

## Jason and the Argonauts

Jason was the son of King Aeson of Iolcus and rightful heir to the throne. But before Jason was born, King Aeson's half brother, Pelias, had overthrown the king and imprisoned him.

Jason's mother pretended that her son had died at birth. And she took him away secretly to be brought up by Chiron the centaur, a creature who was half horse and half man. If King Pelias had known of Jason's existence, he would surely have put the boy to death.

Even though Pelias knew nothing of Jason, he could not rest. For an oracle had warned him that he would be killed by a relative and that he must guard against a man wearing one sandal.

Many years later, a handsome young man with curly, golden hair came walking into the marketplace at Iolcus. He was wearing a leopard's skin and only one sandal. He had lost the other while carrying an old woman across a river.

When King Pelias saw the tall stranger with one sandal, he was instantly afraid. Surely he was the man about whom the oracle had warned Pelias.

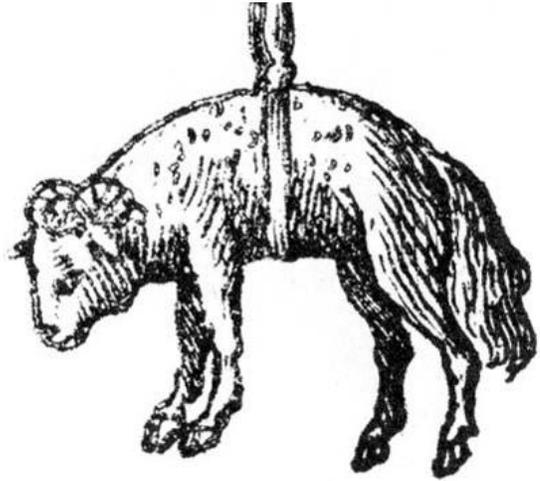
"What is your name?" said King Pelias. "And why have you come to my kingdom?"

"I am called Jason," said the stranger. "I have come to claim the throne, for my father is your half brother, and I am the rightful king of this land. I do not wish to quarrel with you. You may keep all the riches of the kingdom, but I must have the title of king, for it belongs to me."

King Pelias thought quickly and said, "I shall not quarrel with you. The throne shall soon be yours. But first you must do one thing. Bring back the Golden Fleece from the kingdom of Colchis. It hangs on a tree there and is guarded by a dragon that never sleeps. This ram's fleece of gold belongs to *our* kingdom, and only a strong, fearless man like you can recover it. When you return with it, I shall yield my throne."

King Pelias was sure that nobody could survive such a dangerous quest, but Jason did not know this. "What a fine adventure it will be," said Jason. "I accept the challenge gladly. I shall choose a group of brave young heroes and have a sturdy ship constructed at once."

Jason asked Argus, a master shipbuilder, to build him a great ship with fifty oars. Then he sent envoys to every palace in Greece, asking for volunteers to help capture the Golden

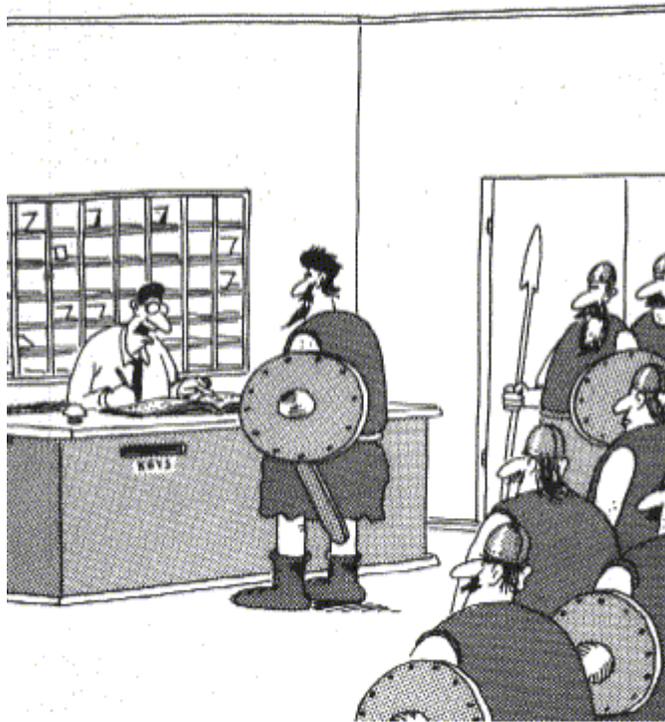


Fleece. The ship was called the *Argo*, and the fifty volunteers, called Argonauts, included such as Heracles and Orpheus.

As the group rowed away, Jason, the leader, prayed to Zeus to bless the dangerous journey. The strong Argonauts pulled their oars, and the ship sped through the waves.

After a while, Heracles called out, "Let us have a contest to see which of us can row the longest."

"Agreed!" cried the others, and they rowed for many long hours until, one by one, they grew tired and had to give up. Only Jason and Heracles continued. Finally Jason fainted from overexertion, and Heracles' oar broke in two.



"I'm sorry, sir, but the reservation book simply says 'Jason.' ... There's nothing here about Jason *and* the Argonauts."

The Argonauts pulled their boat onto a sandbar in a river so that they could rest. And Hylas, Heracles' squire, went ashore to find drinking water. A long time passed, and he did not return. Heracles went ashore and ran through the forest, calling his squire's name, but he could not find him. A water nymph who had fallen in love with Hylas had pulled him down into the spring where she lived. Heracles did not know this and continued searching for Hylas. When Heracles did not return, the Argonauts combed the shore for hours, calling, "Heracles! Heracles! We must leave." At last Jason made the difficult decision to set off without him, for the wind was in their favor.

Before long the Argonauts came to a kingdom where the withered, starved ruler, named Phineus, pleaded for their help. "Because I am able to predict the future, Zeus has punished me. Every time I begin a meal, he sends two horrible flying creatures, the Harpies, to snatch some of my food and make the rest smell so foul that I cannot eat it."

"We are ready to serve you," said Jason, pitying the man. "Tell us what we must do."

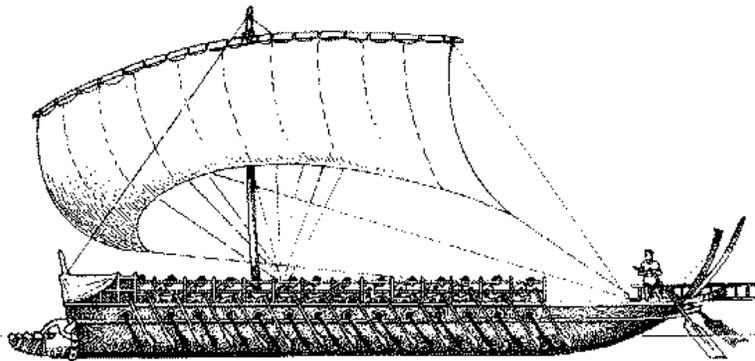
"Only two of your men, the sons of Boreas, the North Wind, can drive them off," said Phineus.

The sons of Boreas stepped forward with their swords ready. Then the Argonauts put dinner in front of Phineus. The Harpies flew down, snatched the food with their sharp claws, and flew off with it. But this time the sons of Boreas flew after them and slashed at them with their swords, chasing them far away. "They won't bother you anymore," they said to Phineus.

"I cannot thank you enough," he replied. "You have saved my life. And now I am going to help *you*, for I know that you must row through the dangerous Bosphorus strait on your way through the Black Sea to Colchis."

Phineus gave them invaluable advice, and the Argonauts set forth once more. At last they sighted the huge, jagged rocks called the Symplegades, or Clashing Islands, that guarded the entrance to the Bosphorus. Phineus had told them, "When a ship tries to go between these floating rocks, the rocks move together and smash the ship to pieces. There is only one way to get through. Let a dove fly before you, and when the rocks crush its tail, row through with all your might. Thus you will pass as the rocks separate before clashing again."

Jason let the dove go. Just as Phineus had predicted, the rocks smashed together, crushing the tip of the dove's tail. Then Jason gave the command: "Row!" The Argonauts did, and as the huge rocks drew apart, the *Argo* slid through safely. Jason looked back and saw the rocks smash together again. But they crushed only the very tip of the ship, which was quickly repaired. Afterward the rocks became rooted, and ever since the passageway has been safe for sailors.



### *THE GOLDEN FLEECE*

The Argonauts rowed through the Black Sea for days. At last they anchored at Colchis, tired but excited. "Somewhere in this land, the Golden Fleece is guarded by a fierce dragon," said Jason. "I do not know how we shall find it, but find it we will. First, though, we must refresh ourselves with a long sleep."

While the Argonauts slept under the stars, Hera and Athena discussed them on Mount Olympus. "We must help Jason," they said to each other, for Jason was one of their favorite mortals. Then they both had the same idea. "Let us ask Aphrodite for her aid."

Aphrodite, goddess of love, was always happy to use her powers, and she said to her son, Eros, "I shall give you a shining toy, a ball of gold, if you do what I ask."

"Only ask," said Eros, anxious to have the toy.

"You must make the daughter of the king of Colchis fall in love with Jason. Her name is Medea, and she is a witch. Only Medea can help the Argonauts with their dangerous mission."

Eros prepared to fly down to earth while the Argonauts made their way to the palace of King Aetes of Colchis. The king greeted them courteously, as did his daughter, Medea. But King Aetes felt uneasy. He asked Jason who he and his companions were and why they had come to him. Jason replied, "We are all brave men of Greece, and we have come to ask you for the Golden Fleece. Ask us any service, and we shall perform it for you in exchange for the fleece."

King Aetes had no intention of handing over his most precious possession. And so he thought of an impossible task for the Argonauts to perform.

He said to Jason, "I shall be happy to give you the Golden Fleece. But first you must yoke to a plow two bulls that breathe fire. Then you must plow the field, and into the furrows of the earth you must sow the teeth of a dragon. These teeth are seeds from which a crop of armed men shall grow. They shall attack you and, single-handed, you must mow them down."

Jason said, "This I shall do tomorrow," although he could not imagine how he would accomplish such an impossible task.



At that moment Eros flew down to Colchis. Quickly he shot an arrow of love into Medea's heart, and from that time she could not take her eyes off Jason. Medea longed to help Jason with her magic, but she tried desperately to put aside her thoughts of him. Was he not, after all, an enemy of her father?

That night she twisted and turned in bed, torn between her love for Jason and her loyalty to her father. But Eros's arrow had done its job well, and at last she sent her servant to bring Jason to her.

In the middle of the dark night, Medea declared her love for Jason and said, "If you promise to take me as your wife, I shall help you." And Jason clasped the lovely sorceress in his arms, promising to wed her. Then Medea said to him, "Here is a magic ointment. Spread it over your body and your weapons. It will protect you from the fire-breathing bulls and the armed men who will spring up when you have sown the dragon's teeth." She also gave him a magic stone to throw among the armed men. "Now go, for there is not much time before daylight."

The next morning Jason spread the magic ointment on his body and on his spear and his shield. Then he went to the field where King Aetes and his warriors awaited the spectacle.



"Jason will be killed by the fire-breathing bulls," said the king's son, Apsyrtus.

"That is certain," said the king. "What a fool he is to undergo this ordeal."

Jason strode out onto the field, and the two fire-breathing bulls were set loose. Jason ran after them, grabbed them both by the horns, and yoked them to the plow.

"The bulls breathe fire on Jason, yet they do not even singe him," said Apsyrtus. "How can this be?"

"It is indeed strange," said the king. "But he will not be able to withstand the armed warriors who will spring up when he sows the dragon's teeth."

Jason drove the bulls across the field. The plow cut furrows in the earth. Into these Jason sowed the dragon's teeth. Instantly an army of fierce armed men sprang up and ran to attack Jason. But Jason threw the magic stone into their midst, and the men began killing one another with their spears.

King Aetes was furious. He said to his son, "Jason shall never have the Golden Fleece. Go and call our army together. Tonight, when he expects me to give him the treasure, we will attack his band of men on board their ship."

Because Medea was a sorceress she knew her father's plan. That night she stole to Jason's ship and said, "My father is planning to prevent you from capturing the Golden Fleece. You must seize it now, before he attacks you. I shall come on board and lead you to the sacred grove where the Golden Fleece hangs." The heroes rowed quietly as Medea guided them. "Now!" she said suddenly. "Stop here and pull up your ship on shore."

They did as she said. Then Medea and Jason crept ashore to the sacred grove. There they saw the Golden Fleece hanging from a tree and glistening in the moonlight. A huge, hissing dragon guarded it, but Medea sneaked up and sang it a soothing, magical lullaby. Soon the dragon was fast asleep. Jason snatched the Golden Fleece, and he and Medea ran back to the ship. The heroes rowed away as fast as they could. And not until they were several miles out to sea did Jason show them the Golden Fleece. They all marveled at the hard-won prize and praised Medea for her help in gaining it. "But how will Medea get back to the palace?" they asked.

"She is not going to leave us," said Jason. "For I have promised to marry her as soon as I can."

It was not long before King C learned that Jason and the Argonauts had rowed away with the Golden Fleece and his daughter, Medea. The king sent Apsyrtus with an army to pursue them.

Once again Medea saved the Argonauts with her trickery. She sent a message to Apsyrtus, asking him to meet her on an island. There she would give him the Golden Fleece, and then she would return with him to their father.

Jason accompanied Medea that night. When Apsyrtus arrived, Jason slew him with one stroke of his sword. Medea's robe was covered with her brother's blood, but she was so hardhearted that she did not even grieve over him.

Apsyrtus's army, now leaderless, gave up. Jason and Medea rejoined the Argonauts, and they sped toward home in the *Argo*.

Another story says that Medea convinced her brother to leave with her on the *Argo*. Her father assembled his army and chased them. As he caught up with the *Argo*, she killed her brother and chopped him into pieces. One by one she threw the pieces into the water. Her father, distraught, stopped to pick up the pieces of his son. This enabled the *Argo* to escape.



Their plight was not over with the escape from King Aetes, however. They began to run out of supplies and felt the need to stop to get some. The only island that they could stop at was guarded by the only survivor of the bronze age of men, Talos. As guardian of the island, Talos kept the Argo at bay by hurling great boulders at it. Medea convinced Talos that she would give him a secret potion that would make him immortal if he would let her stop on the island. Talos agreed and drank the potion and it made him fall asleep. Medea knew that he had one great weakness, a single vein that went from his ankle to his head that kept his body alive. Medea went to him in his sleep and pulled the plug in his ankle, whereupon Talos bled to death



### THE RETURN HOME

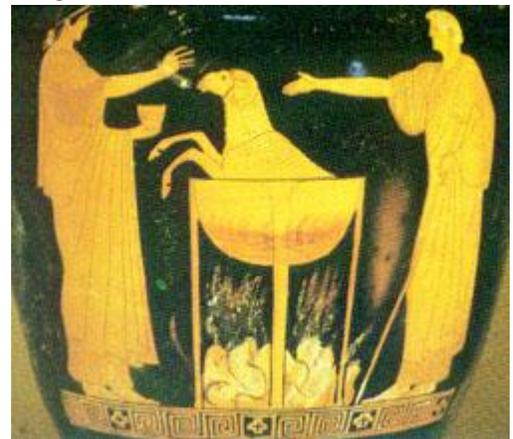
Finally the *Argo* landed safely at Iolcus. "Home at last!" shouted the victorious Argonauts as Jason stepped ashore to present the Golden Fleece to King Pelias.

But Jason's joy was short-lived. To his horror, he learned that King Pelias had killed his father and that his mother had died soon after of grief.

Jason enlisted Medea's help to punish Pelias. Medea told Pelias's daughters that she had the power to make Pelias young again. In order to persuade them that she could bring this about, she cut up and boiled an old sheep together with some magic herbs. Soon a young lamb leaped out of the cauldron.

The daughters of Pelias were convinced. They asked Medea to cast a spell to put their father to sleep. Then they cut up Pelias and put him in the boiling water. But this time Medea did not add the magic herbs, and poor Pelias did not return to life. The prophecy that Pelias would be killed by a relative was thus fulfilled.

Even though Jason was the rightful heir to the throne, he decided to hastily leave Iolcus, as Pelias had been murdered using treachery. He and Medea fled to Corinth, where they remained for ten years and raised two sons. However, Jason fell in love with Glauce, the daughter of the King Creon, and determined to marry her, despite all that Medea had done for him.



Medea was enraged at Jason's heartless desertion. On the wedding day, she sent Jason's bride a beautiful robe that she had sprinkled with poison. When the princess put it on, it burst into flames, killing her.

Then Medea killed her own two children, whose father was Jason, for she knew that life held nothing for them after her terrible deed. Her children would be slaves in Corinth, at best, or put to death, at worst.

Jason came to her in anger. She said to him:

Yet it is well you came.  
For I shall ease the burden of my heart  
If I can make your baseness manifest.  
I saved you. Every man in Greece knows that.  
The bulls, the dragon-men, the serpent warder of the Fleece,  
I conquered them. I made you victor.  
I held the light that saved you.  
Father and home-I left them  
For a strange country.  
I overthrew your foes,  
Contrived for Pelias the worst of deaths.  
Now you forsake me.  
Where shall I go? Back to my father's house?  
To Pelias' daughters? I have become for you  
The enemy of all.  
Myself, I had no quarrel with them.  
Oh, I have had in you  
A loyal husband, to be admired of men.  
An exile now, O God, O God.  
No one to help. I am alone.

Medea fled in her chariot drawn by dragons. And Jason was left a lonely man, mourning for his young bride-to-be and his beloved children.



Jason was no longer in the favor of the gods, for he had broken his word to Medea so that he could marry another. He became a friendless, homeless old man, and one day, when he returned to gaze at his ship, the *Argo*, the prow fell on his head, and he died.

Long after Jason's death, the Golden Fleece hung in a temple of Zeus, and all of Greece could see it and remember the remarkable feats of Jason and his heroic band of Argonauts.

Text of the story mostly taken from:

“Jason and the Argonauts.” *Passaic County Community College*. N.d. 22 Feb. 2007. <[www.pccc.cc.nj.us/asrc/readwrit/jason.html](http://www.pccc.cc.nj.us/asrc/readwrit/jason.html)>.

#### Descendants of Prometheus

