JASON, MEDEA and the ARGONAUTS saga

- Quest for the Golden Fleece by Jason and the crew of Argo.
- How did the Golden Fleece come to the picture?

MYTHIC BACKGROUND OF THE STORY:
Athamas (Boiotian king) took as a wife NEPHELE (name means ‘cloud’) and had 2 children Phrixus and Helle. Nephele returned to sky.
ATHAMAS then married INO, daughter of CADMUS.
INO attempted to destroy her stepchildren. Pursuaded Boeotian women to parch the seed grain > nothing grew > famine
Athamas consulted Delphi > sacrifice Phrixus, his son, to end famine.
At sacrifice, NEPHELE took Phrixus and Helle to the sky on a golden-fleeced ram (from Hermes).
Helle fell off and drowned> Hellespont, Phrixus went to Colchis, in the Black Sea, was received by king Aeetes (son of Helius, brother of Circe and Pasiphae).
Phrixus sacrificed the ram, gave the golden Fleece to king Aeetes, hung it up on an oak tree, grove sacred to Ares, guarded by a never-sleeping snake.

Fleece> goal for a hero’s quest.
JASON

- Cretheus, brother of ATHAMAS was king of IOLCUS. At his death, his stepson PELIAS (son of Poseidon and Tyro, the wife of Cretheus) usurped the throne and deposed the rightful heir, AESON.

- AESON – son of Cretheus and Tyro, father of JASON.

- Jason was sent by his mother (Polymede) to the mountains to be educated by centaur CHIRON.
Jason’s return to IOLCUS

- Returned to claim the throne
- Pelias knew he was fated to be killed by a descendant of Aeolus.
- Delphic oracle to Pelias “Beware of the man with one sandal”
- Jason coming down of the hills carried an old woman (disguised goddess HERA) across the river Anaurus, lost his sandal.
- Pelias promised to yield the throne if Jason brought him the Golden Fleece.
THE ARGONAUTS

- The ship ARGO (=swift) was built with help from Athena. Hellenistic poet Apollonius Rhodius (*Argonautica*) source.
- List of Heroes: Jason, Peleus (father of Achilles), Telamaon (father of Ajax), Oileus (father of Ajax the less), seers Idmon and Mopsus, Castor and Polydeuces, Heracles. Journey to Colchis.
At Colchis

- Aeetes would let Jason take the fleece only if he first performed some tasks- yoked pair of fire-breathing bulls, ploughed field, sowed it with dragon’s teeth, killed armed men that sprang from teeth.

- MEDEA fell in love with Jason (Hera and Aphrodite). Medea was a witch as her aunt Circe. Gave Jason magic ointment

- In Euripides, Medea is the dragon slayer (Medea 476-482).
Back to IOLCUS

- Pelias refused to yield the throne
- Medea caused his death. She rejuvenated Aeson, Jason’s father by cutting him up and boiling him, rejuvenated an old ram. Daughters of Pelias tried to rejuvenate their father, Medea did not give them the magic herbs, Pelias was killed.
- Driven out of the city for murder.
- Went to Corinth, setting of Euripides’ tragedy.
Medea rejuvenating the ram, tricking Pelias
Medea and daughters of Pelias with the ram (Medea rejuvenated ram to make the daughters think she would do the same for their father); Greek, c. 470 BCE
Berlin, Pergamon Museum.
APOLLONIUS of RHODES (or else Apollonius Rhodius)

- Apollonius of Rhodes was probably born around 290 B.C. in Alexandria. Born in Alexandria of Hellenistic Egypt, also lived in island of Rhodes
- Director of the library at Alexandria for about 12 years
- He wrote scholarly work (he was a philologist) on Homer, Hesiod and other poets
- He was contemporary (and perhaps rival) of Callimachus- Alexandrian Poet whose programmatic poetry wants “the delicate Muse” Big book- big evil.
- Yet Apollonius wrote ‘big’ epic poetry.
- New Alexandrian/Hellenistic aesthetics
- Scholarly poetry- Writing- knowledge of the tradition- innovation
DIFFERENCES AMONG JOURNEYS

- Different context of sources
- Both Homer’s *Odyssey* and Apollonius Rhodius’ *Argonautica* are epic poems.
- Explain the difference.
- Homer and Oral Tradition
- Apollonius and scholarly work
- Odysseus as the hero on his own
- Jason as the hero of the team, constantly relying on others’ help
contemporary of Callimachus