

Jason and the Aggronauts

It was my great-great-uncle, Priapus, who sailed with the Aggronauts. I am not proud of the man, and I never knew him. The one thing I would like the world to remember him by is the fact that he sailed with "Aggronauts" and not "Argonauts". The name "Argo" is a later embellishment by Jason, in an attempt to make himself more acceptable to the civilised world than he was in fact and in deed.

I will tell the story of Priapus as it was told to me by my grandmother, a toothless old woman of sixty, something lacking in wit, but determined to pass on the family history before she died.

Priapus was a scholar, a man of some learning, who claimed to read books written by the Alexandrians. He knew something of the movements of the stars. But above all, he liked to make sure that his neighbours and fellow-townsmen were aware of his scholarly inclinations. In short, he was undoubtedly an unblemished bore.

One fine summer's evening, of which we have many in this part of the world, Priapus was busying himself at the quay, in examination of the ships which had called in, either casting an inexperienced eye over their cargoes or giving an opinion on their rigging to anyone who would listen. A ship had that day come into port from Thessaly, crewed by a band of adventurers led by Jason, son of Iolcos, in search of - it was said - a "Golden Fleece". My great-great-uncle, in his ceaseless quest for knowledge, accosted one of the crewmen, a giant named Heracles, and demanded to know more about the "Golden Fleece". Heracles was not the most sharp-witted man, the worse for drink, and provided only an incoherent explanation. My ancestor unwisely berated him and an argument soon ensued between him and Heracles, the former denouncing the expedition as a waste of time, the latter stoutly proclaiming it to be a god-given opportunity to become a hero. The upshot was that, on that fine summer's evening, Priapus was lifted bodily from the harbour-side, pitched protesting aboard the adventurers' ship, and was bound and gagged to the main-mast overnight. Early on the following day - or as early as an extended bout of drinking, singing and whoring permitted - the crew untied the ship, but not Priapus, and set sail across a glorious blue sea.

The ship, it transpired, was named the "Agrios", the "Wild One". The captain, the belligerent young prince named Jason, explained the concept of "wildness" in some detail to Priapus, with practical demonstrations as required. Priapus was a captive audience in more ways than one, and felt himself greatly threatened by Jason and by the equally unpleasant young thugs who formed the crew. There was, said my great-great-uncle at a later date, very little to choose between them when it came to wildness. After two days, he was released from his fastenings and permitted to roam the ship. What he saw there did not fill him with great optimism. The entire cargo consisted of weapons - swords, axes, clubs, daggers, tridents, nets - and flagons of wine, the large part of which had apparently already been emptied, even at this early stage in the voyage. The ship itself was in a poor state of repair - torn sails, loose cross-spars, worm-eaten wood; and during the entire voyage, no attempt was made by the crew to improve matters.

In a rare moment of wit, Priapus suggested the crew name themselves the “Aggronauts” - wild sailors of the “Agrios” who cause aggravation. Jason was quite unabashed at the implied criticism; was, on the contrary, delighted with this name, and ordered his crewmen to compose songs in praise of “Jason and the Aggronauts”, sailing upon the seas. Such songs grated upon the delicate ear of Priapus, but he could scarcely complain if his joke had rebounded against him.

Several days into this erratic voyage over the Greek Sea, with no particular destination in mind, the ship put into a small island. Since almost all the flagons were now emptied, and a mutiny threatened, Jason hoped to find fresh supplies of wine, bread and meat. To the horror of Priapus, the island of Lemnos turned out to be one whose womenfolk had - for reasons which were never quite made clear to anyone - murdered all the men of the community. The arrival of a ship full of young wild men was something which Priapus might have expected to have been met by the fair sex with at least some trepidation. Alas, the Aggronauts were met with open arms and more. According to Priapus, he kept on board during the whole of this landfall, which lasted several days and nights, resisting with an iron will the invitations of several women of loose morality.

At last, Jason and his men tired of the women of Lemnos, and, having taken possession of almost all the wine, bread and salt meat on the island, blew fond farewell kisses and set sail, all the while causing Priapus to blush uncontrollably with descriptions of their exploits in graphic detail. He complained that he did not wish to hear such immodest tales, but his protests fell on deaf ears. At last he adopted the preventive measure of singing at the top of his voice, in order to block out the sound. Which stood him in good stead when, passing through a narrow strait, the ship was assailed from both promontories by tall, ill-looking birds singing songs of infinite sadness, such that the Aggronauts were fain to throw themselves over the side of their craft. But Priapus encouraged them to do as he had done; the crew therefore sang bawdy songs loudly, and they came through safely. To his very great surprise and delight, a crewman named Orpheus turned out to have a most sweet tone to his voice. Priapus encouraged him to seek steady work and perhaps passing fame as a singer at some king’s court. Needless to say, none of the crew had any lasting gratitude for the service Priapus had rendered, and soon he was back scrubbing the decks and serving up meals.

Priapus’ downfall came when the “Agrios” entered the Straits of the Bosphorus and the crew encountered a strange and terrifying sight. Priapus was dragged from his bed to explain “the floating, clashing rocks” which floated towards and around the ship as it sailed to the east. Priapus examined these “rocks” carefully, and then informed Jason that these were “ice mountains”, of which he had heard one very old traveller tell, after a journey that had taken him to the edge of the known world and some way beyond.

This explanation was far beyond the understanding of anyone else on board, and a great and brief tumult resulted. At the end of which, Priapus was pitched unceremoniously over the side; landing to his good fortune, since he could not swim more than two strokes, on top of one of these floating rocks which scraped and whined in the current. My great-great-uncle clung on to his life-raft for dear life, noting with justifiable satisfaction that it was indeed composed of ice, and called out to the fast-disappearing “Agrios” that he was correct. To no avail, since the ship soon disappeared into the morning mist, leaving the castaway to drift southwards on a raft that was perceptibly melting under him in the warmer sea.

It was indeed a gift from the gods that Priapus was that very morning cast up against a small island that lay to the north of the strait, and was able to wade across an ebbing tide to reach dry land.

According to my grandmother, this land in which Priapus found himself was a country of ogres, witches and lizards who consumed human flesh. I cannot tell whether this is true, not having travelled far myself in the known world. Regardless of this, it was probably wise that Priapus travelled only at night, for fear of being captured and eaten, or worse. He crept along by the light of the revolving stars and the moon; so reliant on them, that he named himself, in a proud effort to out-do Jason, a “cosmonaut”, a traveller in starlight. Fearful of salamanders, of rustling winds, of flitting bats, all of which could be a harbinger of his imminent death, Priapus came at last to a kingdom where the people - for he hid in bushes to listen carefully - spoke a language that was known to him. He emerged from the wilderness, found a welcome from the king of that land, who gave him due recognition for his learning, his wisdom and especially for his adventures; and who finally placed him aboard a ship that was carrying fine cloth to my ancestor’s home port.

Many months had passed since Priapus had been cast adrift in the Bosphorus. Thus, when he came in sight of his home-town, it was with some feelings of anguish and outrage that he spied the familiar shape of the “Agrios” tied up at the quayside. No sooner had he disembarked than he went in search of Jason and the Aggronauts.

He did not have to look far: in the very first inn, he came across Orpheus in a drunken state, croaking out outrageous songs concerning the women of Lemnos in a voice riven by retsina. Unsurprisingly, Orpheus did not recognise Priapus; so the returned traveller moved on, shortly thereafter coming upon the main party of the adventurers in a garden. Where, surrounded by gawping old men, giggling young girls and goggling youths, they were telling the tales which have become common currency: the tales of Jason and the Argonauts (for the ship had, at some point in their peregrinations, been renamed the “Argo”, the “white one”), and the crew had made their adventures more respectable by this change of appellation. I need not tell you these tales here for they will be familiar to you.

Priapus stood at the edge of this crowd, his anger rising ever and ever as he heard Jason describe one unlikely adventure after another, take all the credit for avoiding the Sirens, or describe the terrible floating rocks of the Bosphorus in terms which Priapus found hard to reconcile with the facts. Wisely, however, my great-great-uncle kept his silence, contenting himself only with remaining to the bitter end, when, at last, Jason and his crew swaggered off to their ship for a drunken sleep.

My grandmother tells me that Priapus was considerably amused and heartened by being the sole witness to the untimely death of Jason that very night, in the uncertain light of a crescent moon. Stumbling as he came aboard last of all, Jason lurched against the mast; the old loose cross-spar came crashing down and smote Jason so that his skull burst; and the hero lay instantly dead upon the deck.