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Reviving Colchian Mythology: Symbolic Capital for Georgia's Nation Branding, Tourism, and Cultural Diplomacy

Anastasia Nelson
Independent Researcher. Stamford, Connecticut, USA
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6465-6468

Abstract

Mythology is a dynamic, multi-level system rather than cultural stasis. While dominant traditions (Greece, Rome, Egypt) still shape narratives of power and leadership, Colchian mythology is largely absent, despite the profound symbolic significance of the stories of Medea, Helios, Circe, King Aeëtes, and the Golden Fleece. This interdisciplinary study examines how activating these narratives can strengthen Georgia's nation branding and tourism, with implications for cultural diplomacy. We employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, comprising 25 interviews, six focus groups, a document review, and a national survey (N = 300; 150 residents, 150 international visitors). Grounded in cultural memory and symbolic capital, we propose a myth-to-strategy framework that outlines pathways for cultural, social, and economic value, along with a phased roadmap (pilots → scale → institutionalization) aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 11.4. Diplomatic outcomes are not measured here; we treat cultural diplomacy as an implication to be tested in follow-up research.

Keywords*:* Colchis; symbolic capital; nation branding; digital heritage; immersive tourism; Georgia.

Introduction

Colchis was an ancient kingdom located at the eastern end of the Black Sea, south of the Caucasus, in what is now western Georgia. It was Medea's homeland and the Argonauts' destination, and is portrayed in Greek sources as a place of fabled wealth, *phármaka*, and specialized knowledge (Braund, 1994). Set against that literary image, the material record gives us a grounded counterpart. Excavations at Vani, Pichvnari, and

Sairkhe delineate a coherent Colchian horizon: at Vani, elite funerary and ritual assemblages with rich goldwork and carefully staged deposits; at Pichvnari, a littoral interface marked by imports and sustained exchange with Hellenic colonies and traders on the Euxine coast; and at Sairkhe, an inland workshop tradition indicative of developed metallurgical craft. Taken together, these contexts suggest technical expertise, patterned ritual practices, and sustained participation in Black Sea interaction networks (Lordkipanidze, 1995; Kacharava, 2008; Tsetskhladze, 1994).

Despite this robust archaeological record, Colchian materials circulate weakly beyond the region. The issue is not presence but transmission: who curates and mediates these narratives, which versions become canonical in museums, curricula, and media, and what kinds of cultural, social, or economic value are produced through that selection. Within this scaffold, Colchian storytelling can serve practical ends when curated with consideration, such as narrative leadership in education and civic life, evidence-based brand storytelling, and digitally mediated interpretation that widens access without overwhelming sites. The gap is apparent. Compared to the strength of the archaeological record and the presence of Colchis in learned and popular imagination, institutional communication is fragmented; mythology-based routes and programs lack coordinated design; digital mediation appears sporadic and uneven. This paper addresses that gap through an explanatory sequential mixed-methods study (interviews, focus groups, document analysis, and a national survey) linked to a governance-aware myth-to-strategy framework. The framework traces value pathways from narrative translation to measurable outcomes in interpretation quality, audience engagement, and heritage-positive visitation.

To address the gap, our contribution is threefold. First, we specify a myth-to-strategy mechanism that links cultural memory to symbolic capital with measurable outcomes; second, we set out a phased roadmap, pilots, scale, and institutionalizations with governance guardrails and multilingual access; third, we curate Medea as a contested leadership narrative, showing how to hold dissonant material without flattening it. We focus empirically on nation branding and tourism. References to cultural diplomacy are treated as implications of the model rather than tested outcomes in this study.

Research Questions

RQ1. How are Colchian narratives translated into contemporary interpretation while preserving cultural integrity (protocols, brokers, venues)?

RQ2. Through which pathways do these narratives accumulate symbolic capital and convert into cultural, social, and economic value (measures and mediators)?

RQ3. How do stakeholders and audiences evaluate myth-activated products (routes, curricula, digital layers) in terms of legitimacy, engagement, and heritage-positive behavior?

Literature Review

Cultural memory serves as a durable channel through which communities preserve knowledge and revive it when conditions change (Assmann, 2011). Memory circulates through repeated practices and archived materials that re-enter public life via institutions, media, and education; this view explains why Colchian narratives retain activation potential after periods of dormancy. National identity is made in the imagination: people who will never meet still picture themselves as part of the same community. That sense of belonging is sustained not only by the state but by shared language, media, schooling, and public rituals (Anderson, 2006). In Georgia, Colchian motifs are one of the storylines that help people picture a common past and a profound sense of time. Nadareishvili (2007, 2010, 2013) demonstrated that Medea continues to resurface as a modern touchpoint in Georgia's cultural conversation: a figure through whom writers, artists, and critics work out questions of gendered agency, political power, and knowledge exchange between East and West. In that reading, Medea is less a fixed myth and more a living individual, mobilized across literature and public debate to negotiate identity and authority (see Fig. 1). For this study, these theories imply observable traces of activation, including curricular references, museum interpretation, media output, and civic programming that utilize Colchian narratives.

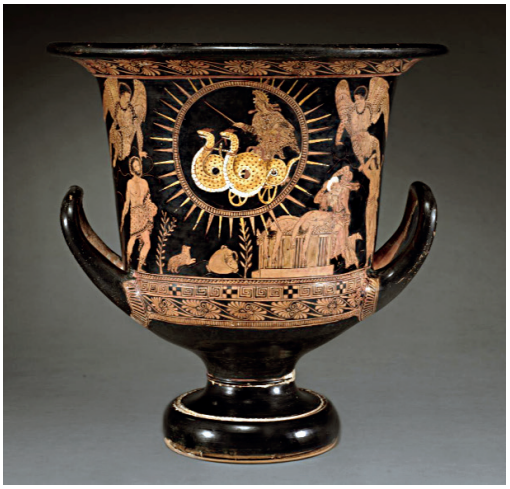


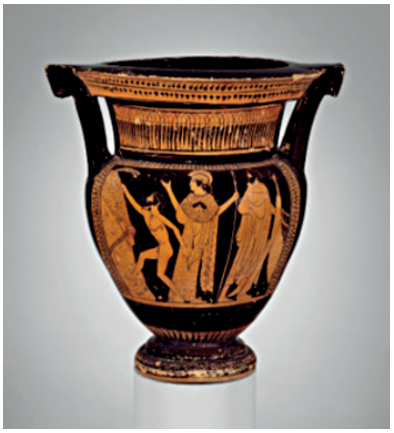
Fig. 1. Medea in her chariot. South Italian (Apulian) red-figure vase, ca. 400 BCE. Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH, United States.

The Integration of Mythology in Leadership Studies

Leadership scholarship increasingly treats influence as narrative work: actors stitch past and future into stories that make collective action plausible (Boje, 1991; Czarniawska, 1997; Denning, 2005; Shamir & Eilam, 2005). In Bass's (1995) account of transformational leadership, leaders do not just manage; they lift people's sights, link private aims to a shared mission, and model change through vision, challenge, and care. Reading leadership through archetypes, Izadifar (2020) argued that recurring mythic figures, such as the mentor, the warrior, the trickster, and the sage, shape how leaders signal intent and how audiences read authority, often at a partly unconscious level. Taken together, these perspectives suggest why ancient story-forms still prime expectations about who should lead and how change should unfold. The research adopts a rhetorical and practice-based approach consistent with narrative leadership. Myth references gain traction when institutions, curricula, and media translate them to address present problems, and audiences evaluate them as credible and fitting (Schedlitzki & Edwards, 2018). Evidence of uptake should be evident in syllabi, training modules, public speeches, and program designs that link the myth to decision-making or problem-solving tasks.

Medea: the Complex and Contested Leadership Model

Medea exceeds simple categories (Fig. 2a, 2b). Hall (1989) argues that Euripides scripts her through the Greek/barbarian polarity so that "the Other" becomes the stage on which civic fears and boundary-making are worked out. Foley (2001) reads Medea as a test case for female self-determination: her speech, cunning, and appeal to justice push across the usual lines, forcing the audience to hear a woman's political voice. In some readings, she is the foreign strategist who outthinks kings; in others, the transgressive outsider whose choices expose the costs of loyalty and revenge (Apollonius of Rhodes, 2007; Euripides, 2002).



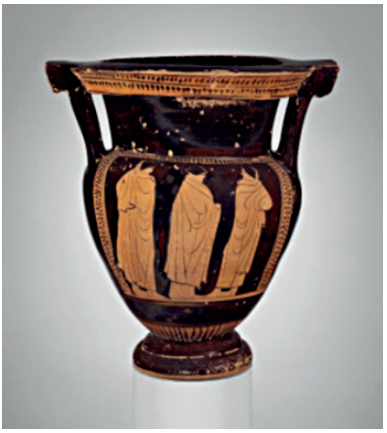


Fig. 2a. Jason about to seize the Golden Fleece (stern of the Argo). Attic red-figure, ca. 470–460 BCE. The Metropolitan Museum, New York, USA.

Fig. 2b. Medea rejuvenating the ram. Red-figure hydria, Classical period (5th–4th c. BCE). Cleveland, OH, United States.

Euripidean performance foregrounds persuasion and precarious status, Roman and later adaptations often amplify fury and spectacle, and modern stagings recast her through points of migration, race, and women's agency. For public use, that variability is a strength if it is curated, spells out what is known vs. contested, includes plural voices (scholars and local custodians), adds content notes for sensitive material, and frames Medea as a contested leadership narrative, the figure of negotiation, boundary-crossing, and risk, rather than a fixed moral type.