

HERAKLES

The archetypal hero

Herakles, who was called Hercules by the Romans, was the only hero honoured throughout the Greek world and the only human to be granted immortality among the gods. He sums up much of the paradox of heroism as portrayed in Greek myth. He vanquished monsters and struggled with Death to save a friend, yet he was also the victim of his lust and greed: he raped women, destroyed cities and in his madness killed his own children. In later Greek writing, Herakles became a philosophical hero who chose the path of virtue and underwent suffering to pursue it. In this guise he entered Christian traditions.

According to myth, Herakles was the son of the illicit liaison of Zeus and Alkmene, who was descended from the hero Perseus. Alkmene was an unwitting party to the adultery (see p.135), which may explain why Zeus's wife Hera chose to take her jealousy out on Herakles rather than his mother. Hera persecuted the hero throughout his life, occasioning many of his heroic exploits, including the celebrated Twelve Labours. Hence, the common explanation of the name Herakles: "glory of Hera". His mettle was tested within a few days of his birth, when he was laid in a crib (a shield in some accounts) with his half-brother Iphikles. Hera sent monstrous snakes to destroy the infants, but Herakles strangled them.

The hero was often engaged in combat. He killed Cycnus, the robber son of Ares, who lived in Thrace, and King Syleus of Aulis, who compelled strangers to work in his vineyard and then slit their throats. He fought against the Lapiths, a fabulous race from Thessaly, and against the Egyptians. In these and many other myths Herakles is portrayed as the greatest of fighters, whose exploits took him all over the world. He went on the expedition of Jason and the Argonauts (see p.154), taking Hylas, his young male lover, with him. But when Hylas went to fetch water and was snatched by water nymphs, Herakles spent so long looking for him that the *Argo* sailed on without the hero.

Herakles was often characterized as a slave to his passions. In Greek comedy he was depicted as a drunkard, a glutton and a lecher, and in myth he was said to have slept with the fifty daughters of one King Thespios in a single night. Indeed, it was his lust that led to his death. Herakles married Deianeira, daughter of King Oeneus of Aetolia, after defeating the river god Achelous to win her hand. Some time later he killed a Centaur, Nessus, who tried to rape his new wife; as the Centaur was dying, the creature gave Deianeira a potion which, he claimed, would keep her husband's love forever. She decided to put it to the test when Herakles fell for Iole, daughter of King Eurytus of Oechalia, and went as far as slaying her father and brothers and sacking their city to win her. Deianeira, in an attempt to regain his affections, smeared a shirt with the Centaur's potion and sent the garment to her husband. But Nessus had lied: the potion was really a terrible poison, which destroyed Herakles' body. Deianeira killed herself in grief, but the dying Herakles was carried by their son, Hyllus, to Mount Oeta, where the hero ordered a funeral pyre to be built.

Herakles lay on the pyre, which then was lit by Philoctetes, the only one of his followers prepared to carry out this grim task (for which he received the grateful hero's bow and arrows). As the flames took hold, a cloud appeared and took Herakles up to heaven amid a glorious display of thunder and lightning. He entered Olympus, the realm of his father Zeus, where he was granted immortality, reconciled with Hera, and given Hebe, the goddess of youth, as a new wife.

An Attic red-figure vase (c.5th-century BC) depicting the apotheosis of Herakles, who is carried off to Olympus in a chariot accompanied by gods. His funeral pyre and attendants are shown at the bottom of the scene.



The Labours of Herakles

The most famous exploits of Herakles were eventually systematized in the story of the Twelve Labours. The most common version of the myth recounts how Hera sent Herakles into a fit of madness, during which he killed his wife and children. The oracle at Delphi told him that in penance he must serve Eurystheus, king of Tiryns, for twelve years. Eurystheus imposed twelve grueling tasks on his servant, as related below. The first six labours took place in the Peloponnese.



Herakles wrestles the Nemean Lion, as Athene (right) looks on. A black-figure vase of c.550BC.

1. **The Nemean Lion.** Herakles was sent to the land of Nemea to kill a monstrous lion, whose hide was impervious to any normal weapon. The hero fashioned a huge club with which he battered the lion before strangling it and cutting through its skin with its own claws. He donned the lionskin, which rendered him invulnerable.
2. **The Lernaean Hydra.** The hero had to slay this nine-headed water-snake, which lived in a swamp near Lerna; but whenever Herakles cut off one head, two more grew in its place. Herakles was aided by Iolaus (the son of his half-brother Iphikles) who cauterized each decapitated neck with a burning torch, preventing the growth of new heads.
3. **The Cerynean Hind.** This bronze-hooved and golden-horned beast lived on Mount Cerynea and was sacred to Artemis: Herakles had to capture it unharmed or incur her anger. After a year's pursuit he wounded the beast and carried it back to Eurystheus, whom he blamed for the hind's injury, thereby avoiding the wrath of Artemis.
4. **The Erymanthian Boar.** A monstrous boar was ravaging the area around Mount Erymanthus and Herakles was ordered to bring it back alive. On the way, he defeated the Centaurs in battle. He eventually returned to Eurystheus with the boar, which terrified the king so much that he hid in a bronze urn.
5. **The Augean Stables.** Augeas, son of Helios, owned great herds of cattle. They were kept in stables that had never been cleaned out and were piled high with the enormous quantities of dung that had built up over many years. Herakles was given the noisome task of

cleaning out the filth in just one day, which he achieved by diverting the rivers Alpheus and Peneus through the stables.

6. **The Stymphalian Birds.** Lake Stymphalos in Arcadia was home to a flock of monstrous birds that ate humans and had beaks, claws and wings of iron. Herakles was commanded to get rid of them. He frightened them out of their trees by clashing bronze castanets, and then shot them one by one with his bow.

7. **The Cretan Bull.** A giant bull was running wild on the island of Crete and terrifying the population. On the orders of Eurystheus, Herakles captured

it and brought it back alive to Tiryns.

8. **The Mares of Diomedes.** Herakles was commanded to bring back a herd of mares belonging to the Thracian Diomedes, who fed the beasts on human flesh. Herakles killed him and fed him to his own mares, which he tamed and took back to Eurystheus.

9. **The Girdle of Hippolyte.** Hippolyte, the queen of the warlike Amazon women of Asia Minor, possessed a beautiful girdle which was coveted by the daughter of Eurystheus. Herakles fought and defeated the Amazons and killed Hippolyte, taking the girdle from her corpse.

10. **The Cattle of Geryon.** Geryon, a three-bodied monster, lived in the far west and kept red cattle, helped by a giant herdsman and his hound. Herakles borrowed the Cup of the Sun to sail on Okeanos, the Ocean (see p.137), to Geryon's land. He killed Geryon, the herdsman and the hound, and returned to Eurystheus with the cattle. The Pillars of Herakles (Straits of Gibraltar) mark this most westerly point of Herakles' adventures.

11. **The Apples of the Hesperides.** The Hesperides were nymphs of the far west, daughters of the Titan Atlas. They tended a tree bearing golden apples which Herakles was ordered to bring back. Herakles slew Ladon, a dragon guarding the tree, and stole the apples.

12. **Cerberus.** Herakles' final task was to bring up the fierce three-headed dog, Cerberus, which guarded the gates of the underworld. The hero entered the underworld, wrestled with Cerberus, and dragged him off to show Eurystheus (see illustration on p.146). Herakles then sent him back to the underworld.