

## THE ARGO NAVIS CONSTELLATION

At the last meeting we talked about the constellation around the South Pole, and how in the olden days there used to be a large ship there that has since been subdivided into the current constellations.

I could not then recall the names of the constellations, but remembered that we talked about this subject at one of the early meetings, and now found it in September 2011. In line with my often stated definition of Astronomy, and how it seems to include virtually all the other Philosophy subjects: History, Science, Physics, Biology, Language, Cosmology and Mythology, lets go to mythology and re-tell the story behind the Argo Constellation.

Argo Navis (or simply Argo) used to be a very large constellation in the southern sky. It represented the ship used by the Argonauts in Greek mythology who, in the years before the Trojan War, accompanied **Jason** to Colchis (modern day Georgia) in his quest to find the Golden Fleece. The ship was named after its builder, **Argus**.

Argo is the only one of the 48 constellations listed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century astronomer **Ptolemy** that is no longer officially recognised as a constellation. In 1752, the French astronomer **Nicolas Louis de Lacaille** subdivided it into Carina (the keel, or the hull, of the ship), Puppis (the poop deck), and Vela (the sails). The constellation Pyxis (the mariner's compass) occupies an area which in antiquity was considered part of Argo's mast (called Malus).

The story goes that, when Jason was 20 years old, an oracle ordered him to head to the Iolcan court (modern city of Volos) where king **Pelias** was presiding over a sacrifice to Poseidon with several neighbouring kings in attendance. There Pelias asked Jason to go and fetch the Golden Fleece for him. In Hellenistic mythology the golden fleece is part of the **golden winged ram** that rescued **Phrixos** and his sister **Helle** from the altar where they were to be offered as a sacrifice to Zeus. The golden ram carried them to the land of Colchis but on the way Helle fell into the sea and drowned (**the sea there is still called Hellespont**). When Phrixos arrived at Colchis he sacrificed the ram to Zeus and presented the golden fleece to his father-in-law, the King of Colchis. The golden ram's fleece was hung from a tree in the grove of the Colchian Ares, guarded night and day by a dragon that never slept.

Jason in his quest took some 50 of the principal heroes of ancient Greece with him, amongst them **Hercules, Peleus, Orpheus, Castor and Pollux**. The story is of great antiquity – older than **Homer** (eighth century BC) – and it survives in various forms, among which many details vary. Some have hypothesized that the legend of the Golden Fleece was based on a practice of the Black Sea tribes, who used to place a lamb's fleece at the bottom of a stream to entrap gold dust being washed down from upstream. This practice is still in use, particularly in the Svaneti region of Georgia.

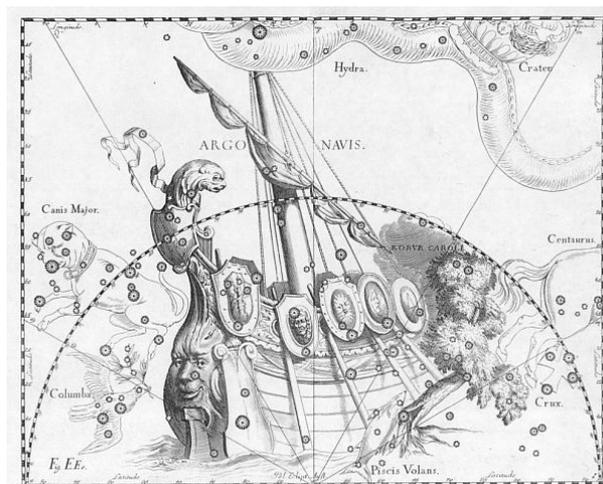
Anyway, Jason and the Argonauts were successful in obtaining (stealing?) the golden fleece, after many struggles (and with the help of king **Aeetes'** daughter **Medea**, who fell in love with Jason and provided the potion that put the dragon to sleep).

After an epic journey home – much like Homer's *Odyssey* – Jason became king of Thessaly (Aeolia in the *Odyssey*). But when he, to strengthen his political ties, married the daughter of the king of Corinth, Medea became very angry and put curse on Jason and he lost everything.

His son, **Thesselaus**, became king, and Jason, so the story goes, returned to the old Argo to rest. As he was sleeping under the bow of the ship it broke apart and fell on him and buried him.



The Argo Navis ship with the Argonauts on board



Constellation Argo Navis by Johannes Hevelius 1611-87