When King Aeson of Iolchos was defeated by his stepbrother Pelias, he knew his son Jason was in danger. He sent Jason away to be raised by the centaur Chiron.

The time came for Jason to claim the throne that was rightfully his, and he set out for Iolchos. Along the way, he helped an old woman cross a river. She turned out to be the goddess Hera, who promised to help Jason when he was in need.

Pelias knew that Jason could destroy him, so he decided to send his nephew on an impossible mission—to bring back the Golden Fleece belonging to King Aeëtes of Colchis. This fleece was guarded by a fearsome serpent that never slept.

Jason built a magnificent ship, which he named the Argo, and set sail for Colchis. King Aeëtes, however, was not about to part with the Golden Fleece. "You must earn it," he told Jason, "by tilling a field with my two fire-breathing bulls, and planting rows of dragons' teeth."

Hera kept her promise to Jason. She caused Aeëtes' daughter Medea to fall in love with Jason. Medea helped him tame the bulls, till the field and plant the dragons' teeth. When the dragons' teeth turned into a band of savage warriors, Medea helped him defeat them.

But Aeëtes still refused to give Jason the Golden Fleece, so Jason had to take it himself. Medea helped to calm the serpent that guarded the fleece, and Jason carried it off.

Jason married Medea, and they sailed back to Iolchos to claim the throne. They hung the Golden Fleece in the Temple of Zeus, as a sign of Jason's triumph over Pelias.
Part II: It Started Here, Folks: Greek Mythology

JASON THE JERK

Jason is most famous for leading the Argonauts on the quest for the Golden Fleece. It's one of Western civilization's quintessential adventure stories. He also was a lousy husband and father. His wife, Medea, was a witch, and she became a model for the evil witches who appear in later fairy tales.

The third-century poet Apollonius of Rhodes wrote a long poem telling about the quest for the Golden Fleece. Pindar and Ovid also told the story. The fifth-century playwright Euripides wrote a play all about Jason and Medea, called (appropriately) Medea — it's heart-rending.

THE 14K GOLD RESCUE: THE GOLDEN FLEECE

So what was this Golden Fleece? Well, long ago, a Greek king was going to sacrifice his son Phrixus to save his people from a famine. But when the boy was on the altar about to be killed, Hermes sent a ram with a fleece of pure gold to pick him up and carry him to safety. The boy's sister, Helle, fell off the ram over the strait between Europe and Asia and drowned. That strait now bears her name: the Hellespont. Phrixus landed in the country of Colchis in modern Turkey, where he was taken in by its king, Aeetes. Phrixus then rather ungratefully sacrificed the ram to Zeus and gave the ram's golden fleece to King Aeetes.

Now back to Greece. Phrixus's uncle was a king in Greece (this king's name isn't important), but a guy named Pelias had usurped his kingdom. The ousted king's son was Jason, which makes Pelias Jason's uncle, and it makes Jason the rightful heir to the throne that Pelias unjustly was occupying. An oracle had told Pelias that he would die at the hands of a kinsmen wearing one shoe, so he was pretty shocked when his nephew Jason walked in one day wearing only one shoe — it looked like Jason would be the one to kill him. (Jason had lost the other shoe helping a goddess cross a stream.) Jason said he had come to claim the throne. Pelias told him that he would give up the kingdom if Jason would go to Colchis (remember, Colchis is in Turkey) and bring back the Golden Fleece.

LIFESTYLES OF THE HEROIC AND FAMOUS: THE ARGO AND THE ARGONAUTS

Jason summoned all the most famous heroes of Greece:

- Heracles
- Castor
- Pollux
- Orpheus
- Achilles's father Peleus
- Atlantis
- A few other folks standing around with nothing better to do

They all set sail in a ship called the Argo and called themselves the Argonauts. The goddess Hera helped them along the way. They had many adventures on the way to Colchis, and Jason repeatedly lost his nerve and had to be encouraged by his shipmates. Heracles ditched the company when his boyfriend Hylas drowned. The Argonauts fought the Harpies, disgusting woman-birds who spoiled their food and left behind a foul stench. They just barely got their boat through the Symplegades, two rocks that repeatedly banged together; they timed the opening by letting a dove fly through first, and then rowed as fast as they could. They sailed past the Amazons and Prometheus chained to his rock. Finally they arrived in Colchis, land of the Golden Fleece.
Medea the Witch: Self-starter, proactive, works late as needed

Hera knew that Jason would need help getting the Fleece, so she had Aphrodite’s son Eros make King Aetë’s daughter Medea fall in love with the hero. Medea was a sorceress.

Jason and his buddies introduced themselves to the king, who welcomed them and gave them dinner. Then Jason stated his business—he wanted the Golden Fleece. Aetë didn’t want to hand it over, so he told Jason that he could have it if he completed an impossible task: Yoke two fire-breathing bulls with hooves of bronze, plow a field, plant it with dragon teeth, and fight off the army of men that would immediately grow from the teeth. Jason said he’d give it a try.

Late-night meetings and invincible ointment

Medea visited Jason that night and gave him an ointment to smear on his body and weapons to make them invincible. She told him that if the dragon-teeth soldiers attacked, he should throw a stone into their midst and they would fight each other instead of him. Jason promised to take her to Greece and be faithful to her forever, and she stole back to the palace.

Yep, she’s helpful all right

The next day Jason presented himself before Aetë and all the spectators who had come to watch. He harnessed the giant bulls and plowed the field, casting the dragon teeth into the furrows as he went. By the time he finished plowing and sowing, the dragon-teeth soldiers were already up and ready to attack him. He threw a stone into their midst, and they cut each other to pieces, just as Medea had said they would.

King Aetë was not pleased. He started thinking of other ways to get rid of Jason, but Medea ran to the Argonauts again and told them that they needed to take the Fleece and run before their father got to them.

Apparently blood is not thicker than water...

A giant snake guarded the Golden Fleece. Medea put the snake to sleep with a magical charm, and Jason easily pulled the Fleece out of the tree where it hung. Then they dashed back to the Argo and rowed away as fast as they could. Medea’s brother came after them, but she killed him, cut up his body, and tossed the pieces into the sea. Aetë stopped to collect the body parts, and Jason and Medea got away.

Behind every hero is a great witch

Back home in Greece, the Argonauts disbanded and Jason and Medea took the Golden Fleece to Pelias. They discovered that Pelias had forced Jason’s father to kill himself, and his mother had also died. Jason asked Medea to help him get revenge.

Oh, she’s a sweetheart all right

Medea told Pelias’s daughters that she could make him young again and illustrated her technique: She cut an old ram into pieces, boiled it in her cauldron, uttered the magic words, and a baby lamb jumped out. Convinced, the daughters cut up their clad and cooked him. Then they looked for Medea to say the spell, but she was gone and their father stayed dead. Jason had his revenge.

Jason trades up for a more royal model

Jason and Medea moved to Corinth and had two sons. They lived on happily this way for some years in Corinth. But one day Jason announced that he was going to marry the daughter of King Creon of Corinth. Married the Corinthian woman was a political move—he wanted royal children, and Medea’s sons had no rights and weren’t suitable heirs. The Corinthian king, nervous about Medea’s magical powers and her two sons, ordered her to leave the country with them. Jason now told her that she was too wild and dangerous for him, and it was her own fault that she had to leave. However, great guy that he was, he had generously asked the king to exile her instead of killing her. He was going to make sure she had plenty of money for her journey to wherever.

Hell hath no fury...

Medea tore into him, pointing out the many times she had saved him, but he refused to acknowledge that she had done anything to help him, claiming that the gods had been on his side. Medea was angry now. So Medea killed his new bride by anointing a beautiful robe with poison and having her sons deliver it to her rival. When she put it on, her flesh melted away and she dropped dead.

Then Medea made the most dreadful decision a mother can make. She knew that her boys would be defenseless without their father, and couldn’t bear to see them become slaves. So she killed them herself. Jason came looking for her, outraged that she had killed his bride. He found his sons dead and Medea fleeing away in a chariot pulled by dragons. He cursed her as she left.
INTRODUCTION

The legend of Jason and the Argonauts is probably older than Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. In the twelfth book, or chapter, of the *Odyssey*, which was composed in the eighth century B.C., the story of the voyage is already a familiar tale. Today, the most widely used literary source, and the one on which this myth is based, is the *Argonautika* of the Greek poet Apollonius of Rhodes (295–215 B.C.).

Jason was a member of the ruling family of Iolcus, a city located at the base of Mount Pelion in Thessaly. Jason’s family was descended from Hellen, ancestor of all the Greeks. Jason’s grandfather, Cretheus, married Tyro and together they had three sons, including Jason’s father, Aeson. Tyro also fell in love with the sea god Poseidon, and they had twin sons, Pelias and Neleus. Pelias was a greedy, power-hungry man who took away the throne of Iolcus from Jason’s father, the rightful heir, and tried to get rid of Jason by sending him on a near-impossible mission to obtain the Golden Fleece.

The Golden Fleece was the hide of a ram that had been sacrificed to Zeus. The hide glowed with an unearthly red sheen and represented supernatural powers and kingship. The ram’s pelt was hung on a sacred oak tree that was located at the opposite end of the known world from Iolcus in a town called Colchis.

Jason sailed on the mighty *Argo*, meaning “swift,” a vessel crafted from timber harvested from Mount Pelion. The prow, or front, was carved from part of a sacred oak tree from the sanctuary of Zeus at Dodona, a shrine in a remote area of northern Greece. This piece of oak could speak prophecies. Apollonius described the *Argo* as being equipped with oars lashed to benches on which the heroes sat to row. It also had a sturdy mast and well-made sails. Similar ships were depicted on ancient vases.

The crew of the *Argo* was made up of the mightiest heroes and young nobles of the Greek world. There were...
about fifty Argonauts; however, different sources list different names because storytellers modified the tale to make sure that a hero from their city or region was included in the crew. In all versions of the myth, however, the main characters are the same. Jason was always the heroic leader. Argos, the master builder, oversaw the building of the ship. Tiphys was the helmsman who steered the vessel. Other Argonauts were Orpheus, the musician; Zetes and Calais, the sons of the North Wind; the twins Castor and Polydeuces; and Heracles, the greatest of Greek heroes.

A centaur, the Harpies, and nymphs were also featured in this myth. A centaur had a human head and chest, and the legs and body of a horse. Usually, centaurs were wild and uncivilized, but Chiron, the centaur in this tale, was gentle and educated. The Harpies, whose name means “the snatchers,” were part woman and part bird. These demons snatched food with their sharp talons and crooked beaks and befoul whatever crumbs remained with a disgusting stench. Nymphs, a type of divine spirit, were commonly depicted as beautiful young girls who loved to sing and dance. Often, they were attendants for the major gods or goddesses.

The perpetual interference of the gods in human affairs occurs often in this tale. Typically, the gods had their favorites whom they supported. In this myth, Hera, queen of the gods, does all she can to help Jason. The gods also took offense when mortals forgot, or, even worse, deliberately chose not to honor them. Pelias, the evil king of Iolcus, did not render to Hera what she felt was the honor due her, so throughout the myth, she attempts to destroy Pelias.

The plot is typical of folktales: Jason, the hero, is given a number of nearly impossible tasks to perform; he successfully completes them; he is helped by the local princess, whom he later takes as his bride. He sometimes ponders his ability to complete his task. He receives help from Medea, a witch, and from the gods. This dependence and occasional lack of confidence could be viewed as a flaw, or it could be considered “a realistic acceptance of man’s limitations.”

JASON AND THE ARGONAUTS

The tale of Jason and the Golden Fleece began long before Jason was born. Aeolus, the son of Hellen, the ancestor of all the Greeks, had seven sons, including Athamas. Athamas became king of the town of Orchomenus in Boeotia, a plain north of Attica. He took as his first wife Nephele, and she bore him two children, a son, Phrixus, and a daughter, Helle. When Athamas tired of Nephele, he took a new wife, Ino, who bore their two sons. Because Phrixus was next in line to inherit the throne instead of Ino’s sons, Ino decided to kill Phrixus.

Ino secretly plotted with local women to parch all of the seed grain, so that after it was sown, no crops grew. Famine filled the land, so Athamas sent messengers to Apollo’s oracle at Delphi to ask for advice. Ino intercepted the messengers when they returned from Delphi and bribed them to tell Athamas that Apollo wanted him to sacrifice Phrixus if he ever hoped the famine would cease.

In deep sadness, Athamas led Phrixus to the sacrificial altar. Helle stood close by, consumed with grief. Just as Athamas lifted the knife to stab Phrixus, a ram with a golden hide flew down to the altar. Phrixus and Helle scrambled onto the ram’s back, and it soared away to the east. Unfortunately, above the straits, between Europe and Asia, Helle lost her grip, fell into the water, and drowned. (These waters, named after Helle, are still known today as the Hellespont.) The ram
flew on, with Phrixus gripping tightly to its hide, until it reached the town of Colchis at the eastern end of the Black Sea. King Aeëtes ruled Colchis, and he and his people were fierce and mighty. Yet they welcomed Phrixus as a guest, in the tradition of Greek hospitality. Phrixus sacrificed the ram to Zeus in thanks for his safe flight and gave the fleece to the king. Aeëtes hung it from an oak tree in a sacred grove, where it was guarded by a serpent that never slept.

Now Cretheus, the brother of Athamas, was king of Iolcus, a seaport in Thessaly. When he died, his son Aeson, as the rightful heir, was expected to ascend the throne. But Pelias, the stepson of Cretheus, was more powerful than Aeson, and he usurped, or stole away, the throne from Aeson. Pelias, who was power-hungry and evil, imprisoned Aeson in the castle at Iolcus.

Soon after Pelias took control of the throne, Polydeme, the wife of Aeson, gave birth to a son, Jason. Jason was rightfully the next in line to inherit the throne after his father, Aeson. But Pelias was now in control and had sons of his own. Polydeme feared that Pelias might kill Jason, to make sure that one of his sons would ultimately succeed him to the throne. To ensure her baby’s safety, Polydeme spread the tale that he was stillborn. Then she secretly sent Jason away to be raised by a centaur, Chiron, who lived nearby on the slopes of Mount Pelion. Chiron taught Jason heroic skills such as archery and wrestling, and raised him to be strong and brave.

During the time that Jason was growing up, the Delphic oracle gave an ominous warning to Pelias. Pelias learned that he would die at the hands of one of his kinsmen, who would approach him wearing just one sandal.

After twenty years, Jason came down from Mount Pelion, determined to claim the throne that should rightfully have been his. Jason set off for Iolcus, but before Jason reached the city, he came to the River Anarus. The waters of the river were swollen with the rains, and an old woman crouched by the stream, hesitating to cross the dangerous waters. Jason hoisted her across his muscular shoulders and safely carried

her across. In the process, though, Jason lost one of his sandals in the stream. He decided that it was useless to look for the sandal, for surely the rushing waters would have carried it away. Jason continued on his journey to Iolcus, never realizing that by helping the old woman, he had made an important decision that would affect his life forever.

The old crone was Hera, queen of the gods, in disguise. She already hated feisty King Pelias because he had never treated her with respect or offered sacrifices in her honor. Hera was waiting by the river because she wanted to find an honorable man to use as her tool in seeking revenge against Pelias. Because of Jason’s kindness in helping her, Hera decided he was the perfect candidate. She also decided to protect Jason in whatever way she could.

The people of Iolcus stared as Jason entered their city, for he presented a magnificent picture of strength. A leopard’s skin covered his shoulders and shiny locks of hair graced his head. Headless of his missing sandal, Jason boldly entered the royal palace and stood before King Pelias. “I have come to regain the honor of my family,” Jason told Pelias. “You had no right to take the throne that was my father’s. I have come to claim it back for my father, and for myself.”

Pelias looked upon Jason with fear, because the young hero represented a fulfillment of the oracle’s prophecy. Jason was a relative, and he wore only one sandal. Pelias thought quickly. He wanted to keep his throne at all costs. He knew that he had never been a popular king. Realistically, he understood that the people of Iolcus might gladly replace him with the attractive youth who now stood before him, a youth who might very well kill Pelias. The evil king promised to give up the throne if Jason would first fetch the Golden Fleece from King Aeëtes. Pelias felt certain that Jason would never be able to convince King Aeëtes to give up the fleece. Nor did he believe that Jason could even safely complete the dangerous journey to Colchis, which was located at the other end of the known world. Thus, King Pelias thought he was clever in making a promise he would never have to keep.
Rather than deter him, however, the idea of such a challenging journey sparked Jason's sense of adventure. He was not the only one to crave adventure, however. He sent out a call for the best fighting men of the day to join him in Iolcus. Soon, he had pieced together a heroic crew of about fifty men. Before long, they became known as the Argonauts, named after their mighty ship, the Argo. The Argonauts included Heracles, already famed for completing many heroic deeds, and Orpheus, the musician son of the god Apollo.

Jason led his crew aboard the Argo, striding on deck as proudly as a god. The swift vessel left with its talking prow, or front, crying out in its eagerness to seek adventure. After leaving Iolcus, the Argonauts rowed north along the coast of Greece and passed Mount Pelion on the west. As a stiff breeze came up, the crew put up the sails and the Argo headed due east across the Aegean Sea, through the narrow Hellespont, and into the Propontis, the body of water connecting the Hellespont with the Black Sea. (The Propontis is now called the Sea of Marmara.)

All the Argonauts put their energies into rowing hard, but Heracles was especially eager to show off his mighty strength. He pulled so hard that he snapped his oar in two, and the Argo had to stop in Cios, a city on the Asiatic shore of the Propontis, so that Heracles could cut another oar from a fir tree. Hylas, who served Heracles as a squire, or manservant, went to a nearby spring to get some water. The nymphs, or water spirits, who lived in the spring pulled Hylas down into the water, so that they could keep the handsome young man with them forever. When Hylas failed to bring the water, Heracles began a search for his young servant. Finally, the Argo sailed without Heracles. (He eventually returned to Iolcus on his own, never having found Hylas.)

The next morning, the Argonauts continued on their journey. The Argo sailed for a day and a night and put in at the land of the Bebryces, a fierce warrior tribe. Their king, Amycus, boasted that he had never lost a boxing match to
anyone who visited his land. Jason chose Polydeuces, the best boxer of all the Argonauts, to face Amycus. Polydeuces dealt Amycus a mighty blow to the ear, crushing the bones of the boastful king into his brain.

The next day, the Argo sailed into the turbulent Bosporus, the narrow channel joining the Propontis with the Black Sea. On the day following, the Argonauts moored their ship at Salmydessus, a city in Thrace, a region northeast of Greece. This land was ruled by King Phineus, a blind prophet. Zeus had blinded Phineus to punish him for revealing too much of the future to the Greeks. Zeus also sent the winged Harpies to forever snatch the food from the hands or mouth of the wretched king. After these monsters grabbed the food with their crooked beaks, they spread a terrible stench over any remaining morsels. Jason formed a plan for the next time that the Harpies flew down to steal away the food of Phineus. Two Argonauts, Zetes and Calais, the winged sons of the North Wind, flew after the monsters with drawn swords and forced the Harpies to promise never again to bother Phineus.

Phineus was so grateful that he told Jason how to avoid the dangers of the Symplegades, or Clashing Rocks, two huge boulders located at the northern edge of the Black Sea. Strong winds often caused the rocks to crash together, crushing anything caught between them. Phineus told Jason to release a dove directly between the Clashing Rocks. If the dove flew safely between them, then the Argo could sail through safely. As soon as the rocks separated, the crew should row as hard as they could and sail between the rocks.

The next morning, Jason followed the prophet’s guidance and released a dove between the Symplegades. When the dove flew between the Clashing Rocks, it lost only a few tail feathers. Immediately, Jason commanded the ship to follow. As the men rowed hard, waves splashed over their heads, and the boulders loomed so high above them that the sky seemed black. Just when it appeared that the ship might be crushed, it squeezed through the opening at the end of the Symplegades. Only part of an ornament from the stern, or back, of the ship was caught between the rocks. From that day onward, the Clashing Rocks also remained stuck together, for the gods had decreed that they would remain affixed if any ship safely passed between them.

Grateful for their narrow escape, the Argonauts vowed continued support for their leader, Jason. They sailed for several weeks through the Black Sea along the coast of Asia Minor. After several more adventures, they arrived at the eastern end of the Black Sea at the mouth of the river Phasis and sailed up the river to Colchis. They spent the night on board ship, not knowing what they would face the next morning when they met King Aeetes of Colchis. Jason knew he could rely on his own courage. He also knew that he could rely on his trusty crew, for every Greek hero was committed to follow his leader into battle or any sort of danger they might face.

Unbeknownst to Jason, the Olympian gods were plotting to make sure that he succeeded on his quest. Hera, queen of the gods, knew that he would face hostility from King Aeetes of Colchis, for he distrusted strangers. She asked Aphrodite, goddess of love, to convince her son Eros, the god of love, to make Aeetes’ daughter, Medea, fall in love with Jason. Medea, who was a sorceress, knew how to work very powerful magic. Hera was sure that if Medea was in love with Jason, she would use her magic to help the Argonauts.

The next morning, Jason explained to King Aeetes that he and his men were not there to harm King Aeetes. All they wanted to do was to take the Golden Fleece back to King Pelias. But anger filled the heart of King Aeetes, because he hated foreigners. An oracle had warned him that a stranger would do him great harm. Aeetes feared that this stranger, Jason, might be his undoing. The king had no intention of giving up the fleece, so he decided to do whatever he could to prevent Jason from obtaining it. "I will give you the fleece, but only if you can complete these tasks," Aeetes told Jason. "These tasks are ones that I can do bare-handed. First, you must yoke a pair of fire-breathing bulls and use them to plow
a vast field. Then you must sow the field with the teeth of a
dragon.”

While Jason doubted whether the king could perform
these feats, the leader of the Argonauts felt certain that he
could accomplish these two challenges, or any others that the
king might throw at him. Had he not just sailed all this way
with his trusty ship, successfully facing many dangers?

Then Aeëtes set one more task before Jason. “Once you
have sowed the dragon’s teeth, armed men will spring up
from them. You must put to death every one of these
warriors.”

Jason agreed to take on these tasks, even though he
knew he might die trying to accomplish them. However, as a
true hero, he was determined to accomplish his quest.

Aeëtes smiled to himself. He was certain that Jason
would never be able to complete these challenges. The king
had bargained without the knowledge that there were
Olympian gods helping Jason. Eros shot an invisible arrow of
love into Medea’s heart, and she fell deeply in love with
the young hero. Without telling her father, Medea gave Jason a
magical ointment that would protect him from flames or iron
weapons—but only for one day. The next day, Jason spread
the ointment on his body and over his weapons.

King Aeëtes and the Argonauts gathered to watch Jason
harness the fire-breathing bulls. Along with his spear and
shield, Jason carried a glittering helmet and sharp sword.
With head held high, he marched down to the cave where
the oxen waited. The pair of beasts charged out, breathing
flames. The Argonauts trembled at this sight, but Jason stood
his ground, unshaken, keeping his shield before him. The
oxen blasted him with their fiery breath, yet the ointment
protected Jason. Aeëtes stared in amazement at Jason’s
mighty strength as the young hero seized the horns of the
oxen and forced them into the yoke. The oxen snorted and
raged, but Jason prodded them with his spear until the field
was plowed with the dragon’s teeth. To the cheers of the
Argonauts, Jason released the oxen that fled to the lowlands
nearby.

By now, armed men had sprouted up in the furrows. They
carried sturdy shields and lances. Jason bent and picked up a
rock from the ground, a boulder so large that four ordinary
men could not have lifted it. He heaved the rock into the
middle of the warriors, who turned in confusion to face the
source of this sound. With the warriors thus distracted from
attacking him, Jason pulled out his sword and slashed them
down until not a single warrior was left standing.

Aeëtes stormed back to his palace, furious that Jason had
fearlessly accomplished all the tasks set before him. The evil
king was now even more determined to destroy Jason in
some other way, and vowed to himself that he would never
give up the Golden Fleece to the young hero.

That night, Medea stole away from the palace, for she
realized that she was in danger of having her father discover
how she had helped Jason. By now, Medea was so much in
love with Jason that she was more faithful to him than to her
father. She warned Jason that, because Aeëtes planned to kill
the Argonauts, Jason needed to leave right away to get the
Golden Fleece. Jason promised to marry Medea if he
successfully completed his quest.

Then Jason, Medea, and the Argonauts all climbed
aboard the Argo and rowed up the river to the mighty oak
upon which the Golden Fleece was hung. Jason and Medea
approached the hissing serpent who guarded the fleece.
Medea sprinkled drops of a magical potion into the serpent’s
eyes. Soon the beast was unconscious. Then Jason nimbly
climbed up the oak tree and retrieved the Golden Fleece.
Jason then told Medea that they needed to make haste to
return to the Argo. Dawn was breaking when they made it
back to the ship. The Argonauts marveled at how the fleece
glowed with a bright radiance.

When Aeëtes learned that the fleece was gone, he sent
his son, Apsyrtus, and a fleet of warships after Jason and his
Argonauts. Medea sent a message to her brother telling him
to meet her on a nearby island, because she wanted to go back home with him. She promised to bring the Golden Fleece. Jason hid near the meeting place and ambushed Apsyrtus when he arrived, slashing Medea’s brother to pieces with his sword. Jason, Medea, and the Argonauts fled up the Danube River. When the rest of the Colchians learned of the prince’s death, they pursued the Argonauts in great fury. However, the goddess Hera again interfered, for she was determined to continue to help Jason. She threw down lightning upon the Colchians, who gave up the chase.

As the Argo tried to sail south through the Adriatic Sea, a storm forced the ship north up the mythical Eridanus River, across to the Rhone River, and then back to the Mediterranean Sea. Then Jason and his crew approached the island where the Sirens lived. These winged women sang so sweetly that they had lured many sailors to their deaths. The Sirens’ songs were so entrancing that they could stop sailors from performing any actions. As they listened to the music, the sailors forgot all about sailing and eventually starved to death. Luckily, the Argonauts had Orpheus on board. As the Argo approached the Sirens, Jason had Orpheus sing and play his lyre, a stringed instrument, which drowned out the music of the Sirens. Right after this, the Argo had to sail between Scylla, a six-headed monster who lived in a cave in a cliff, and Charybdis, a deadly whirlpool. Hera, still helping Jason, sent sea nymphs to guide the Argo safely through these two dangers.

Heading south, a storm drove the Argonauts to the coast of Libya in Africa. A gigantic wave tossed the ship inland, and Jason ordered the Argonauts to lift the ship on their shoulders and carry it over the burning sands. They carried it for nine days until they reached Lake Tritonis. There, the water god Triton guided them back to the Mediterranean, where they finally landed again at Iolcus. Jason’s voyage had lasted four months, and many people, including Pelias, had thought that the ship would never return.

Jason brought the Golden Fleece to Pelias. The young hero was stunned to learn that while he was gone, Pelias had forced Aeson, Jason’s father, to kill himself. As a result, Jason’s mother, Polymede, had run screaming into the palace, cursed Pelias, and stabbed herself to death with a sword.

Pelias accepted the Golden Fleece, but, not surprisingly, refused to honor his promise to return the throne to Jason. Then, Jason and Medea plotted to heap revenge on Pelias. Pelias thought that if he could stay young, he could hold on to his power forever. Jason and Medea convinced him that they had a way to do this. It required the help of the daughters of Pelias. First, Medea cut an old ram into pieces and threw the pieces in a cauldron, which she had secretly filled with magic herbs. When the water boiled, the ram turned into a lamb. Convinced that the same process would restore vigorous youth to their father, the daughters of Pelias cut him into pieces and tossed them, like the ram’s, into the boiling cauldron. However, this time Medea failed to add the magic herbs and Pelias remained dead.

So evil King Pelias met his end, as the oracle had prophesied, through the actions of a relative, Jason, who approached him wearing just one sandal. However, despite achieving his quest for the Golden Fleece, Jason never became the king of Iolcus, for the people of that city drove Jason and Medea out for their role in the death of Pelias.
In This Chapter

- Jason's pursuit of the Golden Fleece
- The many adventures of the Argonauts during the quest
- Medea's crimes on Jason's behalf
- Jason's betrayal and Medea's revenge

The Argonauts, who sailed with Jason to obtain the legendary Golden Fleece, were the most storied assemblage of heroes prior to the Trojan War. Many of the Argonauts, children or grandchildren of the gods themselves, first displayed their heroism while serving on the ship called the Argo.

Like most mythical quests, the story of the Argonauts neither begins nor ends with the successful achievement of the goal. The Golden Fleece may provide the heart of the story, but the adventures shared by the steadfast crew in the course of acquiring the fleece and those experienced on the voyage home provide the body. This series of adventures offers the heroes a chance to demonstrate their character, skills, and heroism.

Jason, a young man who had a charming way with women but was otherwise unremarkable, may seem an odd choice to lead a band of the greatest, noblest, and most adventurous heroes on any quest. He was neither the cleverest nor bravest of men. He was not the most skilled hunter or Bowman, or even sailor. But Hera, Queen of the Gods, handpicked Jason for this mission precisely because of his allure to women. For Hera had ulterior motives—and to achieve her ends, she needed Jason to bring the powerful sorceress Medea back to Greece.
Assembling the Argonauts

Jason was the grandson of Tyro and her uncle Cretheus, whom she had married after killing her children by another uncle, Sisyphus (see Chapter 11). The eldest son of Tyro and Cretheus, Jason’s father, Aeson, should have inherited the kingdom of Iolcus, a seaport in Thessaly (northeastern Greece), which Cretheus had founded. But Tyro had also had twin sons by the god Poseidon, and one of these twins, Pelias, had seized the throne. Although Pelias had not harmed his half-brother, Aeson feared for his own life and that of his unborn son. So when his wife (either Polyemede or Alcinomede) gave birth to Jason, Aeson claimed the baby had died. He entrusted the boy to the care of Cheiron, the wisest of the Centaurs, who had also tutored Heracles.

The Other Shoe Drops: The Return of Jason

When he reached manhood, Jason traveled to Iolcus to retake the throne. Before he reached the city, he came to the river Anapus, where he met an old woman. The young hero gallantly carried the woman across the river on his shoulders. The extra weight caused him to lose one of his sandals, which got stuck in the mud of the river bed. Safely on the other side, he set the old woman down and sped off to Iolcus, where Pelias was hosting a festival in honor of his father, Poseidon.

What Jason didn’t know was that the woman he had assisted was actually Hera in disguise. Hera hated Pelias, who had never offered her sacrifices or shown her proper respect. What’s more, he had committed the outrage of killing Tyro’s cruel stepmother, Sidero, while the woman clung to the altar of Hera for sanctuary. The goddess was planning her revenge for these insults—and her plot would involve both Jason and the sorceress Medea.

Pelias soon heard of the one-sandaled man who had arrived in the city. This news frightened him, for an oracle had once warned Pelias that a man with one sandal, a descendant of Aeolus (the great-grandfather of both Aeson and Pelias), would cause his death. Without identifying himself, Pelias confronted Jason and demanded to know who he was. Jason answered truthfully, boldly announcing his intention to reclaim the throne either for himself or his father.

Pelias surely wanted to murder his nephew, but knew that such a crime against the laws of hospitality would incur the wrath of the gods. Looking for a way to dispose of Jason, Pelias decided to assign this young man an impossible task: obtaining the Golden Fleece from Colchis, a barbaric land on the eastern shore of the Black Sea.

Pelias no doubt thought that he would rid himself of Jason forever. So he identified himself and blithely promised to turn over the throne without a struggle if Jason succeeded in performing this task. Jason, bold and ambitious, saw this quest as his path to glory and so agreed to Pelias’s request.

Golden Fleece? What Golden Fleece?

Some years earlier, Athamas (another brother of Cretheus and Sisyphus), the king of Orchomenus, had left his wife Nephele to marry Ino, a daughter of Cadmus. Hoping to improve the lot of her own children, Ino plotted the destruction of Nephele’s son, Phrixus, and daughter, Helle (see Chapter 12). Ino damaged all of the seed grain in the kingdom. When the crops failed, messengers were sent to the Delphic oracle for guidance. Ino bribed the returning messengers to deliver a lie: Phrixus must be sacrificed!

Athamas reluctantly agreed to heed the false oracle. But just as Athamas raised the knife over his son on the sacrificial altar, a golden, winged ram appeared. The ram carried away Phrixus and Helle on its back. While en route to Aea, the capital of Colchis—a mythical kingdom on the eastern coast of the Black Sea—Helle fell off and drowned in the strait that connects the Aegean Sea to the Sea of Marmara. (The site, Hellespont, was named after her.) Phrixus safely reached Aea, where King Aetes—who distrusted and despised strangers—had been ordered by Zeus to welcome him.

Phrixus, who later married Aetes’s daughter Chalciope, sacrificed the ram to Zeus, his rescuer. The Golden Fleece of this glorious ram he hung upon a tree in a sacred grove in Colchis. In this grove, a sleepless dragon had guarded the fleece ever since.

Help Wanted

After consulting the oracle at Delphi, Jason invited the most impressive and daring noblemen from all the cities of Greece to join him. The roster of those who heeded this call to adventure and potential glory included some of the greatest heroes in all of Greece. Many of the volunteers chosen to join Jason were children or later descendants of the gods themselves. Those who signed up included:

- Heracles, the son of Zeus, the mightiest of all heroes (see Chapter 13)
- Polydeuces (called Pollux by the Romans), the son of Zeus by Leda and an expert boxer
- Castor, the twin of Polydeuces (though the son of Leda and Tyndareus, king of Sparta), who excelled at archery, wrestling, and riding horses
- Euphemus, son of Poseidon, so swift that he could race across water without getting his feet wet
Part 3  Everyone Needs a Hero

- Pericymenus, son (or grandson) of Poseidon, who could change his form at will during battle
- Nauplius, son (or later descendant) of Poseidon, an expert seaman
- Idas, son of Poseidon (though some deny this parentage), a boastful but strong ally
- Lyceus, the half-brother of Ida (son of Aphaereus, king of Messenia), who possessed vision so keen he could see things under the surface of the earth
- Orpheus, son of Apollo, the most gifted of all musicians (see Chapter 11)
- Idmon, a son of Apollo and a famed prophet, who foresaw a successful quest and joined the crew though he knew he would die
- Augeas, son of Helius and king of Elis (see Chapter 13)
- Echion and Erytus, sons of Hermes
- Zetes and Calais, twin sons of Boreas (god of the North Wind), who flew on wings

Not all the Argonauts were of divine birth. Tiphys would serve as pilot of the Argo. The brothers Telemachus and Telephus (the latter would marry the sea goddess Thetis and beget Achilles) joined the crew. Meleager, the young prince of Calydon, eagerly came on board. So did Jason’s pious cousin Admetus. The promise of fame and glory even enticed another cousin—Acastus, the son of Jason’s treacherous uncle Peleus—who defied his father’s orders by sailing with the Argonauts.

Atalanta, the famed huntress, also volunteered for the quest. Jason, however, fearing the tumult that might arise with a woman on board during such a long journey, reluctantly refused her.

In Search of Adventure

Jason’s crew named themselves the Argonauts after their magnificent ship, the Argo. Often hailed as the first ship ever built, the Argo was assembled under the watchful eye of Athena, who taught humans the art of sailing the seas. The ship’s beams came from Mount Pelion in Thessaly and included a talking beam from the oracle oak of Dodona. This allowed the Argonauts to receive advice from their own ship during their long journey.

The launching of the Argo was such a marvellous sight that even the Nereids, sea goddesses, rose from the ocean’s depths to wonder at this odd contrivance. It was here that the Argonaut Peleus first met his future bride: the sea goddess Thetis (see Chapters 16 and 17).

After offering a traditional sacrifice to Apollo, the Argonauts set sail for Colchis.

Chapter 14  Crimes of Passion: Jason, Medea, and the Argonauts

The Island of Women

After entering the Aegean Sea, the Argonauts arrived at the island of Lemnos, midway across the northern Aegean. Years earlier, the women of Lemnos had failed to honor Aphrodite properly. To punish them, the goddess had given the women a noxious odor that drove their husbands away. The men of Lemnos had raidied Thrace, brought home female captives, and begun having children with them.

The Lemnian wives, driven mad with jealousy, had killed the Thracian women and all Lemnian men except one. Loyal Hypsipyle, who became Queen of Lemnos, could not kill her father, King Thoas. Instead, she hid him away and then put him on a boat or chest that drifted safely to the island of Oenoa.

By the time the Argonauts landed, the women of Lemnos had realized that they needed men, if only as breeders. So they welcomed the male visitors to their island—and into their bedchambers. Jason lay with Hypsipyle, and though he vowed fidelity, he soon abandoned her to continue on his quest.

The Argonauts might have stayed on Lemnos forever. But Heracles, who had remained aboard the Argo, sent a message questioning whether this was really the way they wanted to win glory for themselves. The Argonauts, shamed into returning to the ship, left behind an island of pregnant women. (Hypsipyle would give birth to twin sons.)

Surprise Attacks

The Argonauts next traveled to Samothrace, an island in the northern Aegean, at Orpheus’s suggestion. There they became initiates in the Samothracian Mysteries, religious rites that they hoped would offer them further protection on their journey.

After passing through the Hellespont and entering the Sea of Marmara, the Argo stopped on an island where Cyzicus, king of the Dillone tribe, welcomed them. Most of the crew joined Cyzicus in ascending to the top of Mount Dindymus. But while they admired the view, a band of six-armed giants attacked the nearly defenseless ship. Fortunately, one of the guards left behind was Heracles.

The son of Zeus alone shot several giants with his bow and arrows before the crew hurried back and killed the rest.

The next morning, the Argo again set sail. But the ship ran into a strong headwind and poor visibility. That night, not knowing what little progress they had made, they stopped on the shores of the very same island. Under the dim light of the moon, the Dillones—
Winged Avengers and Clashing Rocks

Before reaching the Bosporus, the Argo stopped to rest once more. But Amycus, the brutal king of the Bebrycian, challenged the Argonauts to choose a champion for a boxing match. (These matches usually ended with the death of Amycus’s opponent.) Polydeuces, an expert boxer, nimbly avoided the powerful blows of Amycus and killed him with a shot to the ear.

The Argonauts then quickly repelled a retaliatory attack by Amycus’s subjects. They appropriated many Bebrycian sheep for a feast before setting sail again.

At the southern end of the Bosporus, they stopped in Salmydessus, a land ruled by Phineus, whose wife was a sister of Zetes and Calais. They found the king starving, filthy, blind, and so weak he could hardly move. Zeus had sent the Harpies to punish Phineus, a prophet, for revealing too much about the future of the human race. The Harpies, noxious bird-women who doled out divine vengeance, would steal his food and pollute whatever they left behind with a horrible stench.

The Argonauts prepared some food for Phineus to set a trap for the Harpies. They immediately appeared, stole the food, and flew off. The winged sons of Boreas took off in hot pursuit. Zetes and Calais finally caught up to the Harpies and seized them. Just then, Iris—Zeus’s messenger—descended from Olympus. If the twins spared the Harpies, Zeus promised that they would leave Phineus alone. Zetes and Calais reluctantly released the Harpies and returned to Salmydessus.

Phineus, who feasted for the first time in ages, was so grateful that he foretold some of what the future held for the Argonauts (though, mindful of Zeus’s punishment, he did not tell everything). Most importantly, he offered invaluable advice on how to navigate the treacherous Clashing Rocks at the eastern end of the Bosporus: the entrance to the Black Sea. These two enormous floating islands, driven by the wind, crushed everything in their path as they smashed together without warning.

As the Argo neared the end of the Bosporus, the swift Euphemus released a dove that flew directly between the Clashing Rocks. Phineus had told them that if the dove could make it through the strait, the Argo could, too. The rocks clashed together, but the dove lost only a few tail feathers. When the rocks separated again, the 50 oarsmen rowed with all their might. Like the dove, the ship made it almost the whole way through, losing only an ornament from the stern. The rocks parted once more and, with the spell broken, forever after remained apart.

Witch Way to the Golden Fleece

The Argo soon entered the mouth of the River Phasis, where Aeae, the capital of Colchis, lay. Jason first opted to try a diplomatic approach to winning the Golden Fleece. So he set out with Telamon, Augeas, and the sons of Phrixus for the magnificent palace that Hephaestus had built for Aetes.
Part 3  Everyone Needs a Hero

Now Aeëtes, the son of the sun (Helius), was so powerful that even the goddesses Hera and Athena would need help to ensure that the Greeks escaped with the fleece—and their lives. Jason and his crew sought out Athena, who agreed to bribe her son Eros with a golden ball to wound the heart of Aeëtes’s daughter, Medea. For if Medea, a powerful witch, would betray her father, Jason and the Argonauts might have a chance.

A priestess of the Underworld goddess Hecate, Medea was the first in Colchis to see the Argonauts. Smitten by Eros, she instantly became infatuated with Jason.

Arriving at the palace, the sons of Phrixus introduced the three Argonauts and attempted to impress Aeëtes by telling him that Aegeus, too, was a son of Helius and that Telamon descended from Zeus. Aeëtes would have none of it. He called them liars and accused them of plotting a coup against him. Jason, however, insisted they did not want his throne, but only the fleece—and offered to do battle with the Sauromatians, Aeëtes’s enemies, in exchange.

Aeëtes had been warned by an oracle of treachery from his own family. Since he had unshaking faith in his daughters’ loyalty, Aeëtes suspected the betrayal would come from his grandchildren, now Jason’s allies. So he refused Jason’s offer, instead challenging him to pass a test of strength in order to win the fleece.

Like the test Pellax had set for Jason, this one too seemed impossible: He would have to harness a pair of fire-breathing bulls to a plow, sow a field with dragon’s teeth, and then kill all the men who sprang from this seed. The ruthless king of Colchis doubted that Jason would survive even the first part of the test. He ordered his subjects to wait for Jason’s death, then force the Argonauts—including his own grandsons—back to their ship and set it afame.

The sons of Phrixus went to Chalciope, asking their mother to appeal to her much-younger sister Medea to help Jason achieve this dangerous task. Medea, already smitten with Jason, needed little convincing to help him survive his father’s deadly test.

Jason and Medea met for the first time at dawn in the shrine of Hecate at Colchis. Jason, drunk with gratitude, promised to take Medea back to his focus, where he said her name would be honored forever.

Before undertaking the test, Jason anointed himself and his weapons with a magic drug that Medea had given him. With the drug protecting him from their flames, Jason forced the bulls to their knees and quickly harnessed them. Within a few hours he had sown the entire field with the teeth of the same dragon that Cadmus had slain in founding Thebes (see Chapter 12). Following Cadmus’s example, Jason hurled an enormous stone in the middle of the sown men, which started them fighting amongst themselves. In the resulting confusion, Jason rushed in with his sword gleaming and started swinging. By nightfall, he had slain them all.

Chapter 14  Crimes of Passion: Jason, Medea, and the Argonauts

Aeëtes did not immediately turn over the fleece as promised, but instead sulked back to his palace and plotted against the Greeks. Medea stole away to join the celebrations of Jason and the Argonauts. After hearing Jason vow to Hera that he would marry Medea when they returned to Greece, Medea led them to the grove of Ares. When the beautiful sorceress used her magic to cause the sleepless dragon to nap, Jason made off with the fleece. The fleeing lovers quickly set sail as soon as they reached the Argo.

Crime and Punishment: The Long Way Home

Learning of the theft, Aeëtes quickly sent his son Apysrus and a fleet of warships after them. Half the fleet headed for the Bosphorus; the other half for the mouth of the Danube.

Though the Argo had made for the Danube as well, Apysrus arrived there before them.

The Argonauts soon found themselves trapped: A Colchian ship guarded the entrance to the Danube River. They took refuge on an island sacred to Artemis, where they knew the Colchians would not dare launch an attack that might offend the goddess.

Am I My Brother’s Keeper?

Sending him a message claiming she had been abducted, Medea then lured her brother to a meeting on the island, where Jason ambushed and killed him. The Argonauts then managed to kill everyone on board Apysrus’s ship and fled toward the Danube.

Mythed by a Mile

The crime may have been even worse. According to Apollodorus, Apysrus was just a child who ran away with his sister on the Argo. Medea and Jason killed and dismembered the innocent boy, cut his body into pieces, and tossed the body parts into the sea. This forced the Colchian ships to call off the chase in order to collect the body parts for a proper burial.

The Argo escaped the Colchians. But Zeus—furious at this brazen betrayal of Medea’s brother—bowed up a storm. Zeus ordered Jason and Medea to seek purification for the murder from Medea’s aunt, the famed sorceress Circe. But Circe lived on the island of Aeaea off the western coast of Italy—and the Argo lay in the Danube, cut off from any direct route to Aeaea. Rather than finding an outlet to the sea and sailing all the way around the southern coasts of Greece and Italy, the Argo boldly chose a circuitous—and highly improbable—route of inland rivers to somehow cross northern Greece and Italy. After making their way to the western Mediterranean, the ship sailed on to Aeaea.
Without asking any questions, Circe purified Jason and Medea with the blood of a pig and made sacrifices to both Zeus and the Erinyes (Furies). But when Circe learned who they were and how they had betrayed her brother, Aeetes, and her nephew, Apsyrtus, she angrily chased them off the island.

Dangerous Waters

Jason and Medea were fortunate that Hera had not given up her plot to punish Pelias. The goddess ordered favorable winds from Aeolus, the keeper of the winds, and asked the sea goddess Thetis for help, too.

As they approached Anthemoessa, home of the Sirens, whose seductive singing had caused many sailors to abandon their voyages and slowly waste away from hunger, Orpheus began to sing and play on his lyre as loudly as he could. By drowning out the seductive strains of the Sirens, Orpheus saved the Argonauts from destroying themselves.

To reach the Ionian Sea, the waters west of Greece, the Argo still had to navigate the narrow strait between the cliffs of Scylla, a six-headed beast that preyed on sailors from a sea cave, and the whirlpool of the monster Charybdis. But Thetis secretly took the helm and steered them safely through.

The Nereids then safely skimmed the Argo over the surface of the water around Sicily. This prevented the violent currents from carrying them into the Wandering Rocks—moving rocks that destroyed ships that attempted to pass among them.

After crossing the Ionian Sea, the Argonauts at last reached the Greek island of Drepane (probably what we call Corfu today). Here they met the other half of Aeetes’s fleet. The Coئians demanded the immediate return of Medea.

The Argonauts sought help from Queen Arete and King Alcinous, who agreed to prevent the separation of Jason and Medea—as long as the couple were married. The crew performed the marriage rites that very night in the sacred cave of Macris. The newlyweds slept that night in this cave, which was forever after known as Medea’s Cave.

Dry-Docked

Just as the Argo reached the southern coast of Greece, an ill wind blew them all the way across the Mediterranean Sea to the Libyan coast. An enormous wave then deposited the ship far inland, leaving it stranded on the desert sands.

The Argonauts might have given up, but three nymphs appeared before Jason and issued a cryptic oracle: After seeing Poseidon’s horses unyoked, they should repay their mother for carrying them so long in her womb. When a horse galloped out of the sea and raced across the desert, Jason solved the riddle. Their mother’s womb was the Argo. So the Argonauts repaid the ship by carrying her on rollers across the desert for nine arduous days.

When they arrived at the salt-water Lake Tritonis, the Argonauts went out to search for fresh water. They found themselves in the Garden of the Hesperides, where the wailing nymphs informed them that after stealing their apples, Heracles had created a fresh-water spring just the day before (see Chapter 13).

In trying to find Heracles, the Argonauts lost two more of their members. Antias was killed by a shepherd after trying to steal some sheep. The seer Mopsus died of a bite from a deadly snake—one of those that had sprung up from the blood that dripped from Medusa’s head as Perseus flew over Libya (see Chapter 10).

After returning to the Argo, the crew searched for days but could find no outlet from Tritonis to the sea. Orpheus suggested offering the gods his bronze tripod, a gift from his father Apollo. The god Triton responded, pushing the ship all the way to the Mediterranean along a route that the Argonauts never could have navigated themselves.

After the long journey across the sea, the Argonauts arrived at Crete. But the giant Talus prevented them from landing by hurling boulders at the ship. The last of the ancient race of bronze giants (see Chapter 2), Talus was invulnerable to all weapons—except for one vein near his ankle. Medea used her sorcery to hypnotize the giant, who stumbled, banging his ankle against a sharp rock. The vein burst and Talus plummeted into the sea.

The crew did not waste any time after refreshing themselves on Crete. They were almost home.

No Place Like Home?

Long before the Argo returned to Iolcus, rumors had spread that the ship and her crew had all been lost. Pelias, emboldened by this news, forced Jason’s father Aeson to commit suicide by drinking bull’s blood, a fatal poison. Pelias killed Jason’s young brother, Promachus, too. Jason’s mother cursed Pelias, but then killed herself with a sword.
Chapter 14 ➤ Crimes of Passion: Jason, Medea, and the Argonauts

Beware of Colchians Bearing Gifts

Ditched, divorced, and then exiled by Creon—who had good reason to fear her sorcery—Medea took advantage of her final day in Corinth to send Glaucus a rode and crown for her wedding. When the naïve Glaucus tried on the rode, which Medea had drenched in poison, it burst into flames. The fire consumed not only Glaucus, but Creon, his entire family, and the palace of Corinth as well. Simply to hurt Jason further, Medea then killed their children. When she left Iolcus, Medea took their bodies with her, making it impossible for Jason even to bury them. The sorceress escaped Corinth on a chariot pulled by dragons, a gift from her grandfather, Helius.

Mythed by a Mile

One version of Medea’s revenge claims that she left her children at Hera’s altar. When the people of Corinth found them there, they stoned the children and blamed Medea for their deaths. But the children’s ghosts caused all Corinthian babies to die until the people instituted an annual sacrifice to appease them.

The Aftermath of Tragedy

Medea fled to Athens, where she convinced King Aegeus, who had long been childless, to marry her by promising him children. (Aethra, the daughter of King Pittheus of Troezen, was already pregnant with Aegeus’s son Theseus, but Aegeus didn’t know that.) Aegeus and Medea, who had a son named Medus, lived together in Athens for many years. However, when she tried to kill Theseus in order to clear a path to the throne for her own son, Medea and Medus were both exiled by Aegeus (see Chapter 15).

With nowhere else to go, Medea returned at last to her homeland of Colchis. There Medus—egg on by his mother—killed King Perseus, who had dethroned his brother Aetes. Medus thus captured the throne for himself (or recaptured it for his grandfather if, as some accounts have it, Aetes was still alive). Although she presumably remained in Colchis until her death (if indeed she died at all), nothing further is known of Medea.

As for Jason, he never again approached the glory of his younger days. Though his quest brought him lasting fame, he had gained neither riches nor the throne of Iolcus. And his later exploits with Medea had brought him only tragedy and disgrace.

A Woman Scorned

Jason and Medea settled in Corinth, where they had 2 (or 3) children and spent 10 happy years together. But Jason increasingly found Medea, whom the Corinthians feared and loathed, an embarrassment to him. He decided to divorce Medea.

When King Creon of Corinth offered the hand of his daughter Glaucus (or Creusa), Jason eagerly accepted. He knew that divorcing Medea and marrying Glaucus would add to his own power and prestige as well as ensure the citizenship rights of his children. But his abandonment crushed Medea.

Mythed by a Mile

Some say Aeson was still alive, though just barely, when Jason returned to Iolcus. But Medea restored his youth and vigor by slitting his throat, draining his blood, and filling his veins with a brew of magic herbs.

Jason correctly suspected that Pelias would renge on his promise to give up his throne. So the Argo docked outside the city, where Medea hatched a horrifying plot to seize the throne without a costly battle.

Medea disguised herself as a crone and entered the city. After claiming that Artemis had sent her to restore Pelias’s youth, Medea slipped into a tent. She quickly emerged as the young and beautiful woman she really was, impressing Pelias so much that he agreed to submit to her promised “treatment.”

The spell required the cooperation of Pelias’s daughters, Medea insisted. Despite their loyalty to their father, however, the daughters of Pelias were reluctant to follow Medea’s recipe: Chop up their father into pieces and stew them. Medea then made a show of slaughtering a ram, cutting it up, and putting the pieces into her cauldron. When the sorceress lifted out a frisky lamb, the apparent miracle convinced all but the eldest daughter, Akestis. Her sisters killed Pelias and stewed his body parts—then wailed with despair when he failed to return.

With Pelias out of the way, the Argonauts easily took the city. Jason’s shipmate Acastus, however, who succeeded his father in the throne, expelled the couple from Iolcus after learning of the treacherous way in which they had murdered his father. Or perhaps they left the city to accept an invitation for Medea to rule Corinth, where some say her father Aeetes once reigned. In either case, the objective of the quest—restoring Aeson or Jason to the throne—was never fulfilled.
Desolate in his grief, Jason died while revisiting his past glory: the wreckage of the Argo at Corinth. There, a beam from the rotten ship fell upon his head, ending his glory days forever.

The Least You Need to Know

- Jason assembled the most talented adventurers in Greece to help him acquire the Golden Fleece—and regain his father's throne in Iolcus from Pelias.
- Though the Argo met with many dangers—giants, warriors, and the hazards of the sea—almost all of the Argonauts survived their arduous quest.
- To help Jason win his glory, Medea committed horrible crimes. She murdered and dismembered her own brother and later tricked the daughters of Pelias into killing their own father.
- When Jason abandoned her, Medea murdered his new bride, his prospective father-in-law, and her own children.
- Jason's pursuit of the Golden Fleece and his marriage to Medea were engineered by Hera, who wanted to punish Pelias for refusing to honor her.
Jason and the Argonauts

Prince Jason of Thessaly was deprived of his birthright by his uncle, Pelias. After being raised by the centaur Chiron, Jason returned to Thessaly, determined to reclaim his father’s throne. Pelias agreed to return the throne if Jason brought him the golden fleece of a sacred ram hanging in Ares’ grove in Colchis. Jason and a crew of heroes set off on the Argo (1), the first Greek longship, built with the help of Athena.

After many adventures on the way, the Argonauts reached Colchis. King Aetes was willing to give up the golden fleece only if Jason completed a series of impossible tasks. With the help of Aetes’ daughter Medea, who was skilled in magic, Jason finished the tasks. However, when Aetes refused to give him the golden fleece, Jason stole it and fled, taking Medea with him. Ultimately, he did not ascend the throne of Thessaly as he was unfavorably by the gods. This was because of the murder of Medea’s brother Aptysurus, by which he became “impure” in their eyes.

The myth of Jason has been told in various forms. The only complete version is preserved in the Argonautica of Apollonius of Rhodes.

Figures and Stories Relevant to Jason and the Argonauts

Aphrodite, Cursed the Island of Lemnos, see pp. 142–143
Athena, Helped Build the Argo, see pp. 138–139
Heracles, One of the Argonauts, see pp. 161–165
Orpheus, One of the Argonauts, see pp. 158–159

History of the Golden Fleece

Historians have long wondered about the origin of the golden fleece myth. One theory suggests it might have had something to do with the large amount of gold found in the rivers of the Caucasus Mountains (site of Colchis), where people paneled for it with the help of sheepskins, according to the historian Appian. Others say that the myth of the Argonauts refers to the colonization of the Black Sea region by the Greeks in the 13th century B.C.

Women of Lemnos En route to Colchis, the Argonauts stopped at the island of Lemnos. Aphrodite had cursed the island not long before by planting rumors in the women’s heads that their husbands, who were returning from war, had brought home their slave girls as mistresses. In a jealous rage, the women slaughtered all the men. With no men left to procreate with, they were facing extinction. Thus, the Argonauts were given such a warm and lusty reception by the women (2) that they stayed. After a long time, Heracles, who had guarded the ship, reproached Jason and his crew. They returned and the Argos sailed on, filled with wine and provisions from their grateful hostesses.

The Robbery of the Golden Fleece When the Argonauts arrived at Colchis, King Aetes said he would give Jason the golden fleece if he could harness two fire-breathing bulls, tow dragon’s teeth, and slay the warriors born from those teeth. Medea, Aetes’ daughter and a priestess of Hecate, fell in love with Jason and helped him accomplish his tasks. When Aetes refused to hand over the fleece, Medea helped Jason steal it (3) by using her knowledge of dragon’s fire. The dragon guarding the fleece fell asleep. Then Medea murdered and dismembered her brother, Aptysurus, to keep the Colchians from pursuing them.