Jason and the Golden Fleece

Jason and the Argonauts captured the famed Golden Fleece from King Aeetes of Colchis, with the help of the sorceress Medea, the king's daughter.

The Greek tale of Jason and the Golden Fleece has been told for 3,000 years. It's a classic hero's quest tale, in which the hero embarks on a sea voyage into an unknown land, with a great task to achieve. He is in search of a magical ram's fleece, which he has to find in order to reclaim his father's kingdom of Iolkos from the usurper King Pelias.

The story is set a generation before the time of the Trojan War, around 1300 BC, but the first known written mention of it comes six centuries later, in the age of Homer (800 BC). The tale came out of the region of Thessaly, in Greece, where early epic poetry developed. The Greeks have retold and reinterpreted it many times since, changing it as their knowledge of the physical world increased.

No one knows for sure where the earliest poets set the adventure, but by 700 BC the poet Eumelos set the tale of the Golden Fleece in the kingdom of Aia, a land that at the time was thought to be at the eastern edge of the world. At this point the Jason story becomes fixed as an expedition to the Black Sea. The most famous version, penned by Apollonius of Rhodes, who was head of the library at Alexandria, was composed in the third century BC, after the invasion of Asia by Alexander the Great.

Since the 1870s a series of excavations at Mycenae, Knossos, Troy and elsewhere has brought the Greek Heroic Age - the imaginary time when the great myths were set - to life. The archaeologists' discoveries of Bronze Age artefacts made it clear that the Greek myths and epic poems preserve the traditions of a Bronze Age society, and may refer to actual events of that time. The story could also perhaps represent an age of Greek colonisation around the shores of the Black Sea.

Jason's task

Village in Svaneti region of north west Georgia. Here people still pan for gold using the fleece of a sheep. According to the legend, Jason was deprived of his expectation of the throne of Iolkos (a real kingdom situated in the locale of present day Volos) by his uncle, King Pelias, who usurped the throne. Jason was taken from his parents, and was brought up on Mount Pelion, in Thessaly, by a centaur named Cheiron. Meantime his uncle lived in dread of an oracle's prophecy, which said he should fear the 'man with one shoe'.

At the age of 20 Jason set off to return to Iolkos - on his journey losing a sandal in the river while helping Hera, Queen of the Gods, who was in disguise as an old woman. On arriving before King Pelias, Jason revealed who he was and made a claim to the kingdom. The king replied, 'If I am to give you the kingdom, first you must bring me the Fleece of the Golden Ram'.

And this was the hero's quest. His task would take him beyond the known world to acquire the fleece of a magical ram that once belonged to Zeus, the king of the gods. Jason's ancestor Phrixus had flown east from Greece to the land of Cochlis (modern day Georgia) on the back of this ram. King Aietes, son of Helios the sun god, had then sacrificed the ram and hung its fleece in a sacred grove guarded by a dragon. An oracle foretold that Aietes would lose his kingdom if he lost the fleece, and it was from Aietes that Jason had to retrieve it.

Why a fleece? Fleeces are connected with magic in many folk traditions. For the ancient Etruscans a gold coloured fleece was a prophecy of future prosperity for the clan. Recent discoveries about the Hittite Empire in Bronze Age Anatolia show celebrations where fleeces were hung to renew royal power. This can offer insight into Jason's search for the fleece and Aietes' reluctance to relinquish it. The fleece represented kinship and prosperity.

Black Sea colonisation

Jason's ship, the Argo, began its journey with a crew of 50 (which swelled to 100, including Hercules, in subsequent retellings of the myth) - known as the 'Argonauts'. The Greek claim that the Argo was the first ship ever built can not be true, but Jason's journey was seen by the ancient Greeks as the first long-distance voyage ever undertaken.

Indeed, the voyage can be seen as a metaphor for the opening up of the Black Sea coast. Historically, once the Greeks learned to sail into the Black Sea they embarked on a period of colonisation lasting some 3,000 years - but the time they first arrived in the region is still controversial.

Lemnos, an island in the north-eastern Aegean was Jason's first stop. This was a place inhabited by women who had murdered their husbands after being cursed by Aphrodite. Next the Argo sailed to Samothrace, where the Argonauts entered the Sea of Marmara, the city of Troy by night, and entered the Sea of Marmara the next day.

The Jason tale is a founding myth for many towns along this shore. It is, however, most likely that local accounts of events have arisen out of the story itself, rather than being based on historic facts that themselves became the basis of the myth.
It is along this stretch of coast that the Argonauts rescue a blind prophet, Phineus, by chasing away the Harpies - the ugly winged females Zeus had sent to torment Phineus. In return Phineus prophesies that Jason will be the first mariner to sail through the 'clashing rocks' that guard the entrance to the Black Sea. The myth arose when Greek sailors were first able to negotiate their way up the powerful currents of the Bosphorus to enter the Black Sea beyond. In time the sea was transformed in Greek eyes from 
\textit{Axeinos Pontus}, the 'hostile sea' to \textit{Euxeinos Pontus}, the 'welcoming sea'.

**City of Aia**

The story continues with the Argonauts finally reaching the land of Colchis, and the first part of their quest is achieved. The heroes land and hold council, deciding to walk up to the city of Aia. Along the way they see bodies wrapped in hides and hung in trees, a sight that travellers in Georgia recount right up to the 17th century.

The ancient Greeks speak of Aia as a real city on the River Phasis (the modern River Rhion). Archaeologists have yet to find it, although in 1876 gold treasure was found in this region at an ancient site near the town of Vani, and it was suggested that this might be the city of the Argonaut legend. Heinrich Schlieman, the excavator of Troy and Mycenae, proposed to dig here but was not given permission.

Then in 1947 excavations revealed that between 600 and 400 BC (the time the Jason legend took its final shape) Vani was indeed an important Colchin city. The city was not inhabited during the Heroic Age (when the Jason story is set), but it was the Colchin 'capital' at the time the Greek poets located the myth here. This suggests that some parts of the myth depict the culture of the historical Iron Age rather than the earlier Bronze Age of Jason.

**The story continues**

In the myth, once in Colchis Jason asks King Aietes to return the Golden Fleece. Aietes agrees to do so if Jason can perform a series of superhuman tasks. He has to yoke fire-breathing bulls, plough and sow a field with dragons' teeth, and overcome phantom warriors. In the meantime Aphrodite (the goddess of love) makes Medea, daughter of King Aietes, fall in love with Jason. Medea offers to help Jason with his tasks if he marries her in return. He agrees, and is enabled to complete the tasks.

Thus the classic triangle of hero, dark power and female helper is formed, to be repeated in stories all the way down to Hollywood. And it seems possible that this theme was based on an even earlier myth. An excavation of the 1920s and 30s, at Boghz Koy, in central Turkey, uncovered Indo-European tablets from a Hittite civilisation dating to the 14th century BC. One of these has an account on it of a story similar to that of Jason and Medea, and may reveal the prehistory of the myth.

It is not known at what date the Greeks borrowed it, but it very possibly happened in the ninth or eighth century BC. This was the time when many themes were taken from the east and incorporated into Greek poetry.

To continue the story. King Aietes organises a banquet, but confides to Medea that he will kill Jason and the Argonauts rather than surrender the Golden Fleece. Medea tells Jason, and helps him retrieve the Fleece. From here the Argonauts flee home, encountering further epic adventures. The ancient storytellers give several versions of the route Jason took back to Greece, reflecting changes in Greek ideas about the geography of the world.

On the final leg of their journey, the Argonauts are caught in a storm, and after they pray to Apollo an island appears to them. The inhabitants of modern-day Anafi, 'the one which was revealed', and which is said to be the island in question, continue to celebrate their part in the story to this day. They regularly hold a festival inside an ancient temple to Apollo, built on the spot where legend says Jason gave thanks to the god for his rescue.

**Dénouement**

On his return to Iolkos Jason discovers that King Pelias has killed his father, and his mother has died of grief. Medea tricks Pelias by offering to rejuvenate him, and then kills him. Jason and Medea go into exile in Corinth, where Jason betrays Medea by marrying the king's daughter. Medea takes revenge by killing her own children by Jason.

Pausanias, in his first-century guidebook to Greece, describes a shrine to the murdered children next to a temple to Hera, queen of gods, at Corinth. Centuries later, in the 1930s, a British excavation at Perachora uncovered an eighth-century BC temple to Hera, supposedly dedicated by Medea, near an oracle site with pilgrimage offerings left by women devotees over many centuries - perhaps there's a historic basis to the myth?

In the end, Jason becomes a wanderer once more, and eventually returns to beached hull of the \textit{Argo}. Here the beam of the ship (which was said to speak and was named Dodona) falls on him and kills him. His story has come full circle - as in all Greek myths, the hero's destiny is in the hands of the gods.

We know the story of Jason, but not exactly when it was first told. By classical times the myth had spread across the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, and it continues to fascinate us in our own day, informing archaeological investigations and bearing continued retellings - a testimony to the perennial appeal of the tale of the hero's quest.