



Golden Fleece

Jason was a popular character in Ancient Greek mythology. He set out on a quest with some of the most fearsome and strongest heroes in the whole of Greece. His mission was simple: retrieve the infamous Golden Fleece that belonged to King Aeetes. It was considered to be an impossible task, which was why Jason was sent on it; more on that later.

Life wasn't easy for Jason. When he was born, his heart wasn't beating, so his father abandoned him with a centaur named Chiron. He brought Jason back to life and raised him. Jason returned to his home town as an adult, but he wasn't welcome. His father had been king, but King Pelias had usurped him from the throne. He didn't want Jason hanging around reminding people that Pelias wasn't the true king.

Pelias was Jason's uncle (I know, kicking your own brother off the throne is so Ancient Greek), so they both made an effort to seem like they got on. During one conversation, Pelias asked Jason how he would get rid of somebody forever if he had to. It probably wasn't the most subtle hint in history. Nevertheless, Jason said that he would send the person to steal the Golden Fleece. "It would be certain death," he probably said.

You can probably imagine Jason's surprise when his uncle turned to him a few days later and told him that he needed him to do the exact thing that he'd suggested. I imagine it was probably an awkward conversation. Jason accepted the mission. Instead of heading out alone, he put together a band of heroes and warriors. Think of them a bit like Ancient Greek Avengers, only they didn't have superpowers, and they were called the Argonauts.

Myths change over time. Jason might have taken fifty men with him, or it might have been hundreds. However, he did take some names that you might recognise: Heracles (you might know him as Hercules) and Orpheus are perhaps the most famous.

The group took its name from the boat. The ship Jason sailed was called Argo, which means "swift". The suffix "naut" means "traveller", so the sailors who travelled on Argo were called Argonauts. We still use this suffix now - people who travel in space (astro- refers to space) are called astronauts, and somebody who uses the Internet to explore is called a cybernaut.



When Jason arrived in Colchis, King Aeetes didn't want to give him the fleece. That's not really a surprise; it was highly coveted. However, he did say he could have it if he completed some tasks.

We won't get into the details of the tasks here, but they were tricky. They included ploughing a field using a pair of fire-breathing bulls and defeating an army of stone warriors grown from dragon's teeth. Luckily, Jason had the help of a few gods as well as his heroes.

The king still wouldn't give him the fleece, but Jason was at the end of his tether by then. Eventually, he managed to steal it from its hiding place and head back home, where he kicked his uncle out and became king.

VOCABULARY FOCUS

1. Which word described forcing somebody off the throne?
2. If something is "subtle" is it obvious or not very obvious?
3. Using the text for context, what do you think "coveted" means?
4. What does the phrase "end of his tether" tell you?
5. Why might the conversation have been "awkward"?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

R

What was Jason trying to steal?

I

What evidence is there that Jason didn't feel confident heading out on his mission alone?

S

How did Pelias trick Jason?

I

How do you think Pelias felt when Jason returned with the fleece?

R

What was the name of Jason's ship?