainly been crossed by ships for millennia.⁶ Later versions of the legend, including that of *Apollonius*, describe the fate of the heroes differently. Most

⁶ Radoslav Katičić, *Podunavlje i Jadran u epu Apolonija Rodanina*, "Godišnjak Akademije nauke i umjetnosti Bosne i Hercegovine" no. 7, Centar za balkanološka ispitivanja knjiga 5, ed. Alojz Benac, Sarajevo 1970, pp. 71–132.



Fig. 4. The Dolenjska Hallstatt territory (8th to 4th century BCE) with the most important settlements and hydronyms known before the occupation by the legions of the Early Roman Empire and the establishment of their provinces

notably, they reflect high levels of trade between the Greek centres, the Scythian hinterland of the Black Sea and the tribes living between the southern edge of the Eastern Alps and the coast of the *Caput Adriae* in the hinterland of the modern Gulf of Trieste (fig. 4).⁷ Interpretations of the *Argonautica* legend have also provided the first names relating to physical geography in modern Slovenian territory. The old hydronyms are still in use today thanks to Roman and Slovenian transcriptions and these pre-Roman routes are preserved in the rivers *Corcoras*/Krka, *Savus*/Sava, *Colapis*/Kolpa and *Nauportus*/Ljubljana (fig. 4).

The region of Dolenjska (Lower Carniola), located in the hilly landscape of the *Corcoras* river valley on the edge of the Eastern Alps, was an important Hallstatt society at the beginning of the Early Iron Age. Traces of this community can be seen in heavily fortified settlements, known as hillforts, and noteworthy clan and family burial mounds, which often contained central tombs with stone constructions and precious gifts. Built in the late 8th and 7th centuries BCE, they indicate the development of a new social organisation in this region.⁸

During the transition from the Urnfield to the Hallstatt period, which marks the beginning of the Early Iron Age, there is unmistakable evidence of foreign influence and imports resulting from long-distance contacts. It was at this time that the inclusion of status symbols became an important element of burials. The appearance of gold as well as precious imported bronze artifacts

⁷ Martina Blečić Kavur, *Plovidba duž Caput Adriae: plovidba Svijetom?* [Navigation along Caput Adriae or Navigation around The World?], "Histria Antiqua" 2012, no. 21, pp. 215–229.

⁸ Stane Gabrovec, *Zur Hallstattzeit in Slowenien*, "Germania" 1968, no. 44, pp. 1–48; Janez Dular, *Halštatske nekropole Dolenjske/ Die hallstattzeitlichen Nekropolen in Dolenjsko*, Ljubljana 2003.



Fig. 5. Golden head and hair appliques and hair ornaments from a destroyed girl's grave at Sajeve on Krka bank in Dolenjska region/ Slovenia (7th century BCE, after Guštin, Preložnik 2005, fig. 6)

and weapons in burials is the result of economic development, social change and new rites. There are many clear examples of this in the Dolenjska community, probably due to trade through direct personal contacts or through centres in which goods were redistributed. There are even some objects of eastern origin, such as golden appliques in the shape of a clover leaf and the typical short swords and horse equipment, which connect with tales of Jason's journey to the Far East.⁹

The confluence of the *Corcoras* and *Savus* rivers was dominated by the Velike Malence hillfort, which was strategically connected to another significant hillfort at Libna, located north of the River Savus where the river emerges from a narrow canyon. These rivers enclose the small plain of Krško polje/ Gurkfeld, an important eastern area of the Dolenj-

ska region, on the western range of which is the Vinji vrh near Šmarjeta hillfort. The region is known for tumuli in which there are family burials of 5 to 30 inhumations, with clan chiefs buried with Šmarjeta type helmets made of wicker, covered with leather/hide and faced with large bronze *falerae* and nails with large flat heads. These helmets, characteristic of the warriors of the Dolenjska community in the 7th century BCE, were distributed across the Adriatic Sea in the territory of the *Piceni* tribe and even reached the community in Hallstatt on the other side of the Alps.¹⁰

At the heart of the *Corcoras* valley is a bend in the river, where the medieval foundations of Rūdolfsverde were laid in 1365, today the center of Novo mesto. Both riverbanks have been inhabited since the Late Bronze Age and played an important strategic role in the Iron Age, as evidenced by two thousand excavated graves. In the first centuries of the Early Iron Age, numerous clan and family tumuli began to be built. Most contained between two and 20 graves, some even more, and four have been found to include more than 50 inhumations with grave goods of south Balkan origin, as well as outstanding Etruscan and other Italic goods.¹¹

⁹ Borut Križ, *Starejša železna doba* [The Early Iron Age] [in:] *Arheološka podoba Dolenjske. Katalog stalne arheološke razstave Dolenjskega muzeja Novo mesto* [The archaeological image of Dolenjska. Catalogue of the permanent archaeological exhibition at the Dolenjski muzej Novo mesto] eds. Borut Križ, Petra Stipančič, Andreja Škedelj Petrič, Novo mesto 2009, pp. 87–139.

¹⁰ Markus Egg, Ulrike Neuhäuser, Želimir Škoberne, *Ein Grab mit Schlüsselhelm aus Budinjak in Kroatien*, Jahrbuch Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums Mainz 1999, Bd. 45, pp. 435–472.

¹¹ Križ, *Starejša železna doba*, pp. 124, 137, 138.

The famous grave with the bronze tripod from Novo mesto belongs to the 'warrior horizon.' The tripod itself is of Etruscan origin, while the grave's bronze pin with four amber beads (fig. 6: 1) is an import from the northern Apennine peninsula. Numerous glass- or amber-bead necklaces have been found in female graves in Novo mesto and throughout the Dolenjska region (fig. 6: 2–4). The large number of glass beads of various colours, forms and decoration suggest both local origin and distribution.¹²



Fig. 6. Amber masterpieces from Early Iron Age graves in Novo mesto, 7th and 5th century BCE (after Križ 2017)

¹² Borut Križ, Peter Turk, *Bernstein- und Glasschmuck aus Novo mesto Slowenien*, "Schriftenreihe des Keltenmuseums Hochdorf/Enz" 2003, no. 5; Križ, *Starejša železna doba*, pp. 40, 101–103, 139.

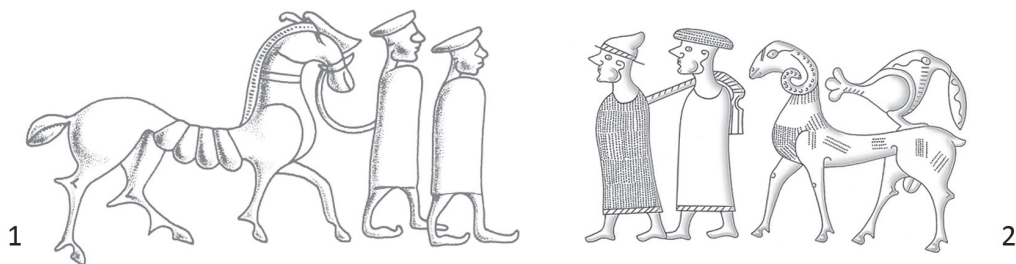


Fig. 7. Novo mesto-Kandija, Grave IV/3, two men with transport bags carried on horseback from the frieze of situla no. 2 from Grave V/35 from Novo mesto-Kapiteljska njiva and detail from the bronze situla from Vače with a ram led to a sacrifice, Slovenia, transition of the first half of the 5th century BCE (after Križ 2009, 132; Guštin 2020, fig. 8; Guštin and Kuzman 2021, fig. 1)

Exceptional objects found in graves of the Kapiteljska njiva necropolis in Novo mesto testify to the importance of the place itself and its significance as a point of trade (fig. 7: 1). There are clear connections with the south-east, possibly even with Greece itself, evidenced by certain grave goods in the burials of later generations from the 5th and 4th centuries BCE. Examples include Greek ceramics from Graves VII/20 and VI/44 and two Illyrian helmets from Grave VII/19, which have undoubtedly come from the armour of a Greek warrior or warriors.¹³

The main urban centres of the hillforts of Stična, Magdalenska gora and Vače were located on the left side of the River *Savus* in the hills between the source of the *Corcoras* and the confluence of the *Nauportus* and *Savus* rivers. Together with the aforementioned Novo mesto, they formed the heart of the Dolenjska community in the Early Iron Age period. Good evidence for this is the size of the settlements and the number of graves. At Stična and Magdalenska gora there are a number of huge tumuli containing several hundred graves belonging to prominent families or clans.

Here, in the hills, where settlements were connected by overland routes, transport of people is represented by four-wheeled carts and the transport of goods by pack animals. The latter is beautifully presented on a situla depicting two men leading a haltered horse carrying bags,¹⁴ an everyday narrative, in Grave IV/3 from Kandija in Novo mesto (fig. 7).

On the western border of the Dolenjska community there is a small hillfort with several groups of family tumuli at Molnik, located on the edge of the wide basin of modern Ljubljana. An important burial is that of a horseman in grave 16 of tumulus 17, dated to the late 8th century BCE. The grave goods provide

¹³ Križ, *Starejša železna doba*, p. 86.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 132–133.

a strong example of local expressions of the variety of object forms circulating in the wider area of the crisscrossed Ljubljana Basin. These goods appear along the main river routes from Transylvania and the Iron Gates of the Danube, even extending as far as the north-central Alps.¹⁵

Today's Ljubljana Basin or Ljubljana Gate has always been an important crossroads. The one-kilometre-long passage between the Rožnik, Šišenski hrib and Grajski grič hills facilitated transcontinental travel between the eastern part of Central Europe and the western Balkans. In the centre of the Ljubljana Basin, on the Grajski grič hill above the River *Nauportus*, there was a hillfort in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages. Between the sloping foot of the hill and the river there was a large urban settlement. Nearby, on the left bank of the river, there was a corresponding necropolis with cremation graves. Five tumuli contained one or more cremated graves dating to the 8th and 7th centuries BCE. The grave goods capture both local developments and the influence of societies living in the hinterland of the *Caput Adriae*.

Coming from the east along the River *Savus* or overland from the source of the River *Corcoras* to the Iron Age settlement under Grajski grič in the Ljubljana Basin, it was possible to break out south (to the Apennine Peninsula) by navigating the 19 km long River *Nauportus* to its source. From there, as discussed for the Argonauts, one had to cross hilly terrain and pass the Postojna Gate to reach the northern Adriatic coast and eventually the Mediterranean.

Objects recovered from the beds of these rivers show that these waterways connected to the east in and before the Early Iron Age. Travelling east (and west) were part of everyday life. Direct physical evidence of the Argonauts' itinerary has yet to be found, but the youngest version of the *Argonautica* the tale permits the assumption that narrators in the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE were familiar with the richness and prosperity of the Dolenjska community, a theory confirmed by precious Greek imports found at Novo mesto.

Glass rams' head beads, popular in the Early Iron Age community of Dolenjska, have an amber parallel. These are much less numerous, but their form is very similar. Two were found in Grave VI/4 at Kapiteljska njiva at Novo mesto, two are known from Stična Grave V/11, and a single example was recovered without context in tumulus VI from the same place.¹⁶

How and why did the ram's head motif suddenly become significant for the Dolenjska Hallstatt community living in *Corcoras* river valley? And why is this significance particularly pronounced in Novo mesto? In addition to glass beads, rams are represented on fibulae from the same period (e.g. Grave II/b from Preloge and grave X/48 from Laščik, both from Magdalenska gora and

¹⁵ Sneža Tecco Hvala, *Molnik pri Ljubljani v železni dobi* [The Iron Age site at Molnik near Ljubljana], Ljubljana 2017.

¹⁶ Markus Egg, *Gläserne Widderkopferlen aus der Eisenzeit*, "Archäologisches Korrespondenzblatt" 2010, Bd. 40, Nr. 4, p. 532; Adrienne C. Frie, *Women, Sheep, and Textiles: The social significance of ram's head beads in Early Iron Age Slovenia*, "Arheološki vestnik" 2021, no. 72, p. 50.



Fig. 8. Roman merchant vessels, amber 1st century BCE: 1 – Nin, Dalmatia (Archeological Museum Zadar), 2 – Köln (Römisch-Germanisches Museum, Köln)

from grave VII/1 from Brezje).¹⁷ Beyond Dolenjska, the motif of the ram's or sheep's head can be found on fibulae as well as on metal vessels (fig. 7: 2), whether as complete or part figures. This is also true of the wider Celtic world north of the Alps from the beginning of the Late Iron Age in the second half of 5th and first half of 4th century BCE.¹⁸

The earliest examples of Situla Art with artistically embossed depictions on the lids, such as those from Este, Most na Soči/Sv. Lucija, Scoul/Schuls and Como-Grandate from the transition period between the 7th and 6th centuries BCE, show a motif of four animals following each other in procession. The ram is depicted with a domesticated bull and a domesticated goat or together with forest animals such as bucks, does and wild goats. In one case they are followed by a lion, in another by two beasts.¹⁹

Undoubtedly, the breeding of sheep for food and the production of by-products such as wool and milk were important aspects of the economy and of male activity well represented on female jewellery. The ram's head was very popular on women's jewellery in the period between the late 6th and early 4th centuries BCE and reflects animal husbandry and in particular sheep farming in the centuries of transition between the Early and Late Iron Ages.²⁰ Their presence in some male graves in Novo mesto²¹ could be related to the ownership of herds or even to production of glass beads.

In pastoral societies, animal fertility was important because larger herds meant a better life. The ram itself was a symbol of male fertility and strength.

¹⁷ Egg, *Gläserne Widderkopferlen...*, p. 535, note 34.

¹⁸ Ulrike Binding, *Studien zu den figürlichen Fibeln der Frühlatènezeit, Universitätsforschungen zur prähistorischen Archäologie*, Bonn 1993, pp. 37–38, 95–97, Abb. 39–41, Taf. 5: 3; 7: 2; 16: 8; 17: 2–3; 36: 12–16; 37: 1–3.

¹⁹ Este-Rebato, grave 187; Este, situla in Vienna; Most na Soči, (Sv. Lucija) grave 351; Scoul/Schuls – Munt; Grandate (Otto-Hermann Frey, *Die Entstehung der Situlenkunst: Studien zur figürlich verzierten Toreutik von Este*, Berlin 1969, pp. 65–66, 101, Taf. 40; 102, Taf. 53; 103, Taf. 60; 103, Taf. 62; 103–104, Taf. 62).

²⁰ Guštin, Kuzman, *The Chrysomallos from Lychnidos...*, pp. 73–91.

²¹ Križ, Turk, *Bernstein- und Glasschmuck...*, Cat. nos. 50, 93, 102.



Fig. 9. Georgius Agricola's illustration of the legend of the Argonauts in the book *De re metallica*, Basil 1556: the Argonauts (C), spring (A) and skin (B) (redesigned by Vladimir Milanovski)

Fertility symbols refer not only to the reproduction of the human race, often depicted in Situla Art with sexual acts, but also to the reproduction of the animal species that fed and support humans.

The fleece of a sheep played an important role in the various versions of the *Argonautica* and similar tales. Odysseus used fleeces to hide himself and his crew during their escape from the Pol cave. The use of fleeces to collect gold from streams is also recounted.

The Phasis (Greek, Georgian *Rioni*) River was well known in antiquity. It is the main river of western Georgia, originating in the Caucasus Mountains (Racha) and flowing westwards towards the Black Sea, emptying into it north of ancient Phasis (city of Poti). The river carried a considerable amount of gold. The locals placed fleeces on the riverbed, the gold became entangled in the wool and could then be shaken out. Both the famous naturalist Strábō (64/63 BCE – c. AD 24) and Pliny the Elder were familiar with this method of collecting gold. This is also attested in several regions, including the River Tagus in Spain, the *Padus* (Po) in Italy, the *Hebrus* in Thracia, the *Pactolus* in Asia and Ganges in India. In fact, this gold was considered perfection, given it had been highly polished by the current. Georg Bauer, whose Latin pen name was Georgius Agricola, wrote in 1556: "The Colchians placed the skins of animals in the pools of springs; and many particles of gold clung to them when they were removed,

the poets invented the 'golden fleece' of the Colchians. In like manner, it can be contrived by the methods of miners that skins should take up, not only particles of gold, but also of silver and gems."²²

The famous fleece of the ancient winged ram may allude to the ancient use of fleeces to collect river gold. The same technique was used until the Middle Ages and even in modern times to recover gold dust from rivers. As such, the fleece has retained this particular role and is still in human memory.

Did Jason and his companions, the famous heroes of antiquity, pass through the Krka River valley on their way to the Adriatic? It is hard to believe and impossible to confirm. Yet some objects, such as the iron sword made somewhere in the Far East and found in the famous cave deposit at Mušja jama in Škocjan²³ in the Karst in the Gulf of Trieste's hinterland, together with thousands of bronze objects from the Late Bronze Age, confirm the links between these two worlds. From its source to the mouth of the River *Savus*, the River *Corcoras* (later Gurk and Krka), is an easily navigable river. However, the area between its source and the River *Nauportus* and River *Savus* had to be crossed on foot and with pack animals, passing through Early Iron Age centres such as Stična and Magdalenska gora.

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²² Georgius Agricola, *De re metallica*, Basil 1556 (1950), pp. 330–331.

²³ Biba Teržan, Elisabetta Borgna, Peter Turk, *Depo iz Mušje jame pri Škocjanu na Krasu. Depoj-ske najdbe bronaste in železne dobe na Slovenskem III/ Il ripostiglio della Grotta delle Mosche presso San Canziano del Carso. Ripostigli delle età del bronzo e del ferro in Slovenia III*, Ljubljana 2016.

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