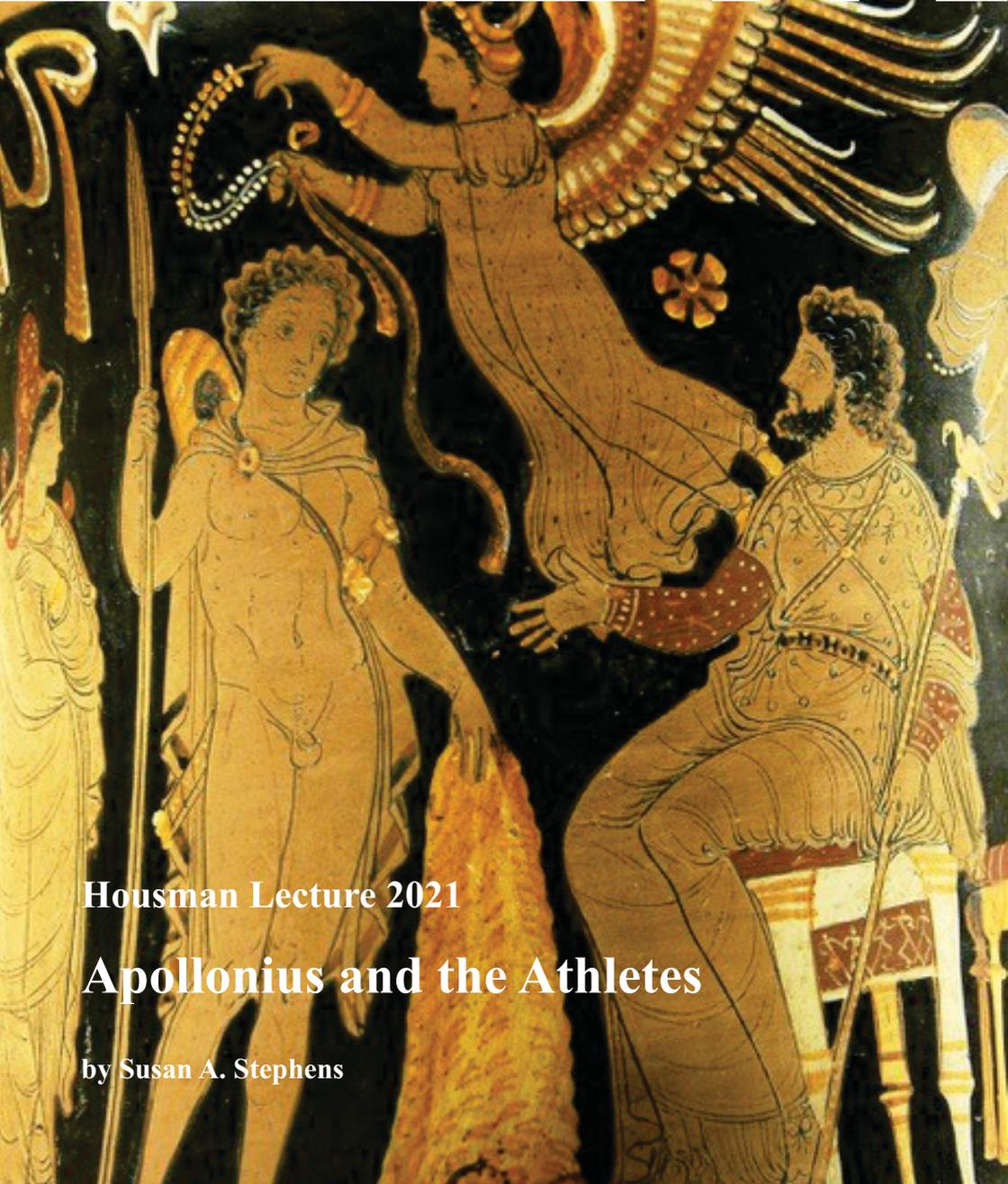




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Housman Lecture 2021

Apollonius and the Athletēs

by Susan A. Stephens

A.E. Housman (1859–1936)

Born in Worcestershire in 1859, Alfred Edward Housman was a gifted classical scholar and poet. After studying in Oxford, Housman worked for ten years as a clerk, while publishing and writing scholarly articles on Horace, Propertius, Ovid, Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles. He gradually acquired such a high reputation that in 1892 he returned to the academic world as Professor of Classics at University College London (1892–1911) and then as Kennedy Professor of Latin at Trinity College, Cambridge (1911–1936).

Housman Lectures at UCL

The Department of Greek and Latin at University College London organizes regular Housman Lectures, named after its illustrious former colleague (with support from UCL Alumni). Housman Lectures, delivered by a scholar of international distinction, originally took place every second year and now happen every year, alternating between Greek and Roman topics (Greek lectures being funded by the A.G. Leventis Foundation).

This is the thirteenth Housman Lecture, and it took place in October 2021.

Apollonius and the Athletes Susan A. Stephens

Xenophon's *Anabasis* is an account of the expedition of ten thousand Greek mercenaries who fought to advance the cause of the Persian prince Cyrus the Younger against his brother Artaxerxes II. But when Cyrus was killed at the battle of Cunaxa in 401 BCE, these men were left stranded, and they had to make their way back to Greece through central Persia. As they marched north, the ten thousand finally reached the Black Sea near Trapezus and from there took a westward course along the seacoast that later Apollonius' Argonauts would trace in reverse.

The Argonauts and the Ten Thousand have much in common: both were Greeks adrift in foreign, often hostile, lands (and often the same hostile lands); both groups were constituted of men from different *ethne* and *poleis*, who were necessarily – though not always willingly – forced to subordinate individual goals and identities to the needs of the group. Xenophon's narrative makes abundantly clear the rifts among different Greek constituencies, the fragility of Greek ethnic identity, and the yearning to create a cohesive community. He also makes clear the role certain institutions like festival sacrifice and athletic games played in facilitating a collective sense of Greekness. For example, when the Ten Thousand reached the coast at Trapezus, Xenophon tells us that they sacrificed to Greek gods and engaged in impromptu athletic games:

ἐποίησαν δὲ καὶ ἀγῶνα γυμνικὸν ἐν τῷ ὄρει ἐνθαπερ ἐσκήνουν ... ἠγωνίζοντο δὲ παῖδες μὲν στάδιον τῶν αἰχμαλώτων οἱ πλείστοι, δόλιχον δὲ Κρήτες πλείους ἢ ἐξήκοντα ἔθειον, πάλην δὲ καὶ πυγμὴν καὶ παγκράτιον ἕτεροι, καὶ καλὴ θέα ἐγένετο. (Xenophon, *Anabasis* 4.8.25, 27)

They also held an athletic competition on the mountain where they were camped ... While boys competed in the sprint (most were sons of the captives), more than sixty Cretans ran the distance race, and others (?) [competed] in the wrestling, boxing, and pankration, and it made a fine spectacle.

As John Ma remarks about this passage: 'Out of the disparate elements at hand (slaves, exiles, mercenaries from different backgrounds), the occasion allows for the improvisation of community.'¹ Similarly, at Cotyora:

ἐνταῦθα ἔμειναν ἡμέρας τετταράκοντα πέντε. ἐν δὲ ταῦταις πρώτων μὲν τοῖς θεοῖς ἔθυσαν, καὶ πομπὰς ἐποίησαν κατὰ ἔθνος ἕκαστοι τῶν Ἑλλήνων καὶ ἀγῶνας γυμνικούς. (*Anabasis* 5.5.5–6)

They remained there for forty-five days, during which they first sacrificed to the gods and held processions, each of the Greeks, nation by nation, and athletic contests.

In both cases Xenophon calls these contests *ἀγῶνες γυμνικοί*, 'naked contests', a marked term to which I will return to later in this paper.

A century and a half after Xenophon, the role of athletics in building community continued to gain in importance. Whether as mercenaries, members of imperial bureaucracies, or engaging in business or trade, Greeks in some number had migrated to and were now living in the new and growing Hellenistic cities of the eastern and southern Mediterranean. These men came from disparate city states, each of which had its own founding legends, patron deities, and ritual practices (as Xenophon puts it: *κατὰ ἔθνος ἕκαστοι*). The challenge for these new places was how to build a cohesive community from these often-competing elements. To this end, institutions that already transcended local particularity became a key factor.

¹ Ma 2004: 338.

In Alexandria we see the Ptolemies instituting festivals and divine cults in part intended to instill the sense of a collective identity for Greek immigrants, and tellingly, they also took care to institute athletic contests as part of their cultural agenda. The Ptolemaia, for example, when established, around 278 BCE, even asked participating cities to grant it a status equal to that of the Olympic games, as we see in this decree of the Nesiotic League.

(16) και νῦν ὁ βασιλεὺς [Π]τολεμαῖος, διαδεξάμενος τὴν βασιλείαν παρ[ᾶ] τοῦ πατρὸς, τὴν αὐτὴν εὐνοίαν καὶ ἐπιμέλειαν [π]αραχόμενος διατελεῖ εἰς τε τοὺς νησιώτας κα[ὶ] τοὺς ἄλλους Ἑλληνας, καὶ θυσίαν ποιεῖ τῷ πατρ[ὶ] καὶ ἀγῶνα τίθησιν ἰσολύμπιον γυμνικὸν καὶ μουσικὸν καὶ ἵππικόν, τὴν τε πρὸς τοὺς θεοῦ[ς] εὐσέβειαν διαφυλάττων καὶ τὴν πρὸς τοὺς π[ρο]γόνου[ς] εὐνοίαν διατηρῶν, καὶ παρακαλεῖ εἰς ταῦτα (25) τοὺς τε νησιώτας καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους Ἑλληνας ψ[η]φίσα[σθαι] τὸν ἀγῶνα ὑπάρχειν ἰσολύμπιον ... (39) καὶ τοῖς νικῶσιν [τῶν νησιωτῶν] τὰς τιμὰς τὰς αὐτὰς ὑπάρχειν, ἀπὲρ εἰσὶ[ν ἐν] τοῖς νόμοις παρ' ἐκάστου τῶν νησιωτῶν [γεγραμμένα] τοῖς τὰ Ὀλύμπια νικήσασι. (*Syll.*² 390.16–42, with omissions)

(16) The current king Ptolemy, who has inherited the kingdom from his father, continuing to demonstrate his goodwill and concern towards the Islanders and other Greeks, is offering sacrifice to his father and establishing a contest for gymnastic, musical, and hippic events to be Is-Olympic, preserving his piety toward the gods and maintaining his goodwill toward his forefathers, he urges (25) that the islanders and the other Greeks vote for the contest [i.e. the Ptolemaia] to be Is-Olympic ... (39) and for the victors of the islanders to have the same honors as each of the islanders has prescribed in law for those who are victorious at the Olympic games.

This request for Is-Olympic status was intended not only to raise the profile of the new event and the new city, but also to attract athletes by de facto guaranteeing the sort of emoluments that Olympic victors received from their home cities. In addition to other honors, such victors were granted support at the city's expense for life (σίτησις). As an aside – this is precisely what Socrates proposes after his conviction, as his alternative punishment:

οὐκ ἔσθ' ὅτι μᾶλλον, ὃ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, πρέπει οὕτως ὡς τὸν τοιοῦτον ἄνδρα ἐν πρυτανείῳ σιτεῖσθαι, πολὺ γε μᾶλλον ἢ εἰ τις ὑμῶν ἵππῳ ἢ συνωρίδι ἢ ζεύγῃ νενίκηκεν Ὀλυμπιάσιν. (Plato, *Apology* 36d)

There is nothing that is more fitting, Gentlemen of Athens, than such a man be given free meals (σίτησις) in the prytaneion. And much more fitting [for me] than for any of you who have won with a single horse (ἵππῳ) or pair of horses (συνωρίδι) or four-horse team (ζεύγῃ) at the Olympic games.

The Athenians were not convinced.

Early Alexandria did not lack successful Olympic athletes: in the *stadion* (or sprint), the signature event at Olympia, an Alexandrian, Perigenes, won in 272 BCE (Moretti 539, Africanus), an Ammonius in 256 (Moretti 555, Africanus); and a Demetrius in 228 (Moretti 575, Africanus). As early as 296, an Apollonius won the *diaulos* (double stade) (Moretti 512, P. Oxy. 2082), and Cleoxenus won the boxing in 240, which he accomplished ἀτραματίστος (Moretti 569) or 'without receiving a wound'. In addition, Cleoxenus was a *periodonikês* or 'circuit winner'.² That is, he had won a boxing victory in each of the four crown games (*Olympia*, *Pythia*, *Isthmia*, and *Nemea*), an achievement rather like winning the Grand Slam in tennis today. And it is an achievement that undoubtedly brought him considerable fame. In turn, as a 'circuit winner', he would have brought distinction to the new city, just as the Ptolemies with their own numerous victories at crown games in chariot-racing had set out to do. Somewhat later, around 216 BCE, Polybius records that Ptolemy IV was actively sponsoring the training of a promising Olympic boxer.³

² Information on these victors may be found in Moretti's list (1956).

³ 27.9.7–12. The boxer was named Aristicus; he lost at Olympia.

In Hellenistic Egypt preferential treatment for victors began early. Victorious athletes and athletic trainers were among the very few exempted from the salt tax – an exemption that probably extended to their family members. Ptolemy II's chief financial officer, another Apollonius writes as follows:

Ἀπολλώνιος Ζωίλω χαιρεῖν. ἀφείκαμ[εν] τού[ς] τε διδασκάλου[ς] τῶν γραμμάτων καὶ τοὺς παιδοτρίβας [κ]αὶ τ[οὺς] c.14] τὰ περὶ τὸν Διόνυσον καὶ τοὺς νενικηκό[τ]ρασ τ[ὸν] c.12] ἀγῶνα καὶ τὰ Βασιλεία καὶ τὰ Πτολεμ[ι]α[τ]ία, κ[α]θάρων ὁ βασιλεὺς προσέταχεν, τοῦ ἀλὸς τὸ τέλος αὐτοῦ τ[ε] καὶ [οἰκείου[ς]]... ἔρω[σο]. (ἔτους) [c. 9]. (*P. Halle* 1.260–65)

Apollonius to Zoilos, greetings. We exempt teachers of grammar, athletic trainers, the [practitioners?] of Dionysus, and those victorious in the [?] games and the Basileia and the Ptolemaia, as the king has decreed, from the tax on salt, and their [households?]. Farewell, year [-].⁴

The active grooming of potential athletes began early as well, as this letter of 257 BCE, from the Zenon archive, attests:

Ἐροκλῆς Ζήνων[ι] χαιρεῖν ... ἐ[γ]ραφά[ς] μοι περὶ Πύρρου, εἰ [μὲν] ἀκρι[βῶ]ς ἐπιστάμεθα, ἀλείφειν αὐτόν, εἰ δὲ μή, μὴ συνβῆ[ι] ἀνήλω[μα] τε μάταιον προσπέρσειν καὶ [ἀ]πὸ τῶν γραμμάτων ἀποσπαθῆναι ... Πτολεμαῖοι δὲ φαίνεται, ὅσα κατ' ἄ[ν]θρωπον, ὅτι τῶν νῦν ἀλφομένων, οἱ προεὶλήφασιν χρόνον πολὺν, πολὺν κρείττων π[...]. [καὶ] σφόδρα ὀλίγου χρόνου πολὺ ὑπέρξει αὐτῶν ... σὺν δὲ θεοῖς εἰπεῖν, ἐλπίζω σε στεφανωθήσεσθαι. (*P. Cairo Zenon* 59060.1–8)

Hierocles to Zenon, greetings. You wrote me about Pyrrhus: if I thought he was apt enough, to train him, but if not, I should not incur useless expenses and detract him from his education ... It seems to Ptolemaios, who should know as much as is humanly possible of those now training, though they began long before him, that he [sc. Pyrrhus] is much better, and within a very brief time he will far surpass them ... To speak with the will of the gods, I expect that you will be crowned.

If a victorious athlete brought glory to himself, his family, and his city, as we know already from Pindar, from the last line of this text: 'To speak with the will of the gods, I expect that **you** will be crowned', we see the extent to which local elites could be invested in victories as well.

It is within this growing importance of athletic culture that Apollonius wrote the *Argonautica*, probably in stages, completing it around 240 BCE. The story he chose to tell, that of Jason and his companions' quest for the Golden Fleece, was already old. It is mentioned briefly in Homer's *Odyssey* (12.70: Ἄργῳ πᾶσι μέλουσα, παρ' Αἰήταο πλέουσα); it featured in two now lost regional epics: Eumelus' *Corinthiaca* of the late seventh or early sixth century BCE and the *Naupactia*, written about a century later and sometimes attributed to Carcinus (of Naupactus). The one surviving account of the expedition is in Pindar's *Pythian* 4 for the chariot victory of Arcesilas of Cyrene, the narrative of which Apollonius follows quite closely in his fourth book. But almost as important as their quest for the golden fleece, these pre-Apollonian Argonauts were known as athletes who had competed in at least three different venues. The best-known was the funeral games for Pelias, who ruled over Thessaly. Also known as Jason's wicked uncle, he was killed upon Jason's return from Colchis though the instrumentality of Medea, after which funeral games were held in his honor. Stesichorus wrote a poem on the subject (Ἄθλα ἐπὶ Πελοπίδα) that in turn seems to have occasioned several representations in the visual arts. One such representation is said to have adorned the sixth-century chest of Cypselus dedicated at Olympia and housed in the Corinthian treasury, where Pausanias saw it in the second century CE. He describes one of the many scenes on the chest as follows:

⁴ The date is c. 256 BCE. This paragraph falls at the end of a long official document. For a discussion of its significance see Clarysse and Thompson (2006), vol. 2: 133–35.

μετὰ δὲ τοῦ Ἀμφιαραίου τὴν οἰκίαν ἔστιν ἀγὼν ὁ ἐπὶ Πελία καὶ οἱ θεόμενοι τοὺς ἀγωνιστάς... ἡνιοχοῦντες δὲ συναρίδα Πισός ἐστιν ὁ Περιήρουσ καὶ Ἀστερίων Κομήτου, πλεῦσαι καὶ οὗτος λεγόμενος ἐπὶ τῆς Ἀργούσ, καὶ Πολυδεύκης τε καὶ Ἄδμητος, ἐπὶ δὲ αὐτοῖς Εὐφῆμος, Ποσειδῶνός τε ὂν κατὰ τὸν τῶν ποιητῶν λόγον καὶ Ἴάσονι ἐξ Κόλχους τοῦ πλοῦ μετσεχηκός· οὗτος δὲ καὶ τῆ συναρίδι ὁ νικῶν ἐστιν. (5.17.9)

After the house of Amphiarauus is the contest at the funeral of Pelias, with the spectators looking at the competitors ... Driving a two-horse chariot is Pisis, son of Perieres, and Asterion, son of Cometas (he is said to have sailed on the Argo), Polydeuces, Admetus, and after them Euphemus. being a son of Poseidon according to the poets' account and a participant in the voyage to Colchis with Jason. This one is the victor in the two-horse chariot race.

Pausanias continues:

οἱ δὲ ἀποτετολμηκότες πικτεῦειν Ἄδμητος καὶ Μόγος ἐστὶν ὁ Ἄμπεκος· ἐν μέσῳ δὲ αὐτῶν ἀνὴρ ἐστηκώς ἐπαυλεῖ, καθότι καὶ ἐφ' ἡμῶν ἐπὶ τῷ ἄλματι αὐλεῖν τῶν πεντάθλων νομίζουσιν. Ἴάσονι δὲ καὶ Πηλεῖ τὸ ἔργον τῆς πάλης ἐξ ἴσου καθέστηκε. πεποίηται δὲ καὶ Εὐρυβότας ἀφιεῖς δίσκον, ὅστις δὴ οὗτός ἐστιν ἐπὶ δίσκῳ φήμην ἔχων. οἱ δ' ἐς ἄμυλλαν δρόμου καθεστηκότες Μελανίων ἐστὶ καὶ Νεοθεὺς καὶ Φαλαρεὺς, τέταρτος δὲ Ἀργεῖος καὶ Ἴφικλος πέμπτος· τούτῳ δὲ νικῶντι ὀρέγει τὸν στέφανον ὁ Ἄκαστος. (5.17.10)

Those who ventured to box are Admetus and Mopsus, the son of Ampyx. Between them a standing man plays the *aulos*, just as now they are accustomed to play the *aulos* for the long jump of the pentathlon. The wrestling-match between Jason and Peleus is an equal one. Eurybotas is shown throwing the discus. Indeed, Eurybotas had a reputation as a discus-thrower. Those engaged in a running-race (*ἄμυλλαν δρόμον*) are Melanion, Neotheus, and Phalareus. The fourth runner is Argeius, and the fifth is Iphiclus. Acastus is holding out the crown to Iphiclus as victor.

The chest no longer exists, but images on several decorated objects from the sixth century also portray the Argonauts as contestants.⁵ These include a black-figured *dinos* showing the javelin throw with named competitors, a bronze shield band with images of boxers, one of whom is named Mopsus, and a fragment of a black-figure vase with a footrace between four men, one of whom is identified as Phal[areus], as on the chest. Other illustrations of athletic Argonauts include the Amphiarauos crater showing the same field of competitors in the chariot race as on the chest, however, with Peleus wrestling, not with Jason, but with one Hippalkmos.⁶

In addition to funeral games, Argonauts also participated in Panhellenic games, where they made a fine showing. Several sources, apparently derived from Eumelus' *Corinthiaka*, claim that, immediately after their return from Colchis, the Argonauts sailed to Corinth to compete in the first Isthmian Games. Favorinus, the best source, in his *Corinthian Oration* says that Castor won the *stadion*, Calais the *diaulos*, Polydeuces the boxing, and Peleus the wrestling. The Argo won the boat race, after which Jason dedicated the Argo to Poseidon.⁷ In fact, the Isthmian, because of its location on the Gulf of Corinth, was the only one of the Panhellenic venues that included a boat race.

Pindar (in *Olympian* 4.17–24 and *Pythian* 4.151–54) gives us the Argonauts competing in a third event – games held on Lemnos. The nature of these games is in doubt: some scholars think that they may have been funerary games for Hipsipyle's father Thoas, who had been king of Lemnos and had been murdered by local women; or possibly they are kin to the spontaneous games organized by Xenophon's Ten Thousand. Whatever their type, the Argonauts are so closely aligned with athletic competition that Philostratus in his *Gymnasticus*, written in the third century CE, even credits Jason with inventing the pentathlon.

πρὸ μὲν δὴ Ἴάσονος καὶ Πηλέως ἄλμα ἐστεφανοῦτο ἰδίᾳ καὶ δίσκος ἰδίᾳ, καὶ τὸ ἀκόντιον ἤρκει ἐς νίκην κατὰ τοὺς χρόνους, οὗς ἡ Ἀργὼ ἐπλεῖ· Τελαμῶν μὲν κράτιστα ἐδίσκευε, Λυγκεὺς δὲ ἠκόντιζεν, ἔτρεχον δὲ καὶ ἐπήδων οἱ ἐκ Βορέου, Πηλεὺς δὲ ταῦτα μὲν ἦν δεύτερος, ἐκράτει δὲ ἀπάντων πάλῃ· ὁπότ' οὖν ἡγωνίζοντο ἐν Λήμνῳ, φασὶν Ἴάσονα Πηλεῖ χαριζόμενον συνάναίαι τὰ πέντε καὶ Πηλέα τὴν νίκην οὕτω συλλέξασθαι. (*Gymnasticus* §3)

Before the time of Jason and Peleus, the long jump was crowned individually, as was the discus, and the javelin alone could win a victory at the time when the Argo used to sail. Telamon was strongest in the discus, Lynceus was strongest in the javelin, but those born from Boreas [Calais and Zetes] were the best at running and jumping. Peleus was second in these events, but he was strongest of all in wrestling. Now when they competed in Lemnos, they say that Jason, to please Peleus, put together the five events and Peleus thus collected the victory.

The temporal range and variety of these sources guarantee that the Argonauts' athletic skills both as individuals and collectively were well known, especially their participation in the funeral games for Pelias. But while the tradition of funeral games is very old in Greek visual art and poetic texts, more important, culturally speaking, were the Panhellenic games, particularly those at Olympia established probably in the late eighth century BCE (the traditional date is 776 BCE). A salient myth for the origin of these games was the contest between Pelops and Oenomaus for the hand of Oenomaus' daughter, Hippodameia. Pausanias says that this contest was depicted on the chest of Cypselus in addition to the funeral games for Pelias (5.17.7), but the protagonists were displayed much more prominently on the east pediment of the temple of Zeus at Olympia, where Pindar tells us that 'the Lydian hero Pelops won [the hilltop of Elis] as the fairest dowry of Hippodameia' (*Olympian* 9.9–10).

The Olympic contest is the first allusion to Panhellenic athletics that we have in the *Argonautica*. In the middle of book 1 Apollonius sketches seven scenes woven on Jason's cloak: the first alludes to the beginning of Zeus's reign as king of the gods, the last to the backstory of the Golden Fleece. Thus, they have a temporal trajectory. The fifth places us in the origin myth of the Olympic games:

ἐν δὲ δύο δίφροι πεπονήατο δηριόωντες.
καὶ τὸν μὲν προπάροιθε Πέλωψ ἴθυνε, τινάσσων
ἡνία, σὺν δὲ οἱ ἔσκε παραβιάτις Ἴποδάμεια·
τὸν δὲ μεταδρομάδην ἐπὶ Μυρτίλος ἤλασεν ἵππους,
σὺν τῷ δ' Οἰνόμοος προτενὲς δόρυ χειρὶ μεμαρπὼς
ἄξονος ἐν πλήμνησι παρακλιδὸν ἀγνυμένοιο
πίπτεν, ἐπεσσύμενος Πελοπία νῶτα δαΐζει. (1.753–58)

On it was wrought two chariots contending.
Pelops drove the one in front, shaking
the reins and Hippodameia rode beside him.
Myrtilus drove the horses of the one behind
and with him Oenomaus, gripping his extended spear in his hand,
fell sideways into the nave of the axle as it broke
when he lunged to strike Pelops' back.

⁵For reconstructions of the images on the chest, see Jones 1894, and for a recent discussion, see Borg 2010.

⁶See illustrations in Roller 1981, plates 19–20.

⁷Eumelus, *Corinthiaka* fr. 8 Bernabé.

⁸How the ancient pentathlon was judged remains a matter of debate. Philostratus' passage indicates that the winner of the wrestling event won the whole, even if he was placed second in the other four.

This contest for a bride with a violent father and a suitor who will defeat him obviously foreshadows the later events at Colchis as enacted by Medea, Aeetes, and Jason. But it does something more: the Olympic games like the other Panhellenic or crown games represent a move away from the funeral games of heroic poetry that were occasional, held only to mark the passing of a great man, and whose contestants were the high achievers of Greek myth. The Olympic games, in contrast, introduced a new means for an ordinary Greek citizen to achieve fame and glory. The importance of such athletic success should not be underestimated: as we have seen, winning conferred honors not only on the victor but also on his family and city. For Apollonius' audience, participation in Panhellenic games was a contemporary and on-going phenomenon; moreover, it was restricted. All competitors were actively scrutinized by the presiding judges to confirm that they were citizens of Greek city states. Non-Greeks could not compete.

Apollonius, unlike the Archaic poets, displays little interest in funeral games. In his epic he chooses to feature the types of contests that Hellenistic Greeks might have attended or engaged in. To illustrate this, I shall focus on three athletic moments in the epic, each of which serves a distinct poetic and political (in the sense of polis-centered) function. The first is a boxing match between Polydeuces and Amycus at the opening of book 2; next is Jason's testing that includes yoking bulls at the close of book 3; and, at the very end of the epic, the foundation of the hydrophoria on Aegina.

The boxing match between the Argonaut Polydeuces and Amycus, the barbarian king of the Bebrycians, had a separate poetic life: apparently it belonged not to the epic, but to the comic tradition. Epicharmus is credited with a comedy entitled *Amycus* and Sophocles with a satyr play.⁹ Representations of Amycus on a fifth-century Lucanian hydria by the appropriately named Amycus painter¹⁰ and on the Ficoroni cista, a cylindrical bronze Etruscan box from the late fourth century,¹¹ give us Amycus as a bound captive, surrounded by Argonauts with water vessels. Theocritus' *Idyll* 22 seems to reflect this tradition, since in his version of this same boxing match the dispute was over access to a spring for drinking water; when Amycus is defeated, he is forced to mend his ways. He does not die.

Apollonius' vignette is of an entirely different order: his athletic contest is clearly set out as 'Greek vs barbarian', and, as Richard Hunter remarks, a contest even 'presented [as] a clash between Olympian fairness and justice and pre-Olympian chthonic forces of darkness'.¹² As the incident begins, the Argonauts have put into the shore, where they are met by Amycus, who 'disdained to ask the purpose of their voyage or who they were', as Greek guest-host customs demanded, but immediately goaded them with his challenge:

ὑπεροπλήεστατον ἀνδρῶν
 ὅς τ' ἐπὶ καὶ ξείνοισιν ἀεικέα θεσμὸν ἔθηκεν,
 μὴ τιν' ἀποστειχεῖν, πρὶν πειρήσασθαι ἐοῖο
 πυγμαχίης· πολέας δὲ περικτιόνων ἐδάξεν.
 καὶ δὲ τότε προτὶ νῆα κιῶν, χρεῖα μὲν ἐρέσθαι
 ναυτιλίης, οἳ τ' εἶεν, ὑπερβασιήσιν ἄτισσεν,
 τοῖον δ' ἐν πάντεσσι παρασχεδὸν ἔκρατο μῦθον·
 'κέκλυθ', ἀλίπλαγκτοι, τὰ περ ἴδμενα ὕμιν εἰκεν.
 οὐ τινα θεσμὸν ἔστιν ἀφορμηθέντα νέεσθαι
 ἀνδρῶν ὄθνεϊων, ὅς κεν Βέβρυξὶ πελάσσει,
 πρὶν χεῖρεσσιν ἐμῆσιν ἕως ἀνὰ χεῖρας ἀεῖραι.' (2.4–15)

He was the most arrogant of men; he imposed even on strangers an outrageous law, that no one could depart before contending with him in boxing; many of his neighbors he had killed. And at that time coming to the ship, he disdained in his insolence to ask the purpose of their voyage and who they were, but to them all he immediately made this statement: 'hear, wanderers on the sea, what you need to know. It is not permissible for a foreigner to leave, who have approached the Bebrycians, before he raised up his hands against my hands'.

⁹ Epicharmus: scholia to Apollonius 2.98–100, fr. 6 K.-A.; Sophocles: Athenaeus, 9.400B, 400C (= *TrGF* 112). On these fragments see Shaw 2004: 60–62.

¹⁰ An image is easily accessed through Wikimedia Commons: Amykos Argonautes Cdm Paris 442.jpg.

¹¹ Rome, National Etruscan Museum of Villa Julia, No. 24787 (K). The image may be accessed at: <http://ancientrome.ru/art/artworken/img.htm?id=3250>

¹² Hunter 1993: 28.

Polydeuces, who is Spartan and has come mythologically programmed as a boxer, readily takes up the challenge. As the two men stand opposite each other, Apollonius describes them like this:

ἀλλ' ὁ μὲν ἢ ὀλοοῖο Τυφώεος, ἥε καὶ αὐτῆς
 γαίης εἶναι εἶκτο πέλωρ τέκος, οἷα πάροιθεν
 χωμένη Διὶ τίκτεν· ὁ δ' οὐρανίῳ ἀτάλαντος
 ἀστέρι Τυνδαρίδης, οὐ περ κάλλιστα ἕασιν
 ἐσπερὴν διὰ νύκτα φαινομένου ἀμαρναί.
 τοῖος ἔην Διὸς υἱός, ἔτι γνοάοντας ἰούλους
 ἀντέλλων, ἔτι φαιδρός ἐν ὄμμασιν. ἀλλὰ οἱ ἀλκή
 καὶ μένος ἤντε θηρὸς ἀέξετο· πῆλε δὲ χεῖρας
 πειράζων, εἶθ' ὥς πρὶν ἐντρόχαλοι φορέονται,
 μηδ' ἄμυδις καμάτω τε καὶ εἰρεσίῃ βαρῦθοιεν. (2.38–47)

The one seemed like the monstrous offspring of deadly Typhoeus or even of the Earth herself, like those she had long ago brought forth in anger at Zeus. But the son of Tyndareus [Polydeuces] was like a star in the heavens which is most beautiful when it shines through the evening's darkness. Such was the son of Zeus, just sprouting a beard, still with bright eyes. His strength and courage increased like that of a wild animal. He flexed his hands testing them to see if they moved nimbly as before and were not weary from the rowing.

Spectators on both sides – the Argonauts and the Bebrycians – seat themselves around as if in a stadium to cheer on their man (2.35–36). The match correctly describes Greek boxing techniques – each man wraps his hands and wrists in leather thongs and holds his hands up before his face. There were no rounds as in modern boxing: the point was to wear out, disable, knock out, or otherwise cause the opponent to yield, and to this end blows were directed primarily at the head – hence the torn-up face so characteristic of boxers. Polydeuces, however, is described as αἰὲν ἀνούτατος (2.75), 'ever uninjured'; he fights strategically, jockeying for position to get the sun behind him, so that it shines in Amycus' eyes; he feints and evades the dangerous blows as he evaluates his opponent's strengths and weaknesses; and when Amycus closes to deal the knock-out punch, Polydeuces slips under his guard and lunges to strike a fatal blow to the side of his opponent's head, crushing the bones near his ear. The king collapses in death, which should have dictated an end to the encounter. In formal competition boxing was dangerous and did sometimes result in death.

Boxing does not fit well with our modern sensibilities, but it was one of the main events that Greek boys and youths practiced in their local gymnasia. Pindar records several Panhellenic victories of boxers, both men and boys: in *Olympian* 7, for example, he even praises Diagoras of Rhodes as 'a man finding success in boxing ... travels a straight road that abhors insolence' (88–90). Words that might easily be applied to Apollonius' portrayal of Polydeuces. And, of course, the success of Cleoxenus, who won at Olympia in 240 BCE, and was described as ἀτραυμάτιστος, suggests that Apollonius' interest in boxing was not entirely devoid of contemporary relevance.

Within his overarching narrative of Polydeuces' match, Apollonius not only rather obviously pits Greek against barbarian, he also sandwiches the incident between two battle scenes. Just before they come to Amycus' land, at the end of book 1, the Argonauts are blown off course at night and accidentally land on the coast from which they had just departed. Their former hosts mistake them for invaders and attack with dire consequence: the Argonauts inadvertently kill the king, their recent host (1.1012–77). The battle is Homericly marked and obviously a disaster. Then, when the boxing match concludes, the Bebrycians in fury at the death of their king attack the Argonauts. (2.98–153). Neither of these battles is constructed to showcase individual fighting prowess or as a display of Homeric *arete*, but rather they give us confusion and wanton destruction of human life. It is in the boxing match that we see courage and success of the individual. As Hunter says with respect to the simile quoted above: 'the description of Polydeuces as a star replays the epic themes, most familiar from Pindar, of the immortality and divine grace

conferred upon the athletic victor by his victory'.¹³

The next athletically marked moment of the epic comes at the climax of book 3, when Jason sets out for the (con)test (ἄεθλον) set him by Aeetes to win the Golden Fleece. As Alexandros Kampakoglou has recently demonstrated, this scene employs obvious elements that signal athletic competition:¹⁴

(1) It begins with Aeetes, the Colchian king and Medea's father in his chariot, likened to Poseidon as he goes to the Isthmian games (3.1240–41: οἷος δ' ἴσθμιον εἶσι Ποσειδάων ἐς ἀγῶνα | ἄρμασιν ἐμβεβαός). However, in Argonautic lore the first Isthmian games took place only after the Argonauts returned from their Colchian adventure, and of course the games were part of the Panhellenic cycle that continued well into the Roman period. As a result of this temporal dislocation, Apollonius allows his audience a momentarily glimpse into their contemporary world.

(2) At 3.1272–74 the location of the contest (the plain of Ares) is said to be as far from the city as the turning post (νόσσα) from the starting point (ἐκ βαλβίδος) for a chariot as when, at a king's death, relatives hold contests (ἄεθλα) for those on foot and on horse (πεζοῖσι καὶ ἰππέεσσι). Both νόσσα and βαλβίς are technical terms.

(3) As with the boxing match, the spectators were seated along the slopes of a hill, as they would have been in an ancient stadium (3.1276).

To these textual prompts we can add one more central: Jason's behavior. After sprinkling his weapons with the drug that Medea has given him, he tests them, then sprinkles himself (3.1246–51). When he reaches the place of the contest, he strides naked (3.1282: γύμνος δέμας) and alone to face the bulls. In contrast, Aeetes has earlier been given a typical Homeric arming scene: he fastened a breast plate around his chest, donned his four-crested helmet, had taken up his shield composed of many hides and his dire spear that no hero could withstand, then mounted his well-built chariot with its swift-footed horses (3.1225–36).

Much has been written about Jason's failings as an epic hero, especially when he is juxtaposed with someone like Aeetes, who does look so Homerically correct. And much has been written to try to explain why Jason should be naked. There is the rather earnest observation that, since Jason must plow the field with fire-breathing bulls, he is taking Hesiod's advice in the *Works and Days* (391) that one should plow fields naked;¹⁵ an explanation that epitomizes the critical habit of treating Alexandrian poetry as intertextually enslaved to its poetic predecessors. Richard Hunter comes closer to the mark, claiming that 'we should here rather think of the nakedness of gods and heroes in Greek art'. But however they may be displayed in Greek art,¹⁶ gods and heroes, as far as I know, are not described as γύμνος in literary texts. In fact, to Apollonius' contemporary audience, the public appearance of a man who was γύμνος on his way to a contest (ἄεθλος) signaled that he was behaving not like a Homeric hero but like a Greek athlete. The unique and defining characteristic of ancient Greek athletics is that it was performed in the nude. The Greek word γύμνος is the basis for several key terms related to athletics: γυμνάζειν ('to exercise'), γυμναστική ('the art of athletic training'), and γυμνάσιον ('the building for athletic training'). In the ancient Olympics and even in spontaneous competitions, as we saw with Xenophon, the ἀγῶνες γυμνικοί, 'naked competitions', referred to all athletic events performed by individual athletes, a category that was distinct from horse events (called ἀγῶνες ἰππικοί) and group or tribal competitions. How and why nudity became customary for ancient Greek athletes was a source of debate even in antiquity. Thucydides struggled to explain it in the fifth century BCE, at the same time that he labelled it a uniquely Greek phenomenon:

Λακεδαιμόνιοι ... ἐγυμνώθησάν τε πρότοι καὶ ἐς τὸ φανερόν ἀποδύντες λίπα μετὰ τοῦ γυμνάζεσθαι ἠλείψαντο· τὸ δὲ πάλοι καὶ ἐν τῷ Ὀλυμπικῷ ἀγῶνι διαζώματα ἔχοντες περὶ τὰ αἰδοῖα οἱ ἀθληταὶ ἠγωνίζοντο, καὶ οὐ πολλὰ ἐπιπέδιον πέπανται. ἔτι δὲ καὶ ἐν τοῖς βαρβάροις ἔστιν οἷς νῦν, καὶ μάλιστα τοῖς Ἀσιανοῖς, πυγμῆς καὶ πάλης ἄθλα τίθεται, καὶ διεζωμένοι τοῦτο δρῶσιν. (1.6.4–6).

The Spartans were ... the first to exercise naked, removing their clothing in public and anointing themselves with oil as part of their naked exercise. In the past even in the Olympic games the athletes competed wearing loin-clothes around their genitals, and it is not many years since the practice ceased. And still among the barbarians even now, especially in the countries of Asia, when boxing and wrestling contests take place, they compete wearing this.

Third-century Alexandrians (or any other brand of Greeks) regularly exercised nude in their local gymnasia and competed in the nude in local and Panhellenic contests; and the heroism with which they were familiar would have been much closer to Jason's style than Aeetes'. By the Hellenistic period the citizen soldier was no longer an important factor in warfare. It was now largely a matter of mercenary soldiers whose wars were – usually – conducted at a distance. But those who won prizes in athletic competitions were fellow citizens of Greek communities to which they brought great honor, as we saw in the earlier letter about a promising athlete as well as the request to treat victors in the Ptolemaia as if they were Olympians. Athletic success was something to be prized and cultivated. It was also familiar.

There is one further aspect to Jason's behavior that may have resonated with a contemporary Alexandrian audience, many of whom will have immigrated from Thessaly. Jason pits himself against bulls. Apart from the four Panhellenic games with their set of core events, Greek cities celebrated local festivals with idiosyncratic competitions that showcased their young athletes. Jason hailed from Thessaly, where the festival of the *Taureia*, held in honor of Poseidon, was famous for bull-wrestling (ταυροκαθάψια). The event is depicted on Thessalian coinage from the fifth century BCE.¹⁷ This tradition of athletic events featuring bulls apparently continued into the Hellenistic period and beyond. A first century BCE/CE inscription from Larisa lists winners at the festival of the *Eleutheria* (IG IX, 2 531) that includes the *taurotheria* as well as the standard events of running, boxing, and pankration. It does not take much imagination to infer that in the dim recesses of the mythological past it was Jason's Thessalian roots lurking behind the story of his testing with bulls.

My final example comes at the very end of the epic:

κεῖθεν δ' ἀπτερέως διὰ μυρίον οἶδμα λιπόντες
Αἰγίνης ἀκτῆσιν ἐπέσχεθον. αἴψα δὲ τοί γε
ὕδρείης πέρι δῆριν ἀμεμφέα δηρίσαντο,
ὅς κεν ἀφυσσάμενος φθαίη μετὰ νῆάδ' ἰκέσθαι.
ἄμφο γὰρ χρεῖώ τε καὶ ἄσπετος οὖρος ἐπειγεν.
ἐνθ' ἔτι νῦν πλήθοντας ἐπωμαδὸν ἀμφοροῖας
ἀνθέμενοι κούφοισιν ἄφαρ κατ' ἀγῶνα πόδεσσιν
κούροι Μυρμιδόνων νίκης πέρι δηριόωνται. (4.1765–72)

From there, quickly leaving behind the vast sea
[the Argonauts] came to a stop on the shores of Aegina. At once
they contended in competition without rancor (δῆριν ἀμεμφέα) over fetching water,
who could draw it and return first to the ship,
since necessity and a stiff wind hurried them on.
There, to this day the sons of the Myrmidons place amphoras
on their shoulders and with their light feet compete for victory in a race.

¹³ Hunter 1993: 28.

¹⁴ Kampakoglou 2019: 119–20.

¹⁵ See Hunter 1989: 241 n. 1282–83.

¹⁶ Hunter 1989: 241 n. 1282–83.

¹⁷ See images, e.g., in Lorber (2008), plates 41–43.

This brief closing incident is a nod to the epic tradition. Book 23 of the *Iliad* ends with 800+ lines of detailed description of the funeral games for Patroclus, and many scholars have pointed out how athletic contests at this point in Homer's narrative function as a peaceful alternative in resolving internal Greek quarrels. Apollonius makes that point as well with his labelling of the foot race as *δῆριν ἀμεμφέα* – a 'contest without rancor'. Equally, this vignette nods to the epinician tradition: in Pindar's *Pythian* 4.250–52 the Argonauts, as they return from Colchis, end their journey on Lemnos, 'where they demonstrate the strength of their limbs'. It also does the cultural work of reaffirming Greekness.

The Argonauts had spent most of the fourth book traversing mythologically alien and dangerous lands – especially the treacherous Syrtis of Libya. The race on Aegina occurs the moment that they finally re-enter Greek space. Their friendly competition is reminiscent of what Xenophon's Ten Thousand did to remind themselves of who they were – they held an athletic contest. Apollonius' participants are not named, but like the earlier boxing match, it has a distinctively local resonance: Apollonius' older contemporary Callimachus had previously written an epinician for an Aeginetan victor in this same contest. Apart from its first line, Callimachus' poem does not survive, but the summary does:

ἐπίνικος Πολυκλεῖ Αἰγινήτῃ νικήσαντι διαύλω Ἀμφορίτῃ ἐν τῇ πατρίδι. τὸ δ' ἀγώνισμα τοῦτο· πρὸς τῷ τέρματι τοῦ σταδίου κείται ἀμφορεὺς πλήρης ὕδατος, ἐφ' ὃν δραμῶν κενὸς ὁ ἀγωνιζόμενος ἀναλαβὼν τὸν ἀμφορέα ἀνακίμπτει, προφθάσας δὲ νικᾷ. κατήχθησαν δὲ ἐντεῦθεν οἱ Ἀργοναῦται ἐπιβάντες τῆς Αἰγίνης, ἡμίλλησαν δὲ ἀλλήλοισι ὑδρευόμενοι ὑπὲρ τοῦ θάπτον· ὁ δ' ἀγὼν Ὑδροφορία καλεῖται. (Diegesis to *Iambus* 8, fr. 198 Pf.)

An epinician for Polycles of Aegina, victor in the double stade race with amphoras in his homeland. This is the contest: an amphora full of water is placed at the end of the stadium, to which point the competitor runs, empty-handed. Picking up the amphora he returns, and the victor is the one who arrives first. The contest was established when the Argonauts disembarked on Aegina and competed with one another to be the swiftest in carrying water. The contest is called the *Hydrophoria*.¹⁸

As with the spontaneous games in Xenophon, Apollonius' events fall into the category of *ἀγῶνες γυμνικοί* – the naked contests that featured individual prowess, in contrast to the *ἵπτικοὶ ἀγῶνες* so prominent in the *Iliad*, in the contest of Pelops and Oenomaus, or the Archaic representations of the funeral games for Pelias, in which even the Argonauts compete in chariot racing. Of course, the nature of the expedition precludes the possibility of chariots and horses – these men are sailors in a boat. Still, the absence of hippic events so beloved of Ptolemies and other Hellenistic elites move the Argonauts closer to the average Greek citizen as does Jason's naked body. In fact, scholars have argued that the characteristic nakedness of a subset of Greek athletic competitions was itself democratizing, in that the rich citizen became undistinguishable from the poor. Equally, it promoted the social cohesiveness of the citizen class, whatever their *polis*: nakedness identified those who were entitled to compete to the exclusion of those who were deemed unfit – namely, women, slaves, and foreigners.¹⁹ Further Apollonius' featured events – boxing, bull-yoking, and the hydrophoria – are markedly non-Homeric. Polydeuces, while certainly a mythic hero, was known less for his battle prowess than his boxing and his unique willingness to share his own immortality with his brother Castor. The two were worshipped in Alexandria and elsewhere as patrons of sailors and seafarers. Then, by ending with an *aition* or explanation for the establishment of a new athletic contest Apollonius aligns the epic past with a common feature of Hellenistic cities, both old and new. As we saw, the Ptolemies established the Ptolemaia very early in the city's history, but the Ptolemaia was by no means unique. The establishment, or often the reestablishment, of athletic games in cities of the Hellenistic east was one of the strategies monarchs used to assert their place on the Hellenic stage and to cultivate networks of mutual friendship and support (as with Ptolemy and the Nesiotic League). And the justification for these new venues was often bolstered with 'evidence' drawn from a mythological past (i.e., the competition of the Argonauts on Aegina).

In Alexandria, Apollonius was writing for Greeks who no longer lived in the familiar world of the classical *polis*. They were governed by a man who out of necessity sometimes operated like a Greek *basileus*, at other times like an Egyptian pharaoh. Apollonius' epic, like the works of other early Alexandrian poets, is not an intertextual trip down the memory lane of the Archaic past so much as an exploration of the complex processes of displacement and identity formation that is both reflective and prescriptive. In the *Argonautica* athletics forges a link between past and present; it provided Greeks with a ready signifier of the difference between themselves and others and of their own uniqueness as Greek citizens, whatever their *polis*. At the same time, it provided them with concrete examples of non-Homeric means of achieving excellence and fame. Jason is not a Homeric hero, and, apparently, he does not need to be. On an Apulian hydria of the early Hellenistic period, as he gives the golden fleece to Pelias, he is being crowned as a victorious athlete.²⁰

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¹⁸ For a discussion of this contest on Aegina see Polinskaya 2013: 143–47.

¹⁹ Christesen 2014: 226–29.

²⁰ Louvre K127. Apulian red figure kylix crater by Underworld Painter, c. 340–330 BCE. This may be accessed through Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jason_Pelias_Louvre_K127.jpg.

