Mythology in the Scholia on Apollonius Rhodius

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Scholia represent a significant heritage of the ancient critics’ philological activity. Their main aim was to contribute to correct understanding of the text while taking into account not only the linguistic and literary perspectives but also the regional and social context. Hence scholia to works dealing with mythology also contain interesting information on various versions of individual myths and their traditions; apart from that, they show the ways of how ancient critics viewed particular myths. On the scholia to the epic work by Apollonius Rhodius, whose epic is the only preserved representative from the Hellenistic period, it will be shown what paradigms of thoughts can be found in the approaches towards the ancient myth. Consequently, these paradigms will be subject to comparison with traditional ancient interpretation methods of myth.

Ancient scholia, commonly understood as comments inserted in the margin or in between individual lines of a manuscript of an ancient author, represent an important legacy of ancient criticism. Their main function was to encourage the correct comprehension of a text, both in terms of its language, and its literary and cultural background. It can thus be expected that scholia related to works with mythological topics will discuss myths. In this paper, I am going to present the paradigms of ancient myth interpretation which surround the scholia on Apollonius Rhodius, and compare them to common methods of myth interpretation from antiquity.

Mythology is omnipresent in the scholia on Apollonius's epic work; however, it is not the numerous mythographic comments which neutrally elaborate on information about a particular myth, such as its diverse versions and variety of literary forms, that I am going to explore now. Even though such information is valuable, it may not be helpful regarding critical evaluation of a myth. This can only be found in those commentaries which seek an interpretation of a myth. In this respect, two

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main approaches were advanced in Antiquity — allegoresis and historicism/rationalism. While allegoresis searched under the surface of a mythological narrative for a picture of eternally repeated physical processes or that of universally valid ethical processes, the other approach accentuated traces of historical events in myths, which were likely to become magnified into legendary dimensions with time.  

One of the examples of the historical, or rather rational explanation in the scholia to Apollonius Rhodius is a gloss on a story about Phryxus and his journey to Colchis on the back of a speaking ram. According to the scholiast, Phryxus’s educator was a man named Ram (Κριός). When Ram found out that Phryxus’s step mother was plotting against the little shepherd, he made his nurse-child flee to Colchis, hence a story about a speaking ram (I, 256–9; II, 1144–5; IV, 115–7b). This kind of explanation seems to assume an onomastic miscomprehension of the myth, i.e. that a person bearing an animal name was mistaken for the animal concerned. The ancient rational tradition was actually very fond of this type of explication. Since the scholiast does not add any comment to the explanation, it is difficult to infer whether he was a proponent of the traditional mythology, or whether he understood the myth at different levels as well. Nevertheless, it is obvious that he did not intend to conceal any aspect of the mythology from the reader.

Another scholion that I am now going to look at includes the writer’s standpoint. It tells the story of the birth of Giant Tityus who was supposed to be the son of both female earthlings — Elara and the Goddess Gaia. Finding this an unbelievable and unreliable piece of information (δοκεῖ δὲ ἡ ἱστορία ἀπίθανος εἶναι καὶ ἄπιστος), the scholiast (I, 760–2c) adds comments and offers his own explication as well (ἀλλ’ ἐροῦμεν, ὅτι...: “but let us say that...”). He maintains that poets see the creatures of monster bodies as descendants of Mother Earth, a point which can also be found in Callimachus, who named terrible animals the creatures of Goddess Ge. Tityus himself was large indeed — as referred to in Homer (Od., XI, 577) — however, upon birth he was little (φαμὲν οὖν: “let us say”) and thus thought to be the son of Elara. When he

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3 On allegoresis see e.g.: Fruechtel, 1989; Herzog, 1971; Müller, 1924; Wehrli, 1928.
4 Hunger, 1954:40ff., recommends that we do not contradistinguish rationalism and allegoresis. He rather considers the first type of myth interpretation to be a part of allegoresis.
6 Palaephatus, a rational interpreter, believed that there also existed other kinds of mistakes that led to the birth of myths, such as etymological, metaphorical and logical mistakes. For instance, a mistake in etymology was a source of the tale about the golden apples of the Hesperides (cf. schol. Ap. Rhod. IV, 1396–99a; Palaeph. 18), and a logical mistake can be found in the tale about Endymion — see below; the wrongly understood metaphor was a source of the myth about Scylla (cf. schol. Ap. Rhod. IV, 825–31a; Palaeph. 20 offers a different explanation, but of the same kind).
7 Cf. e.g. Palaeph. 2; 5; 15; 18; Heraclitus (the Paradoxographer) 7, 20, 24.
had grown up, though, the [poets] are said to have created an impression (ἔπλασαν) that Ge bore and brought him up.

The afore-mentioned comment reminds us of Palaephatus’s rationalistic exegesis of myths dating back to the fourth century BC.\(^8\) Palaephatus\(^9\) studied in Athens at Aristotle’s school. Besides philosophical investigations, natural science research, and other fields of study, one of the disciplines pursued there was also rational explanation of myths. This particular branch of knowledge was of special interest to Palaephatus. Out of his extensive work Περὶ ἀπίστων (On Unbelievable Tales), which at the time comprised 5 books, producing exegeses of the most famous tales, only 45 exegeses have been preserved. Despite the small number of Palaephatus’s surviving myth interpretations, they constitute a unique and original source of evidence of classical rationalism and can thus serve as a frame of reference for the myth interpretations included in scholia.

All of Palaephatus’s explanations are structured in a very similar fashion. First, a traditional form of the myth is introduced, and then the writer’s opinion follows. Often he considers the tale foolish, ridiculous and even untrue: 7, 9. In addition, he holds that it is impossible or foolish to believe it is true: 3, 4, 8; alternatively, he holds that the tale in its form is impossible: 2, 5 etc. Finally, Palaephatus brings in his own explanation, often introduced with a sentence: “The truth is...” (τὸ δὲ ἀληθὲς ἔχει ὧδε).\(^10\) Likewise, Apollonius’s scholiast structured his text by starting with the myth in its traditional form (the tale about the motherhood of Elara), followed by rejection of this version (δοκεῖ δὲ ἡ ἱστορία ἀπίθανος εἶναι καὶ ἄπιστος), and completed by his own interpretation of the myth. It is worth mentioning though that in comparison with Palaephatus, this scholiast makes a more modest impression since he does not state categorically what the truth is, but rather expresses that this is his opinion (ἀλλ’ ἐροῦμεν, ὅτι...; φαμὲν οὖν...). He may have lacked the confidence of a “professional” exegete of myths, as Palaephatus was regarded. Nevertheless, he must have known the common methods of the ancient approach to myth interpretation since, like other thinkers,\(^11\) he makes the poets responsible for creating myths.

In yet another example, a rational approach to myth interpretation is highlighted as opposed to a poetic fantasy. This concerns comments I, 1207 as well as I, 1207b, which refer to the abduction of Heracles’s follower Hylas by nymphs in Mysia (Arg., I, 1207–39). The scholiast presents various alternatives of the myth first — who actually drew water from a fountain, and whether Hylas was Heracles’s or Polyphemus’s lover — and then concludes that Onasus presents a more truthful picture (ἀληθέστερον τὴν

\(^8\) On Palaephatus see e.g.: Blumenthal, 1942; Fornaro, 2000; Osmun, 1956; Radová, 2006; Santoni, 2002; Stern, 1999; Vitelli, 1893; Wipprecht, 1892.

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\(^10\) For example: 1; 2.

\(^11\) Cf. Xenophanes, Fg. B 11, Diels-Kranz.
ιστορίαν ἐκτίθεται). According to Onasus Hylas was not drawn down into the water by the nymphs, but he simply fell down into the stream and died. The scholiast does not focus on which of the versions is more compelling — whether the surreal one by Apollonius, or the more rational one by Onasus, but accentuates the fact that Onasus’s interpretation is more truthful, which may suggest a tendency for an unconventional view of mythology by the scholiast.

The origins of a rational approach to myth interpretation are inseparable from the work of the first historical authors; that is in the early stages of the genre, the authors of genealogical writings. While constructing the histories of families and towns, they inevitably travelled into the most distant mythical history, trying to adapt it to other narratives, i.e. they were likely to eliminate the layers of folk narrative tradition to reach the presumable historical event.12 The first book of scholia on the epic poem _The Argonautica_ also treats mythology as history, albeit, in a fairly unexpected manner. In scholion I, 156–60a. Periclymenus, one of the Argonauts, is introduced. The scholiast maintains that it is obvious (δῆλον) that that man is the son of Neleus, since Homer mentions this in _Odysseia_, and a citation follows (XI, 286). After that, the scholiast adds that Periclymenus, as a grandson of Poseidon, had been capable of changing his appearance and had died when transformed into a fly by Heracles. The first part of the scholion thus brings us into the world of history when the scholiast enters a genealogic piece of information that in his view is irrefutable. The supportive authority is Homer. The very next moment, though, the comment goes on beyond any level of credibility, at least for ancient rationally thinking exegetes of myths. The comparison with Palaephatus’s tale about Mestra (23), who according to tradition could also change her appearance, shows us that the myth cannot have been acceptable to someone approaching myths rationally. The scholiast thus accepts the work of poets here (besides Homer, who was regarded as a source of historical information in the era of Antiquity in every case, Hesiod is also cited in the scholion)13 as reliable sources and does not aim at a more truthful explanation.

We will turn now to the other popular interpretation of myth in Antiquity that can be found in the scholia on Appolonius Rhodius, i.e. allegoresis. In this respect, for example, Hermes is introduced as speech (I, 516–8b as an explanation why before sleep people immolated animal tongues and poured wine for him) and a Cypriote, Aphrodite, as an experience of love (τὸ ἐρωτικὸν πάθος), which causes the nymph’s heart to beat faster upon the sight of Hylas (I, 1233). To an extent the category of allegoresis also comprises scholion I, 763–4a, which explains the sense of the pictures embroidered in Jason’s coat. Even though this interpretation of a myth is not part of the epic poem, but an interpretation of pictures painted on a piece of clothing, the pictures do come from a mythical world, and as such also represent an allegoresis.

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13 The inconsistencies and discrepancies in the Hesiodic genealogies had become examples for poets’ unreliability since Hellenism (Hahn, 1985:132).
In terms of terminology, scholion IV, 57–58, seems quite interesting. It tells a myth about an eternal sleep of Endymion. The scholiast opens the scene with the background of the myth and then adds that some “destroy” the myth (ἔνιοι δὲ ἀναιροῦσι τὸν ἐπὶ τῷ Ἐνδυμίωνος ὕπνῳ μύθον). The destruction is supposed to lie in the following rationalistic explanation. Endymion was said to be a passionate hunter. Since game comes out for food mainly at night, he had to hunt beneath the moon. During the day, he rested in a cave, which led some to believe that he was an eternal sleeper. Next, the scholiast adds another type of explication, introducing it with the words οἱ δὲ ἀλληγοροῦσι τὸν μύθον (“some interpret this myth through allegory”). In this case, however, rather a type of rationalism is in play. According to the scholiast, Endymion was the first to explore celestial phenomena, the Moon in particular, which led him to sleep during the day. The scholion thus supports Hunger’s claim that we should consider rationalism a part of allegoresis.

An integral part of epic poems was the representation of Gods. Although they play less important parts in Apollonius Rhodius than that in Homer or Hesiod, they are also present and the scholiasts do incorporate their existence into the comments. The comments are mostly respectful; for instance in I, 721–2, the beauty of Jason’s coat is suggested by the very fact that it was a gift from a goddess. This brief note implies that gifts from gods, in this case even made by the goddess, are always beautiful. Also, gods are seen as architects of phenomena worth admiring. In Arg. I, 820–2, Hypsipyle argues with Jason that God inspired the women of Lemnos to bravely close the town gates against their unfaithful husbands and did not let them in. The scholion (I, 820) then points out that it seemed to be admirable and unbelievable (δεινὸν καὶ ἄπιστον) that women gained control over men, and therefore Hypsipyle mentions godly help. Hypsipyle’s words are presented here without further comment and thus it may be assumed that the scholiast agrees with them and accepts gods as creators of unbelievable events.

The two examples show that in line with tradition, the scholia on Apollonius Rhodius keep respect towards gods. This fact does not clash with rational explanations in other comments. Palaephatus also remembers gods at times, and his words are fairly mild in this respect. For instance, in the case of the myth of Actaeon, who was supposed to be changed into a stag by Artemis, he said (6) that “Artemis may be able to do anything she feels like, but it is not true that a stag comes from a human or that a human comes from a stag.” Artemis is thus given permission to act as she pleases, but the story as such appears to be incredible. In a similar vein, he is tolerant of Zeus’s story about Europe (15), saying that “if Zeus wanted Europe to get to Crete, he might

14 See note 2.
15 Another scholion (III, 233–4a) questions the credibility of the myth about Hephaestus becoming lame. According to the scholiast, this contradicts his great power.
16 Ἀρτεμίν μὲν δύνασθαι ὅ τι θέλησαι· οὐ μέντοι ἐστίν ἄληθες ἔλαφον ἢ ἐξ ἀνδρὸς ἢ ἐκ ἐλάφου ἄνδρα γενέσθαι.
have found an easier way for her”. There is thus no direct indication here that Zeus could not participate in moving Europe from Africa, and Palaephatus even believes that if the supreme God had expressed such a wish, he would have certainly thought of a better way than the myth says. Thus, even a great challenger of the traditional interpretation of myths wants to avoid any insult to the gods and prefers to keep a respectable distance (as far as it is possible to infer from the few works preserved). The authors of scholia actually structured their texts in a similar fashion — on the one hand, they were able to explain myths in a different way from that which the tradition required; on the other hand, they did not intend to dispute the gods’ grandness, as shown in the epic works.

To conclude, scholia provide us with an instructive insight into how ancient critics looked at particular myths. The authors of scholia on Apollonius Rhodius employed both types of approaches towards the interpretation of myths existent in Antiquity; that is, the allegoric as well as the historical one. The scholiasts applied both of the mentioned methods in the same way as the “professional” myth-interpreters like Palaephatus (it is even highly probable that the scholiasts were acquainted with Palaephatus’s work). With regard to the process of scholia origination (a corpus of scholia was compiled from various commentaries and excerpts from these commentaries were afterwards changed and supplemented according to the opinions of anonymous copyists), we cannot discuss the approaches to myth adopted by individual scholiasts; after all, each and every note providing an interpretation of a particular myth can come from a different source. Nevertheless, it is important to observe that the scholiasts, whoever they may have been, included myth interpretation in their notes. As scholia were used mainly by students, even the youngest would-be readers of the classical works were by means of scholia necessarily exposed to the principles of rationalism and allegoresis. Scholia therefore represented one of the many kinds of handbooks written in order to satisfy tremendous interest in mythographic pieces of information and their reader seems to be always inspired to further reflect upon the interpretation of the myth.

17 ὅ τε Ζεύς, εἰ ἐβούλετο Εὐρώπην εἰς Κρήτην ἐλθεῖν, εὑρεῖν ἂν αὐτῇ ἑτέραν πορείαν καλλίονα.
18 According to the last scholion the authors were Theon, Lucillus Tarrhaius and Sophocles. Deicke, 1901:32, identifies them with scholars of the 1st and 2nd century AD.
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