

Zeitschrift: Museum Helveticum : schweizerische Zeitschrift für klassische Altertumswissenschaft = Revue suisse pour l'étude de l'antiquité classique = Rivista svizzera di filologia classica

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Vereinigung für Altertumswissenschaft

Band: 64 (2007)

Heft: 4

Artikel: Phasis and Aia

Autor: West, Martin L.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-49513>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 14.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Phasis and Aia

By Martin L. West, Oxford

Abstract: It is argued that the names Phasis and Aia in the Argonaut legend were purely mythical in origin. Aia (related to ἁώς) was the Dawnland; Phasis was the River of Radiance from which the sun rose.

The land of the Golden Fleece, the goal of the Argo's voyage, is located by classical authors in Colchis, the country at the furthest end of the Black Sea corresponding to the western part of modern Georgia. The river Phasis was identified with the principal river of that region, the Rioni. It is the conviction of most Georgians that the Argonaut legend reflects historical contact between their forefathers and the Mycenaean Greeks.

However, the Greek legend cannot have come to Colchis before the Greeks did, and on the evidence of archaeology they did not get there until the sixth century BCE, as the culmination of a gradual process of Black Sea exploration and colonization that did not get under way before 700.¹ The earliest source that locates Aietes' kingdom in Colchis is a fragment (17 W.) of the *Korinthiaka* attributed to Eumelos. Eumelos was supposed to have lived in the eighth century, but the hexameter poems ascribed to him are certainly of later date, and the *Korinthiaka* is to be assigned to the sixth century.² Greeks from Miletos were settling in Colchis at that time, and having found that it was the furthest east it was possible to sail on that sea, they identified it as the land to which the Argonauts had sailed centuries before.³

The Argonaut legend itself was a good deal older. Its currency in the seventh century is presupposed by allusions in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Hesiod and the pseudo-Hesioda, and Mimnermos.⁴ As in the later versions, Jason and his companions set out from Iolkos and sailed across the north Aegean by way of Lemnos. We can take it for granted that from there they went up through the Bosporos and out into the greater sea beyond. But that sea was still almost wholly

1 David Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity* (Oxford 1994) 89–118; G. R. Tsetskhladze, *Die Griechen in der Kolchis* (Amsterdam 1998). The earliest fragment of Greek pottery from the region, from Batumi in southwest Colchis, is perhaps from the end of the seventh century.

2 M. L. West, *JHS* 122 (2002) 130–131. Mistaken faith in the eighth-century date of 'Eumelos' has drawn archaeologists into groundless speculation about earlier Greek visits to the area.

3 Cf. U. von Wilamowitz, *Griechische Tragödien* iii (3rd ed., Berlin 1910) 169–170; P. Friedländer, *Rh. Mus.* 69 (1914) 300; A. Lesky, *Wien. St.* 63 (1948) 24, 38–39 = *Gesammelte Schriften* (Basel 1975) 27, 38–39.

4 *Il.* 7.467–469; 21.40–41; 23.746–747; *Od.* 12.69–72; Hes. *Th.* 340, 956–962, 992–1002; *Catalogue of Women*, fr. 38, 40, 63, 241 M.-W.; *Megalai Ehoiai*, fr. 253–255; *Keykos gamos*, fr. 263; *Aigimios*, fr. 299; *Mimn.* fr. 11–11a W.

unexplored. It was not yet known to be enclosed; the assumption was that, like the western sea, it connected with Okeanos.⁵ The Argonauts' destination at this early period was not Colchis or any other territory of the real world. It was a purely mythical region, located by the stream of Okeanos and the rising of the sun. This is shown very clearly by the two relevant fragments of Mimnermos:

- (11 W.) οὐδέ κοτ' ἄν μέγα κῶας ἀνήγαγεν αὐτὸς Ἴησων
 ἐξ Αἴης τελέσας ἀλγινόεσσαν ὁδόν,
 ὑβριστῇ Πελίῃ τελέων χαλεπῆρες ἄεθλον,
 οὐδ' ἄν ἐπ' Ὠκεανοῦ καλὸν ἵκοντο ῥόον.

Nor ever would Jason himself have brought back
 the great fleece from Aia, completing that arduous
 journey as he performed the difficult trial for arrogant
 Pelias, nor would they have reached Okeanos' fair stream.

- (11a) Αἰήταο πόλιν, τόθι τ' ὠκέος Ἡελίοιο
 ἀκτῖνες χρυσέωι κείαται ἐν θαλάμῳ
 Ὠκεανοῦ παρὰ χεῖλος, ἵν' ὦιχετο θεῖος Ἴησων.

Aietes' city, where swift Helios' rays are stored in a golden
 chamber by the edge of Okeanos, where godlike Jason went.

In later versions, formed after the Phasis had been discovered in Colchis, the Argonauts reached Okeanos by sailing up the river from Aietes' city;⁶ the Pontos had turned out to be landlocked, but beyond Colchis Okeanos must still be found. In this Mimnermos fragment, however, Aietes' city is itself situated beside Okeanos, in the immediate vicinity of the sunrise. Aietes was the son of Helios. His sister Kirke, whom we know from the *Odyssey* and who no doubt played some part in the Argo story,⁷ lived on an island

ὅθι τ' Ἡοῦς ἡριγενείης
 οἰκία καὶ χοροὶ εἰσι καὶ ἀντολαὶ Ἡελίοιο.

where are early-born Dawn's chambers and dancing-floors,
 and the risings of the Sun (*Od.* 12.3–4).

This island was in the sea, but close to Okeanos (*Od.* 11.1–13, 12.1–3).

5 Cf. Strab. 1.2.10, ἀπλῶς δ' οἱ τότε τὸ πέλαγος τὸ Ποντικὸν ὥσπερ ἄλλόν τινα Ὠκεανὸν ὑπελάμβανον, καὶ τοὺς πλέοντας ἐκέϊσε ὁμοίως ἐκτοπίζειν ἐδόκουν ὥσπερ τοὺς ἔξω Στηλῶν ἐπὶ πολὺ προΐόντας.

6 'Hes.' fr. 241; Hecat. *FGrHist* 1 F 18 = fr. 18 Fowler; Pind. *P.* 4.251.

7 Cf. M. L. West, *CQ* 55 (2005) 43–45.

For Mimnermos the name of the land of the Golden Fleece is Aia. From this are derived the adjective Αἰαῖος, which in the *Odyssey* is applied both to Kirke's island and to her, and the name of Aietes, 'the man of Aia'. By Herodotos' time this mythical Aia had been firmly located in Colchis, and he speaks of Αἶαν τὴν Κολχίδα (1.2.2; cf. 7.193.2, 197.3). But originally Aia was as mythical a place as Okeanos itself, or as Geryon's 'Ruddy Island' (Erytheia) in the far west.

The other toponym intrinsic to the story from the beginning is the Phasis. It appears in Hesiod's catalogue of the world's principal rivers (*Th.* 338–345), and we may assume that he knew it in connection with the Argo story, as it had no existence in any other context. It is immediately preceded in his list by the Danube, and he no doubt conceived it to be located somewhere in the north-east, beyond the Bosporos, though it makes no sense to look for a particular river that was his Phasis. Later, when Greek mariners reached the Don, this was identified by some as the mythical Phasis.⁸ Later still, when they reached Colchis, they identified the Rioni as the Phasis and gave this name also to their own primary settlement by its mouth, just as they established an Istros on the Danube, a Borysthenes on the Dnieper, and a Tanais on the Don.⁹

Before these identifications of the Phasis with real rivers encountered around the Black Sea, we must suppose it to have been a purely mythical entity, part of that imaginary landscape in which Dawn had her dancing-places and Helios his golden storehouse of rays. But what was the function of a river in that landscape? How did it relate to the world river Okeanos, from which in Homer the sun and the dawn rise (*Il.* 7.422, 19.1, etc.)?

I submit that in the original form of the myth, as it developed probably in Submycenaean Thessaly, the Phasis took the place of Okeanos, not as a river conceived to encircle the whole earth but in its more specific identity as the river from which the sun rose. To find the Golden Fleece the Argonauts had to sail to the banks of the Phasis: this is the datum that by Mimnermos' time has been transmuted into 'they sailed to Okeanos' fair stream'. We are accustomed to think of Okeanos as a Panhellenic concept of immemorial antiquity. It is embedded in the Ionian poetic tradition represented by the Homeric and Hesiodic poems. But we have no idea of the origin of the name Okeanos; it has not been satisfactorily explained from Greek, and if it is a foreign borrowing we cannot say where it came from or at what period it was adopted.¹⁰ It might have been unknown to Thessalian mythical cosmology in 1000 BCE.

8 U. von Wilamowitz, *Aischylos. Interpretationen* (Berlin 1914) 152–153; J. D. P. Bolton, *Aristeas of Proconnesus* (Oxford 1962) 55–59.

9 On attempts to link the name Phasis with that of the west Georgian port town Poti see Otar Lordkipanidze, *Phasis. The River and City in Colchis* (*Geographica Historica* 15, Stuttgart 2000) 11–12. Poti was never a river-name and is not on the site of the Greek city, though in the same area.

10 See my discussion in *The East Face of Helicon* (Oxford 1997) 143–148.

If Okeanos does not lend itself to etymological analysis, Phasis does. Once we recognize it as the mythical river of the land of the sunrise, a singularly easy and apt etymology comes immediately: **Bhā-tis*, ‘Radiant’. *Bhā* is the old root verb seen in *Od.* 14.502 φάε δὲ χρυσόθρονος Ἡώς (and in Hesychius φ 146 φάντα· λάμποντα). In the *Rigveda* the same verb is frequently used of Dawn or the Dawns: 1.92.9 *urviyā ví bhāti*, ‘(Dawn) shines out widely’; 3.6.7 *Uṣó vibhātír ánu bhāsi pūrvīh* ‘you shine in accord with the many shining Dawns’; 3.61.2 *ví bhāhi* ‘shine forth’ (imperative); 6.65.2 *bhānty Uṣásah* ‘the Dawns shine’, etc. Similarly in the *Avesta* we have *uši ... bāmya* ‘shining dawn’.¹¹ Various adjectives derived from this root are applied to Dawn in Greek: φαεινή, φαινολίσ, φαεσίμβροτος, etc. As for the *-tis* suffix, which in Greek regularly becomes *-σις*, it normally makes feminine *nomina actionis*, but at an early period it could also make masculine *nomina agentis*. Buck and Petersen cite Sanskrit *dhū-ti-s*, which as a masculine means ‘shaker’ and as a feminine ‘shaking’, and the isolated Greek masculines μάντις, μάρπτις.¹² Sanskrit actually has the word *bhāti-* in its feminine form, ‘shining, lustre’. The river-name Φᾶσις is naturally masculine, with the suffix having agentive force.

That Φᾶ- did not change into Φῆ- in the epic language need occasion no surprise or doubt. If it was at home in Thessalian mythology and remembered especially in Aeolic poetic tradition, it could retain its Aeolic form in just the same way as did Φῆρες, the Thessalian Centaurs (*Il.* 1.268), as against Ionic θῆρες.

Phasis was then originally the mythical River of Radiance in the furthest east from which the sun rose. Perhaps the idea was that the sun’s (and stars’) radiance was actually renewed by the passage through the water; cf. *Il.* 5.5–6 ἄστέρ’ ὁπωρινῶι ἐναλίγκιον, ὅς τε μάλιστα λαμπρὸν παμφαίνησι λελουμένος Ὠκεανοῖο.¹³ That would account for the river being given the name of Phasis.

What about Aia? Does that name hold a similar secret? Eduard Schwyzer, who perversely derived Αἴᾱ from (νῆσος) Αἰαῖν instead of *vice versa*, explained the adjective as meaning ‘of Dawn’; he took it as representing *ἄ(ν)αία, formed from the ἄφα or αὔα which he found in Zenodotus’ curious reading ἄας for ἡοῦς at *Il.* 8.470.¹⁴

Semantically this is exactly what we should like to find. The formal analysis is shaky, but we can improve on it. The Indo-European word for dawn is based on

11 *Vidēvdāt* 19.28. Hence Manichaean Middle Persian ʾwšybʾm, Pahlavi *ušbām* ‘daybreak, morning’; Ilya Gershevitch, *The Avestan Hymn to Mithra* (Cambridge 1959) 291.

12 C. D. Buck and Walter Petersen, *A Reverse Index of Greek Nouns and Adjectives* (Chicago 1949) 574. The name of the Oceanid nymph Μηλόβοσις (Hes. *Th.* 354), though feminine, must be understood as ‘flock-feeder’.

13 The idea of the sun’s cleansing bath is also found in Baltic and Slavonic popular mythology. See my *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (Oxford 2007) 212.

14 E. Schwyzer, *IF* 38 (1917/20) 158–159; cf. P. Kretschmer, *Glotta* 12 (1923) 216; Lesky (as n. 3) 23–24/26–27. For other attempted etymologies of Αἴᾱ, none at all persuasive, cf. Lesky 39–42/40–42. Lesky considers the possibility of non-Greek origin, and I have explored this avenue in *The East Face of Helicon* 407f.

a verbal root $*h_2us/*h_2eus$ meaning ‘glow (red), flame’ (also seen in Latin *aurum* < $*ausom$, Old Prussian *ausis*, ‘gold’), extended by a stem affix $-ós-$ or alternatively $-ró-$. From the form with $-ós-$ come Vedic *uśás-*, Avestan *uśah-*, Greek ὥς, αὔως, ἥως, ἔως, Latin *aurora* ($*ausōs-ā$). With full grade in the root, zero grade in the suffix, and the feminine ending $-ih_2$ we get $*h_2eus-s-ih_2$, in which the $-s-$ would undergo regular simplification to $-s-$.¹⁵ In Greek this would develop into $*āwh-ya$, $*hāw-ya$,¹⁶ and then, by regular assimilation of $*wy$ to $*yy$,¹⁷ $*hāyya$, Αἶα, or with East Greek psilosis Αἶα.

Aia then can mean simply and straightforwardly ‘Dawnland’. But there is a complication that rightly troubled Schwyzler. Besides Αἶα as the name of the land of the Golden Fleece, the poetic language knows an αἶα that means simply ‘land’ and serves as a useful metrical alternative to γαῖα.¹⁸ Is this the same word? But how could ‘Land’ serve to designate a particular place, whether in real or mythical geography? What sense would there be in a νῆσος Αἰαίη or an Αἰαίη Κίρκη as ‘the island of Land’, ‘Kirke of Land’? But if it is not the same word, we shall have to puzzle over the etymology of a second αἶα, independent of the first.

I see a conceivable solution, which I put forward without much confidence but for what it is worth. Manu Leumann taught us that words in the epic vocabulary have sometimes changed their meaning through misunderstanding of their function in ambiguous contexts. Now in two places in the *Iliad* (8.1 = 24.695) we find the verse

Ἦώς μὲν (or δὲ) κροκόπεπλος ἐκίδνατο πᾶσαν ἐπ’ αἶαν.

This might in principle have been an old formula; the goddess’s saffron robe recalls motifs of the Vedic *Uśas* hymns.¹⁹ In certain other expressions relating to dawn the focus is on the locality from which the goddess comes:

Ἦώς δ’ ἐκ λεχέων παρ’ ἀγαυοῦ Τιθωνοῖο
ᾤρνυθ’, ἵν’ ἀθανάτοισι φῶς φέροι ἡδὲ βροτοῖσιν (11.1–2).

Ἦώς μὲν κροκόπεπλος ἀπ’ Ὠκεανοῖο ῥοάων
ᾤρνυθ’, ἵν’ ἀθανάτοισι φῶς φέροι ἡδὲ βροτοῖσιν (19.1–2).

15 As in the Vedic gen. *uśás* < $*h_2us-s-és$. I am indebted to Calvert Watkins for this improvement on my original idea of $*h_2eus-ih_2$.

16 The expected development would be with short *a* in the first syllable, but ὥς for some reason has a long one. The internal *h* aspirates the initial vowel.

17 A. Heubeck, *Die Sprache* 9 (1963) 195–198 = *Kleine Schriften zur griechischen Sprache und Literatur* (Erlangen 1984) 398–401.

18 Cf. Kurt Witte, *Glotta* 3 (1912) 113; 4 (1913) 5 = *Zur homerischen Sprache* (Darmstadt 1972) 37, 87; Lesky (as n. 3) 46/45. αἶα is found only 28 times in Homer, always at verse-end, as against over 300 examples of γαῖα.

19 Cf. *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (as n. 13) 220–221.

Is it possible that Ἡὼς μὲν κροκόπεπλος ἐκίδνατο πᾶσαν ἐπ' αἶαν originally meant not 'spread over the whole earth' but 'spread over all the world's eastern rim'? If so, it is easy to see how in time the true meaning of αἶα might be forgotten and the phrase reinterpreted as 'over the whole earth'. It might then have been taken over for use in other contexts, such as 9.506–507 (Ate) πολλὸν ὑπεκπροθέει, φθάνει δέ τε πᾶσαν ἐπ' αἶαν βλάπτουσ' ἄνθρώπους, or 23.742 (a silver krater) αὐτὰρ κάλλει ἐνίκᾳ πᾶσαν ἐπ' αἶαν, and αἶα adopted as a metrical convenient alternative for γαῖα, as when πατρίδος αἴης is used as the genitive corresponding to πατρίδα γαῖαν, πατρίδι γαίῃ.

In conclusion I would emphasize that I am not claiming the Argonaut legend to be a solar myth, as certain scholars were prone to do in the nineteenth and still in the early twentieth century.²⁰ I do not see Jason as a solar figure, or the Golden Fleece as a solar symbol. Aietes and Medea exhibit no solar behaviour. But it is undeniable that they are of Helios' immediate family and that the goal of the Argo's voyage is the eastern extremity of the earth by the dwellings of Sun and Dawn. I hope to have established the probability that this is the key to the names Phasis and Aia.

Correspondence:
Martin L. West
All Souls College
UK-Oxford OX1 4AL

20 Cf. A. Kuhn and W. Mannhardt, summarized by K. Seeliger in Roscher i. 531; F. Max Müller, *Contributions to the Science of Mythology* (London 1897) 436–440; Leopold von Schroeder, *Arische Religion* (Leipzig 1914–16) ii. 22–25.