

The Argonautica

The Argonautica by Apollonius of Rhodes is an epic poem that follows Jason and the Argonauts on their perilous quest for the Golden Fleece, blending adventure, myth, and human emotion.

INTRODUCTION

Apollonius Rhodius, an ambiguous figure in terms of the chronology within Alexandrian literary history, hailed from Alexandria and lived during the era of the Ptolemies. His magnum opus, "Argonautica," faced initial scrutiny, compelling him to relocate to Rhodes, where his revised work received accolades, earning him the moniker of a Rhodian. Despite uncertainties about his tenure as the head of the Alexandrian Library—a role attributed to him by some sources but disputed due to chronological inconsistencies—Apollonius's legacy as a librarian next to Callimachus, albeit controversial, is a testament to his prominence in Alexandrian scholarly circles.

Apollonius's brush with controversy was most pronounced in his literary feud with his mentor Callimachus, stemming from their divergent artistic visions, escalating to personal animosity with public exchanges of vitriol. This discord epitomized the intense intellectual rivalries of the time, emphasizing differences in literary taste and methodology between proponents of innovation and adherents of traditional epic forms.

"Argonautica" itself, while a venture into the epic genre that was seen as antiquated by his contemporaries, reflects the peculiarities of Alexandria's literary climate, marked by a predilection for intricate diction, learned references, and a departure from epic unity in favor of episodic structure. The narrative traverses the journey of Jason and the Argonauts to Colchis in quest of the Golden Fleece, interspersed with mythological digressions, local lore, and geographical musings indicative of the era's scholarly interests. Despite its episodic composition and adherence to the Alexandrian model of brevity and precision, "Argonautica" shines in its exploration of the Jason-Medea romance, imbuing the narrative with emotional depth that would influence subsequent literary traditions.

In essence, Apollonius Rhodius's work stands as a remarkable synthesis of traditional epic elements and Alexandrian sophistication, serving as a literary bridge from the Hellenistic to the Roman world. His portrayal of Jason and Medea's love story not only elevated the "Argonautica" but also set a precedent for romantic expression in epic poetry, influencing Roman narratives and persisting as a significant aspect of his literary legacy.

BOOK I

Straightway they rushed in throngs from the city gates, eagerly seeking; for no one, neither youth nor elder, tarried behind. They searched, turning every stone, each one eager to be the first to bring back to Heracles tidings of his lovely Hylas. There is a fountain, Artacia, the water of which the Mysians say gushes up from the rock not far from the city, and thither, as fate would have it, the searchers came likewise. And Heracles eagerly asked them if haply they had seen a boy passing to the spring with pitcher of bronze in hand, his shoulders newly covered with down and still showing ruddy cheeks. They halted, assuring him by signs that they themselves knew nought of him, but from far away they had seen some nymphs in glistening apparel draw nigh to the spot. Of these things, they reported, they had a clear memory. Then groaning deeply, Heracles hurried to go to the ship, distressed for Hylas, his companion.

BOOK II

Arms and quickly lowered the mast at the stay by the forestays, and they rowed the ship with their oars and made fast to the bank with ropes stretched to the shore. And they leaped out far eager to touch the land of Colchis. Here were the ox-stalls where Jason later would yoke the fire-breathing bulls to plow the field of Ares. Here too was the grove sacred to the war god, where hung the Golden Fleece guarded by a sleepless dragon, into which task Jason would be thrust as part of his quest.

By the goddess Hera's designs, they met Medea, Aetes' daughter, who would be instrumental in helping them obtain the Golden Fleece. It was in this land that they faced the challenges set by King Aetes – to yoke the fierce bulls, sow the dragon's teeth, and face the warriors that sprang from the earth where the teeth fell.

These trials were undertaken by Jason, with Medea's aid – her magical herbs shielding him from fire and steel, enabling him to yoke the bulls, sow the field, and defeat the warriors that rose from it. Through guile, courage, and assistance from the gods, Jason and the Argonauts succeeded in their tasks. But it was Medea's enchantments that lulled the guardian dragon to sleep, allowing Jason to claim the Golden Fleece.

Their departure from Colchis was a race against pursuit, aided by Medea's cunning and further feats of bravery. The journey homeward was marked by perils, interventions of deities, and the tragic loss of heroes. Yet, it also wove tales of heroism, love, betrayal, and the interplay between human endeavor and divine will.

Each landing and departure, every challenge met, bound the heroes of the Argos in a shared fate, making their voyage a lasting legend in the tapestry of Greek mythology – a quest not just for the Golden Fleece but for glory, knowledge, and the testing of human limits against the whims of gods and the ferocity of untamed lands. Through storms they sailed, navigating the whims of gods and the dangers of uncharted waters, ultimately returning to Hellas, forever changed by their journey – the quest for the Golden Fleece a testament to the heroism, desperation, and the boundless pursuit of honor in the face of insurmountable odds.

BOOK IV

This passage concludes the narrative of the Argonauts and their eventful journey to retrieve the Golden Fleece. Upon returning to their homeland, they face no further adversities at sea or significant conflicts, marking a peaceful and uneventful conclusion to their epic quest. The narrative blends myth with elements of historic Greek geography and customs, offering insight into Greek mythology's complex world. The tale ends on a positive note, with the Argonauts safely reaching their destination, highlighting themes of adventure, divine intervention, and the intrinsic value of unity and cooperation among heroes facing the unknown.

which the Greeks used as a covering for their beds. (1) The Symplegades. (2) Hecate is so called as the daughter of Perses. (3) The Planctae or Wandering Rocks, through which the Argo was the first ship to pass. (4) i.e. a copper alloy resembling gold; the name shows that it came from the far east. (5) i.e. the Sickles. (6) The Ephyraeans, Corinthians colonized Corcyra, and the corruption of the one name into the other is common. (7) The text is corrupt. (8) Apis, the son of Phoroneus and the nymph Teledice, brother to Niobe and the Argive king, and regarded as the founder of Argos. (9) Meaning “to appear” or “reveal”.