This story stands first in line in the Greek tradition, the original, if not the archetypal hero story, the quest to lands distant and mysterious, voyage into danger to places even modern cartographers have not found. Of Bronze Age provenance, set one generation before the Trojan War, and part of the oral tradition, in the Iliad Homer assumed his audience already knew the story.

There was a kingdom in Thessaly ruled by a king called Aeson. The king, being tired of the cares of government, surrendered his crown to his brother Pelias on condition that he should hold it only during the minority of Jason, the son of Aeson. When Jason was grown up and came to demand the crown from his uncle, Pelias pretended to be willing to yield it, but at the same time suggested to the young man the glorious adventure of going in quest of the Golden Fleece, in the kingdom of Colchis, which was, Pelias claimed, the rightful property of their family. Pelias hoped, of course, that Jason would die in the attempt. Jason threw himself into the project. At that time the only vessels of the Greeks were small boats or canoes hollowed out from trunks of trees, so that when Jason employed Argus to build him a ship capable of containing fifty men, it was considered a gigantic undertaking. The "Argo," named for the builder, Jason manned with a band of bold youths, many later among the heroes and demigods of Greece, including Heracles (Hercules), Theseus (slayer of the Minotaur and future king of Athens), Orpheus (the greatest singer, future lover of Euridice), Gemini Twins (Castor and Polydeuces [Pollux], Helen’s brothers), Erytos and Echion (Hermès’ sons), Nestor (future Trojan war hero), Peleus (father of Achilles), the fathers of both Greater and Lesser Ajax, Atalanta (huntress and only woman), and others.

The "Argo" with her crew of Argonauts left Thessaly and arrived at the Island of Lemnos. They found no men on the island. Turned out that all the men had taken concubines, claiming that their wives had intolerable body odor, so the wives killed them all. Argonauts were invited by the women to stay long enough to ensure there were enough pregnancies to repopulate Lemnos. This was agreeable to the Argonauts, who remained a few months, then they departed, Lemnos queen Hypsipyle carrying twins by Jason.

They lingered at sacred Samothrace, passed through the Hellespont, and were welcomed at Cyzicus. In return for this hospitality, Heracles cleared the land of giants. Unfortunately, as they departed, a storm drove them back to Cyzicus at night. The Cyzicans, thinking themselves under attack, rushed upon the ship and Argonauts not knowing who was attacking them killed them all. When the truth was discovered funeral games were held in reconciliation.
After Cyzicus, sea nymphs carried off Heracles’ lover Hylas. Heracles spent so long looking for him that finally the Argo sailed off without him. Next they arrived at Bebryces, a region ruled by Amycus, son of Poseidon. Amycus challenged all strangers to wrestle to the death. Heracles not being on board anymore, it was left to Polydeuces (Pollux) to wrestle Amycus and kill him.

At the entrance of the Euxine [Black] Sea lived blind sage Phineus. He was tormented continually by Harpies, with faces of women and bodies & claws of birds, stealing or defecating on Phineus’ food. Argonauts Zetes and Calais, winged sons of Boreas the north wind, drove them off. Phineas then advised Argonauts that their way through the Bosphorus was impeded by the Symplegades, or Clashing Islands, that occasionally came together, crushing any object that might be caught between them. On Phineus’ advice, as they approached the islands they let go a dove, which passed between the rocks in safety, only losing some tail feathers. Jason and his men seized the favorable moment as the rocks rebounded and raced through. The closing rocks still might have caught them, but Poseidon rose up and held them apart, or alternatively Athena and Hera held them apart. Still, the crew lost their helmsman, Tiphys. Thereafter, the Symplegades have remained fixed in position.

They came to the eastern end of the Euxine (Black Sea), sailed up the River Phasis, and landed at the kingdom of Colchis. Jason approached the Colchian king, Aetes, who knew that to lose the fleece was to lose his throne. So he consented to give up the golden fleece only if Jason would yoke to the plough two fire-breathing bulls with bronze feet, and sow the teeth of the dragon which Cadmus had slain, and from which a crop of armed men would spring up, who would turn their weapons against their producer. Jason accepted the conditions.

Previously, however, he found means to plead his cause to Medea, daughter of the king. She was the granddaughter of Helios, the sun god, and a powerful devotee of the sorceress goddess Hecate. Jason promised her marriage, and as they stood before the altar of Hecate, called on the goddess to witness his oath. Medea yielded, and she furnished him with a charm by which he could safely defeat the breath of the fire-breathing bulls and the weapons of the armed men.

At the grove of Ares, the brazen-footed bulls rushed in with a sound like the roar of a furnace, breathing fire from their nostrils and smoke like water upon quick-lime. Jason advanced boldly to meet them; he soothed their rage with his voice, patted their necks with his hand, slipped over them the yoke, and compelled them to drag a plough.

Jason next proceeded to sow the dragon's teeth and soon the crop of armed men sprang up. No sooner had they reached the surface than they brandished their weapons and rushed upon Jason. For a time he kept his assailants at bay with his sword and shield untill, finding their numbers overwhelming, he resorted to the charm that Medea had taught him, seized a stone and threw it in the midst of his foes. They immediately turned their arms against one another, and soon there was not one of the dragon's brood left alive.

Finally, the unblinking dragon that guarded the fleece, he put to sleep by scattering over him a few drops of a preparation which Medea had supplied. Jason seized the fleece and the Argonauts fled to the
Argo with Medea and her younger brother, Absyrtis. They cast off with King Aetes in pursuit. To delay him, Medea killed her brother and cut his body into pieces, scattering the parts behind the ship. The pursuers had to stop and collect Absyrtis' dismembered body in order to give it proper burial. And so Jason, Medea, and the Argonauts escaped.

Accounts of the Argonauts' journey home vary. According to Apollonius, Medea's brother Apsyrtus blocked the mouth of the Black Sea so the Argonauts had to find a different route for returning to Iolcus. Most versions of the legend agree that the Argonauts sailed up the Danube and traveled along various rivers and seas before reaching the Mediterranean Sea. Some say that the Danube took them to the Baltic Sea; others relate that it led them to the Rhine River, hence to the Atlantic Ocean; others that they reached the Adriatic Sea. At the entrance to the Adriatic, they met Apsyrtus, who tried to convince Jason to give up Medea. Jason refused and killed Apsyrtus. This version has the Argonauts then sailing up the Po River and down the Rhone into the Tyrrhenian Sea. They stopped at the Island of Circe, who purified them of the murder of Apsyrtus. Some suggest that they met other monsters and beings that later Odysseus will encounter in the *Odyssey*. Having almost reached Greece, the Argo was blown off course to the Gulf of Syrtes in Libya. There a great wave stranded the crew deep in the desert. On the advice of the gods, the Argonauts carried the ship twelve days across the desert until the sea god Triton helped them launch it back on the Mediterranean.

As they sailed past the island of Crete, Talos, the bronze man appointed by King Minos to protect the island threw rocks at the Argonauts. Medea killed Talos with her witchcraft. Nearing Greece, the ship was enveloped in a darkness so great that they lost their way. Apollo sent a blazing arrow that showed them the way to an island where they could wait until the light returned.

At last, the Argo arrived home in Iolcus and Jason presented the Golden Fleece to Pelias. The Argonauts were held in great honor throughout Greece, and many noble families later claimed to be descended from them.

In Iolcus, Medea restored the youth of Jason's aged father, Aeson, by cutting his throat and filling his body with a magical potion. [Alternatively, Aeson had been killed by Pelias in Jason's absence and Medea revived the corpse.] She then assisted Jason's ambition for power and revenge against Pelias by claiming to Pelias' daughters that she could make their father younger by chopping him up into pieces and boiling the pieces in a cauldron of water and magical herbs. She demonstrated this with a sheep, which leapt out of the cauldron as a lamb. The trusting girls sliced up their father and put him in the cauldron. Medea refused to add the magical herbs and Pelias remained dead.

But Pelias' son, Acastus, drove Jason and Medea into exile for the murder and the couple settled in Corinth. There Medea bore two sons to Jason before Jason was offered by King Creon a political marriage with Creusa, his daughter. Seizing this route to political power, he suggested to Medea a divorce and that she should go voluntarily into exile. Medea, angry at Jason for breaking his vow that he would be hers forever, got her revenge by presenting Creusa a gold-embroidered dress as a wedding gift that as soon as she put it on stuck to her body and burned her to death. Creon tried to tear the dress from his daughter to save her, but burnt to death himself. Medea completed her revenge on Jason by killing their sons. She fled Corinth in a chariot, drawn by winged dragons, which belonged to her grandfather Helios, taking the bodies of her children.
Medea took refuge with Aegeus, the old king of Athens, having promised him that she would use her magic to enable him to have more children. She married Aegeus and bore him a son, Medus. But Aegeus already had another son, Theseus. When Theseus returned to Athens after killing the Minotaur, Medea tried to trick her husband into poisoning him. She was unsuccessful, and had to flee eastward from Athens, taking Medus with her. Medus became king of the country later called Media (part of Persia).

Finally, Jason and Peleus, father of the hero Achilles, attacked and defeated Acastus, finally taking the throne of Iolcus that was rightly his. Jason's son by Creusa, Thessalus, then became king.

But Jason was to pay for his betrayal of Medea. Because he had broken his vow to love Medea forever, Hera ensured that Jason lived out his later years lonely and unhappy. Years later, asleep under the stern of the rotting Argo, a plank fell on him, killing him instantly.

Some early poets (Ibycus, Simonides) have Medea, after she dies, marrying Achilles in the Underworld and this lively couple living together forever in the Isles of the Blest.