

Jason & the Argonauts (Osprey, 2013)

The story of Jason and the Argonauts and their search for the Golden Fleece is one of the oldest in the western canon. As such, it sits beside Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as one of our few non-archaeological insights into the world of the bronze-age Greeks. At its most basic level, the story tells of a voyage of exploration from Iolcis in Greece along the Black Sea to the kingdom of Aetetes in the vicinity of modern-day Georgia. The journey probably took place around 1300 BCE before the wars with Troy described by Homer. Like Homer's epics, though, the retelling of events through the ages introduced contemporary ideas and mores into the original story, creating a cloud of information that has taken sophisticated scholarship to penetrate. Even with all that work, many mysteries remain and debate continues over the major issues of myth and history, cultural interpolation, and the meaning of the story.

Jason's story began life as oral history passed down through the generations. The most complete written version that has survived was recorded by the Hellenistic scholar Apollonius of Rhodes in the first half of the 3rd century BCE. He worked at the library of Alexandria and infused the story of Jason with the latest cultural and scholarly knowledge. Apollonius's literary inspiration probably came from the 5th century Theban poet Pindar who wrote a brief account of Jason's voyage in his fourth Pythian ode. It would be another three hundred years, however, before an updated version of the Jason myth was written again, this time by a Roman, Gaius Valerius Flaccus.

As with Apollonius, little is now known about Valerius Flaccus. He lived in the first century CE in the town of Setia south of Rome and may have been reasonably prominent amongst his contemporaries. His only existing work, however, is the incomplete *Argonautica*. Flaccus based the style of his poetic version on Virgil's *Aeneid* but his epic was not of the same quality. Nevertheless, Flaccus's version of the myth added significant new elements to the story and opened up debates over the characters involved, especially the hero of the story and his relationship to his crew and Medea. With two versions available to them, literary historians have embarked on their own voyage into the nature of the epic poem and how the story has been told through the ages.

Various modern translations of Apollonius and Valerius Flaccus have been attempted along with two movie productions. While they differ in intent and accuracy, the 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 those of the mediaeval King Arthur and Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* in the twentieth century. They are all stories where 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 that path, through the mists of time and 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 Osprey 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.

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