

Jason and the Golden Fleece

Here is how to say some of the more difficult names in this myth. In brackets, I've broken the names down into sounds to help you to say them.

Iolcus- (eye ole cuss)

Chiron- (chur ron)

Pelias- (pell eye us)

Colchis- (kol kiss)

Phrixus- (fricks us)

Thessaly- (thess uh lee)

Hylas- (high lass)

Calais- (kall lass)

Zetes- (zeet eez)

Jason of Iolcus was as strong and well-bred as he was handsome, for he had been raised by the wise centaur Chiron. Jason's father, Aristo, had brought the boy to the centaur and had asked him to bring him up, for he feared that his own brother, Pelias, who had taken from him the throne of Iolcus, might harm his heir. In Chiron's lonely mountain cave, young Jason was raised to be a hero. When he was grown he left his foster father to go to Iolcus and reclaim his father's throne. Hera, who was paying a visit to earth, saw the handsome youth as he walked down from the mountain. His golden hair hung to his shoulders and his strong body was wrapped in a leopard skin. Hera was taken by his fine looks. She quickly changed herself into an old woman and stood helplessly at the edge of a swollen stream as if she did not dare to wade across. Jason offered politely to carry her and lifted her on his strong shoulders. He started to wade and at first she was very light. But with each step she grew heavier, and when he reached midstream, she was so heavy that his feet sank deep into the mud. He lost one of his sandals, but struggled bravely on, and when he reached the other side, the old woman revealed herself as the goddess Hera.

"Lo," she said. "You are a mortal after my liking; I shall stand by you and help you win back your throne from your uncle Pelias."

This was a promise the goddess gladly gave, for she had a grudge against Pelias, who had once forgotten to include her when he sacrificed to the gods. Jason thanked her and went on his way in high spirits. When he arrived in Iolcus, people crowded around him, wondering who the handsome stranger might be, but when King Pelias saw him, his cheeks paled. An oracle had predicted that a youth with only one sandal would be the next king. Pelias pretended to be great friends with Jason when the boy said who he was and why he had come, but underneath he held dark thoughts and planned to do away with his guest.

Pelias threw a great feast for Jason and flattered him and promised him the throne as soon as he had performed a heroic deed to prove himself worthy of being a king.

"In the kingdom of Colchis, at the shores of the Black Sea," said Pelias, "on a branch in a dark grove, there hangs a golden fleece shining as brightly as the sun. Bring the fleece to me and the throne shall be yours."

The Golden Fleece was once the skin of a flying ram, sent by Zeus to save the life of young Prince Phrixus of Thessaly. The crops had failed and Phrixus' evil stepmother had convinced the boy's father that he must sacrifice his son to save his country from a famine. Sadly the king built an altar and put his son on it, but Zeus hated human sacrifice, and as the king lifted his knife, a golden ram swooped down from the skies and flew off with Phrixus on his back. They flew far to the east and landed in the kingdom of Colchis. The King of Colchis understood that Phrixus had been sent by the gods. He gave him his daughter in marriage and sacrificed the ram. Its glittering fleece was hung in a sacred grove and it was the greatest treasure of the country for it had the power to heal any wound. By placing the fleece around an injured or dying person, that person would be brought back to full life.

King Pelias was certain that Jason would not return alive, for he knew that the warlike king of Colchis would not part with the fleece and that a many-headed dragon was guarding it. But Pelias did not know that Jason had Hera's help.

"Give me timber and men to build for me a sturdy ship and I shall sail off at once," said Jason.

The king gave him what he asked for and a great ship, the Argo, was built. It was the most seaworthy ship ever seen. Athena herself, prodded by Hera, put a piece of magical oak wood in the front part of the boat. The oak had the power to speak in time of danger and advise Jason what to do. With a ship like that it was not hard for Jason to gather a crew of heroes. Even Heracles came with his young friend Hylas. Calais and Zetes, winged sons of the North Wind, joined, and Orpheus came along to inspire the crew with his music. Soon each of the fifty oars of the ship was manned by a hero who swore to stand by Jason through all dangers.

Before they set sail, the heroes who called themselves the Argonauts, sacrificed richly to the gods and made sure to forget no one.

The sea god, Poseidon, was in a good mood. He called for the West Wind and under full sail the Argo sped toward the east. When the wind grew tired and died down, the Argonauts put out their oars and rowed with all their might. Orpheus beat out the time with his lyre and the ship cut through the waves like an arrow. One after the other the heroes grew tired and pulled in their oars. Only Heracles and Jason were left rowing, each trying to outlast the other. Jason finally fainted, but just as he slumped forward, Heracles' huge oar broke in two, so the contest was considered to be a tie.

The Argonauts landed at a wooded coast so Heracles could cut himself a new oar. While Heracles searched for a suitable tree, his young friend Hylas went to a pool to fill his bucket with fresh water. When the water nymph of the pool saw the handsome boy bending down,

she fell in love with him. She pulled him down with her to the bottom of the pool and Hylas vanished forever without leaving a trace.

Heracles went out of his mind with grief when he could not find his friend. He ran through the woods, calling for Hylas, beating down whatever was in his way. The Argonauts, brave as they were, all feared Heracles when he was full of anger. They hastily boarded the ship and sailed away without him, leaving him alone on the island.

On toward the east the Argonauts sailed until they came to a country ruled by a king who was known for his knowledge and wisdom. They went ashore to ask the way to Colchis, but the king was so weak that he could barely answer their questions. He was so thin that only his skin held his bones together. Whenever food was set before him, three disgusting Harpies, fat, nasty birds with women's heads, swooped down and devoured it. What they did not eat they left so foul and filthy that it was not fit to be eaten. No one in his kingdom could keep the Harpies away.

Jason knew that he and the Argonauts had to help him.

