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## **The Enduring Legend of the Golden Fleece**

By E.G. Vallianatos

The Golden Fleece or “Argonautika” is an epic older than the Homeric epics, dating probably from the second half of the second millennium BCE. It is the story of how Iason and 50 of Hellas’ greatest heroes, most of them sons of Greek women and gods, sailed their boat Argo from Iolkos, Thessaly, to Kolchis in the easternmost region of Euxeinos Pontos, the Euxine or Black Sea.

Apollonios Rhodios wrote “Argonautika” in the Alexandrian Library in the third century BCE, about a millennium after the events of the Golden Fleece epic. Apollonios was a scholar and a librarian at the Greeks’ greatest library. He used earlier versions of the story for his narrative, which is a breathtaking masterpiece of adventure, daring, manliness, skills and a united Hellas. Read as a myth, in the Christian meaning of myth as fiction, it is spectacular, filled with superhuman achievements. But read as myth in its Greek meaning of very early Greek history, which is how ancient Greeks read it for more than a thousand years, the Golden Fleece is a mirror of their very beginnings as a country.

Hellas was a country of extremely ancient antiquity where the Arkadians, for example, could brag of being older than the moon. But Hellas was a mountainous place, ideal for self-reliant and politically independent people. Hellas was dotted by hundreds of poleis, states, united only by language, piety for the gods, and other common Hellenic traditions like athletic competition in the Olympics.

So geography and Greek character conspired to make the Greeks extremely vulnerable to extinction through civil wars or foreign conquest. After all, the Greeks knew they were but an insignificant spec in the world, even in their Mediterranean neighborhood. They called non-Greeks barbarians, forbidding them from participating in Panhellenic celebrations.

So the Greeks ventured out of Greece from the very beginning of their history. Greeks from the Cycladic islands were plowing the wine-dark seas from the fourth millennium BCE. The Argonauts’ expedition to Kolchis was

the continuation of that tradition, except this time the Golden Fleece carried a message of urgency to all Greeks – unite or perish.

But the Golden Fleece is also great literature. The love affair between Iason and the barbarian princess Medea is the earliest and probably unsurpassed erotic poem ever penned. The Golden Fleece, like the Homeric epics, carries so much more than details of ephemeral happenings.

The Golden Fleece was a national declaration that Greece proper was too small and too poor for the Greeks. Hellas had to expand its borders. So the Golden Fleece became the Greeks' first successful exploration of the immense Black Sea and northern Europe and Asia, a fabulous region of huge rivers, fish and rich and fertile land, what the Greek scholar, Christos Doumas, aptly describes as "the Greeks' Far East."

## **HELLAS BEYOND HELLAS**

The Golden Fleece was a paean to the heroes who sowed Hellas beyond Hellas. In 640-625 BCE, Megara founded Byzantium on the Thracian side of Bosphoros, the narrow channel connecting Propontis or Sea of Marmara with the Euxine. A thousand years later, in the fourth century, the Christian Emperor Constantine moved the capital of the Roman Empire to Byzantium.

Miletos, Samos, Korinthos, and Athens joined Megara in dotting the shores of Propontis and the huge Euxine-Black Sea with poleis like Sigeion, Abydos, Lampsakos, Kyzikos, Kios, Astakos, Selymbria, Herakleia, Medeia, Apollonia, Odysos, Sinope, Olbia, Amisos, Kerasous, Trapezous, and Dioskouria. Some 90 or 96 of the Greek poleis in the Black Sea belonged to Miletos.

Hellenism thrived in this other Hellas, but, like Hellenism in the mainland, it eventually fell victim to the barbarians. The Greeks of the kingdoms that shared the empire of Alexander the Great fought each other and the Romans. The Greeks in the mainland waited until the second century BCE before making a real effort of forming a political Hellas. But Rome, learning from the Greeks for several centuries, intervened and wrecked the Greeks' belated political vision. This was a blow that set the Greeks on a path of tragic decline. Six-hundred years later, the Christianization of the Roman Empire made Greek decline a catastrophe from which the Greeks have not recovered to this day.

The lesson of the Golden Fleece is a strong and united Hellas. The Argonauts defeated superior forces and brought the Golden Fleece back to Iolkos. Iason married Medeia, bringing the wealth of Kolchis to Hellas.

We need to learn from our history, reading and rereading Greek literature, philosophy and science. We play with fire trying to become other people rather than invigorating our Hellenic roots. The Turks, not the Romans, are now watching us. The careless fashion with which the Greek government is treating the lingering crises of Cyprus and the Slavs calling themselves “Macedonians” is a symptom of an impending disaster.

The Greeks need to be outraged. They should form a government that has only Greek interests in mind.

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