

differ in intent and accuracy, texts and movies point to a continued fascination with the story of Jason, his hunt for the legendary Golden Fleece, and his dramatic love affair with the enigmatic princess – and sorceress – Medea.

At its heart, the *Argonautica* is a quest story that sets the narrative foundation for future great adventures, such as the medieval Grail-quest romances of King Arthur and Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* in the twentieth century. They are all stories in which men and women interact with supernatural forces while undergoing a series of trials on their way to recover a mystical object; monsters stalk the adventurers and some die along the way; heroes rise and fall according to circumstance, and romance is never far away.

Somewhere along the path, through the mists of time, and amidst intense scholarly analysis, the incredible story of Jason and his intrepid crew has become obfuscated in many ways. We no longer believe in the gods of the Greeks, for example, and reconstructions of the quest are rationalized on the basis of modern knowledge. Some analysts are more focused on literary aspects, and movies have their own agendas to pursue. This version of the tale presents the *Argonautica* without judgement or prejudice, as a straightforward story for the enjoyment of the reader, compiled from the various translations – most conspicuously those of Apollonius, with the assistance of Valerius Flaccus.

A 17th century map illustrating the regions through which Jason and the Argonauts travelled.



BOOK I: THE JOURNEY BEGINS

The Man with One Sandal

The story of how Jason and his Argonauts retrieved the Golden Fleece begins in the small kingdom of Iolcus in eastern Greece. It was here that Pelias usurped the throne from his half-brother, Aeson, in a ruthless coup, and launched a reign of terror. An oracle had warned the new king that he would die at the hands of a descendant of Aeolus. Pelias therefore set about killing every Aeolian he could lay hands on, but spared Aeson for the sake of their mother. Aeson instead had to renounce his inheritance and remain a prisoner in Pelias's palace. The king's mercy did not extend to any child of Aeson's, however; so when Aeson's wife gave birth to a son, she and her midwives pretended he was stillborn. He was then smuggled out of the city to the safety of Mount Pelion where Cheiron the Centaur raised him as Jason. On reaching manhood, at the age of twenty, Jason set off for Iolcus to recover his rightful inheritance. Cheiron wished him well and waved goodbye, and, with that, Jason walked off to find his destiny.



The Education of Achilles
by James Barry. Cheiron the Centaur served as a tutor and surrogate father to many of the heroes of Ancient Greece, including Jason.

A second oracle had cautioned Pelias that the man prophesied to kill him would arrive while wearing only one sandal. Years passed but no one fitting that unusual description came to Iolcus, and the king got on with the business of ruling his kingdom. One of the most important functions of Greek rulers was to honour the gods through regular devotions, feasts, and games. Pelias also had a personal reason to do so, as his father was Poseidon, god of the sea. Conversely, dishonouring the gods could result in dire consequences, especially for kings.

In Pelias's case, he had once offended the goddess Hera, the wife of the all-powerful Zeus, by killing his stepmother in Hera's temple. When, one day well into his reign, Pelias organized an Olympiad in honour of Poseidon, Hera seized her chance. If her plan worked, the prophecy would come true and the goddess would have her revenge.

THE GOLDEN FLEECE

The story of the Golden Fleece originated in the generation before Jason launched his epic voyage. It was then that the king of Boeotia, Athamas, had had an affair with Ino while still married to his queen Nephele. The queen was furious to be supplanted by Ino but there was little she could do other than rant about the travesty. In the meantime, Ino plotted to destroy Nephele's children, Phrixus and Helle, so that her sons by Athamas – Learches and Melicertes – would inherit the kingdom. To that end, Ino had tainted corn seed sown for the next growing season, resulting in a complete crop failure. Athamas, as predicted by Ino, consulted the Delphic Oracle to find a solution, but Ino bribed the king's messengers to bring back instructions that Athamas was to sacrifice Phrixus if he wanted the crops to grow again. Although devastated, the king had no option but to acquiesce.

On hearing of this hideous bargain, Zeus ordered the god Hermes to send a winged, golden ram to rescue Phrixus and carry him off to Colchis where he would be safe. Phrixus's sister, Helle, jumped on board too but fell off into the sea, giving her

name to the Hellespont that separates Asia and Europe. On his arrival in Colchis, well out of the reach of the Greeks – or so he believed – Phrixus sacrificed the ram to Zeus and gave the Fleece to King Aeëtes of Colchis for safekeeping. Aeëtes placed the Fleece in a tree where it lay under the protection of a great serpent.



Phrixus riding the golden ram.
(Stefano Bolognini)