

The Universal Hero: Heracles/Hercules

Learning Objectives:

- To understand who Heracles/Hercules was and the myths he is associated with
- To understand how he is typically represented in the sources

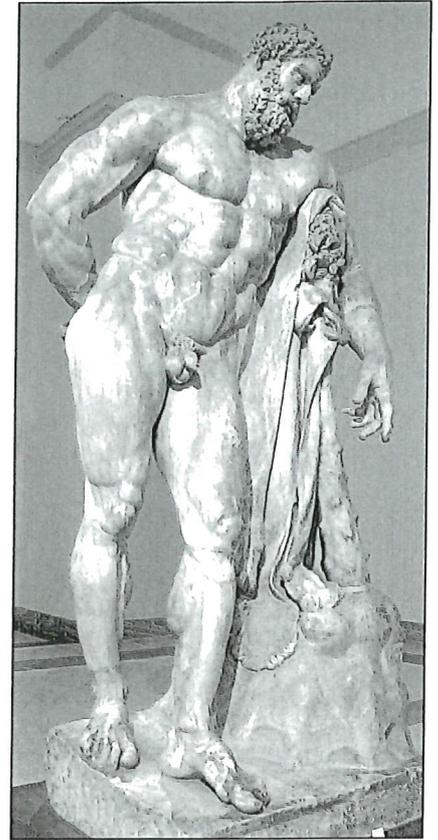


Introduction

Heracles/Hercules was an important figure in both Greek and Roman mythology. He was the son of Zeus/Jupiter and a mortal woman called Alcmene, making him a demigod. He was one of the most famous heroes and as such was an important figure to both the Greeks and the Romans. Following his death, thanks to his completion of the 12 Labours, designed to be impossible to be completed by mere mortals, Heracles was given a spot on Mount Olympus, making him a full god.

The Role of the Universal Hero

As a mortal who became a god, Heracles/Hercules fulfils a bridging role between the mortal world of humanity and the immortal world of the gods for both the Greeks and the Romans. This was significant for a number of reasons. It provided a link to the anthropomorphic nature of the gods themselves but also showcased the differences between mortals and gods. For the Romans there was a specific relevance to the notion of a mortal becoming a god – precedence. According to Roman tradition, both the founder of their race, Aeneas, and the founder of their city, Romulus, also became gods. The story of Hercules for them, therefore, provides a precedence for important individuals with great achievements becoming divine.



A Roman statue of Heracles/Hercules made in the third century AD. It is based on a Greek original dating to the fourth century BC.

Heracles in Greek Myth

Heracles as founder of the Olympic Games

Like many origin stories of the ancient world, the birth of the Olympic Games is one that is shrouded in myth and legend. There are actually several different stories of the foundation of the Olympic Games. According to the Ancient Greek lyric poet Pindar, the story of Heracles as the founder goes that having completed his fifth labour, Heracles was denied the reward promised by King Augeas. As a result, he fought Augeas and defeated him in battle and sacked his city. He then inaugurated the Olympic Games, in honour of his father Zeus. He helped set up some of the early events by measuring out the stadium and determining the length of the foot race. He also taught some of the first athletes to wrestle. This story serves to give the Olympic Games a divine origin. It is worth noting that this role is not attributed to Heracles/Hercules, the son of Zeus, by all ancient sources. Some have disputed his role in this – granting it instead to a much earlier mythological figure who also bore the name Heracles and explaining the confusion being due to the same name.

The 12 Labours of Heracles

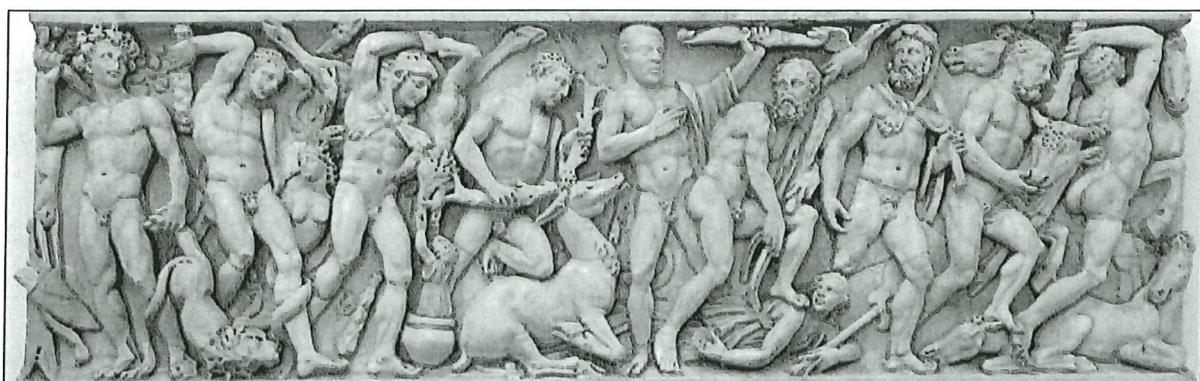
The most famous myth about Heracles concerns his 12 Labours. The origin of this story begins with the fact that as he was a son of Zeus and one of his many lovers, this drew the wrath of Hera. She made Heracles go mad and kill his family. When he recovered, he was horrified at what he had done and sought the advice of the Oracle of Delphi on how to atone for his sins. The Oracle instructed him to serve his cousin the King Eurystheus and perform any tasks given to him. He was given 10 labours to accomplish and if he succeeded in completing all of them, he would be purified of his sins and also granted immortality as he would become a god.

The tasks were as follows:

1. To kill the Nemean Lion. This lion had a hide impenetrable to all weapons and so Heracles strangled it. He then wore its hide as armour and as a demonstration of his strength.
2. To kill the Lernean Hydra. This beast had many heads and each time one was cut off, two would grow in its place. With help from his cousin Iolaus, Heracles killed the Hydra by burning its necks after cutting its heads off, thus stopping them from regrowing. He then dipped his arrows in its blood, which was poisonous.
3. To capture the Erymanthian Boar alive. This was a huge and powerful animal, but Heracles was able to overcome it and bring it to King Eurystheus.
4. To capture the Kerynitian Hind. This hind had golden horns and was hard to catch. After chasing it for a long time, Heracles managed to tire it out and capture it, bringing it to King Eurystheus.
5. To kill the Stymphalian Birds. These were aggressive and ate people. Heracles started them into flight thanks to a rattle granted by Athena, whereupon he was able to shoot them with his bow.
6. To clean the Augean Stables. The filthy stables of King Augeas were home to thousands of divine cattle which produced huge amounts of dung. Augeas promised a reward if Heracles managed this in a single day. Heracles succeeded to clean them by diverting nearby rivers through the stables, washing the stables clean.
7. To fetch the Cretan Bull. This fearsome and dangerous beast was the father of the Minotaur. Heracles was able to overcome it and carried it back to King Eurystheus.
8. To steal the Mares of Diomedes. These horses had been trained to eat human flesh by their owner. Heracles fed Diomedes to his horses, thus satiating them. He was then able to bind their mouths and carry them back.
9. To fetch the Girdle of Hippolyta. This girdle belonged to the Queen of the Amazons, Hippolyta, who was warned by Hera that Heracles was coming to attack them. As a result, the Amazons initially battled Heracles, but Hippolyta was impressed by the hero's ability and in the end gave him her girdle willingly.
10. To capture the Cattle of Geryon. This herd belonged to a giant called Geryon, who had three heads and six arms. Heracles killed Geryon with a poisoned arrow and herded the cattle back to Eurystheus.

Upon completing the 10 labours, Eurystheus claimed that for two of the labours the success was disqualified because Heracles had the help of his cousin in defeating the Hydra, and he was going to accept payment for cleaning the stables. Therefore, he assigned Heracles two more labours.

11. To bring Cerberus from the underworld. Cerberus was a three-headed dog that guarded the entrance to the underworld. Heracles asked Hades for permission to take Cerberus, and Hades said that Heracles could do so if he didn't use his weapons. Heracles succeeded in doing this and brought Cerberus back to the world of the living.
12. To steal the Golden Apples of the Hesperides. These fruits were protected by Hera, who had put as the garden's guardian the hundred-headed dragon Ladon. He sought the Titan Atlas, who was tasked with holding up the heavens, for help in locating the garden. Atlas offered to get the apples if Heracles would hold the heavens in his absence. However, Atlas upon his return refused to take the heavens back, so Heracles tricked him by claiming he just needed to position himself better, and so he left with the apples. The apples were supposed to grant immortality, and so are also symbolic of his ascension to divine status upon completing the tasks.



The 12 Labours of Heracles/Hercules as depicted on a Roman relief from the third century AD.

The labours as represented on the Temple of Zeus at Olympia

The labours were represented on the metopes of the Temple. Metopes are rectangular spaces between the columns below and the pediment above. While the images in these spaces would not be as prominent as those on the pediments, they nonetheless would stand out for those who would enter the temple.

The architecture of the temple restricted what could be shown as there were only 12 spaces available. Interestingly, it is possible that the reason that there are 12 Labours of Heracles is because there were 12 spaces available here, and Heracles was selected as the theme, with 12 of his most famous exploits immortalised in the metopes. Some of the ways that the labours are presented here are different from their usual depictions. The labour involving the Nemean Lion, for instance, usually presents Heracles in the midst of battle with the beast, but here the beast is dead and Heracles, with one foot on top of it, is resting his shoulder on his knee, showing his fatigue after completing this difficult task. Heracles is usually depicted very heroically, as an invincible hero overcoming all the odds, but here the focus is more on his humanity, of the consequences, be they fatigue or fear, of the labours he undertook. The focus is, therefore, on his bravery and his endurance of the labours he undertook – Heracles did not complete them effortlessly.

There is further emphasis on his humanity as Heracles himself matures during the labours; while clean-shaven in the lion metope, he is bearded when holding up the heavens for Atlas. While he is often depicted alone, in several of the metopes Athena is shown beside him, perhaps just offering silent support, or easing his burden when he holds up the heavens. The focus on his humanity comes out even more, not only in the fact that sometimes even he needs aid, but the contrast between Heracles using his full body to hold up the heavens, while Athena effortlessly with one hand helps reduce his burden.

Homeric Hymn to Heracles, the Lion-Hearted

This short hymn shows in just a few words the main elements of the Heracles story that would have been familiar to most Greeks. The title includes one of his epithets, that of 'the Lion-Hearted', referring to his courage and bravery. The hymn begins by calling Heracles 'Zeus's son', and 'greatest and best of those on earth', hinting at the hero's dual heritage as being of both heaven and earth. This duality of Heracles was important for the Greeks as he served as a sort of bridge between the divine and humanity, showing also the limitations of humans when faced with divine expectations. The hymn briefly refers to his famous labours, 'sent away by Lord Eurytheus', who was the one who assigned the labours to Heracles. The hymn closes with a reference to Heracles' achievement of divinity, as he is 'in the beautiful abode of snowy Olympus', which is the home of the gods. The very existence of this hymn shows the importance of Heracles as all the hymns are only dedicated to individual gods and goddesses. It sets out Heracles' divine status as he gets a hymn as well.



Hercules and the Cretan Bull as depicted on one of the metopes of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia. The focus of this metope is on the action – hero and animal turning inward to face each other. Most of the metopes haven't survived in full unfortunately.

Hercules in Roman Myth

The myth of Hercules and Cacus

This Roman story about Hercules is featured in the *Aeneid*, an epic that covers the story of the origins of the Roman race by following the adventures of Aeneas, who was meant to be their mythical founder. This story is about how Hercules defeated the fire-breathing monster Cacus, whose father was Vulcan, who had been terrorising the people who lived in the area of what would one day be the city of Rome. Hercules was passing through the area returning from one of his labours when Cacus stole some of his cattle. Hercules tracked him down to his lair, where Cacus blocked himself in. After a lot of effort, Hercules managed to break in and threw missiles at Cacus. Cacus responded with his fiery breath, which prompted Hercules to jump into the lair, and he grabbed Cacus in his arms and choked him to death. The people rejoiced to be freed from this terror and began to celebrate a festival to honour the day they were rescued from Cacus by Hercules.

Hercules' intervention is described as divine, 'the assistance of a god', despite the fact that his intervention occurs while he is returning from one of his labours – capturing the cattle of Geryon – meaning that he was not yet a god at this stage. However, this passage alternates between this focus on his divinity and a focus on Hercules' humanity: he is referred later to as 'Amphitryon's son'; compare this to the references to him only as 'Zeus's son' in the *Hymn to Heracles*. The alternation between divine and human continues in this story as Hercules is shown to exhibit exhaustion and other attributes that are more associated with mortality, whereas later he is once again referred to as divine: 'the god we know'.

Hercules as protector of Rome

The link between the story of Hercules and Cacus and Hercules' role as protector of Rome is the location of this tale. Cacus was defeated by Hercules on the site of the Aventine Hill, one of the seven hills the city of Rome would later be built on. The festival mentioned in the *Aeneid* celebrating this event occurred in the area of the future city of Rome – thus adding a divine link to the city's tradition. The altar set up for the worship of Hercules is referred to as "'The Mightiest", and the mightiest it shall be for ever.' This is seemingly a reference to the future of the location – which the reader knows is Rome. Therefore, we see here how myth was used to embellish an origin story, as Rome sought to justify its rule of the world – who better to link yourself to than the mortal who rose above the others and was recognised as a god?

Battle with Achelous

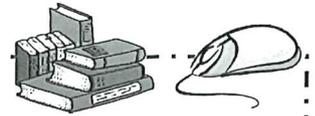
The story of Hercules in Ovid reinforces the typical characterisation of Hercules – his divine parentage, and his accomplishment of the labours being his defining features. The story of Achelous, a river god, and Hercules goes that both sought to wed the same woman, Deianira. Both present their case to her father, with Hercules stating his labours, how he had survived the wrath of Juno, and that his father was Jupiter, as reasons that he was worthy. Achelous appeals to his position as a god, as opposed to Hercules, who was still a mortal at the time, and his being native to the region as opposed to Hercules, who was not. They begin to fight and after a while, Hercules came to overpower Achelous, who turned to his magic in an attempt to defeat Hercules because Hercules' strength was superior to his own. However, this did not help him, and as he turned into a bull, Hercules dragged him to the ground and tore off one of his horns, scarring the god.

'It would be shameful for a god to concede to a mortal' is what Achelous says before the contest between the two begins. This serves to emphasise the position of Hercules as human in this battle, but still able to overcome a god, a remarkable achievement and one that sets him apart from other heroes.

Battle with Nessus, and the death of Hercules

Ovid continues his tales of Hercules with the story of Hercules and Nessus. Nessus was a centaur, a creature that was half man, half horse, usually known to be wild in character, who crossed paths with Hercules as he returned home with his new wife, Deianira. Hercules had come across a river that was treacherous, and feared for his wife in the crossing. Nessus offered to carry her over while Hercules swam across. However, once across, Nessus prepared to run off with the girl, and in retaliation Hercules shot him with an arrow. The arrow went through Nessus's body and mixed into his blood the poison of the Lernean Hydra, with which the arrows were tipped. Nessus, dying, presented his tunic, which was soaked with the poisoned blood, to Deianira as a gift for reviving a waning love.

After some time had passed Hercules, whose fame had grown, was preparing a sacrifice to Jupiter. Rumour claimed to Deianira that Hercules was falling in love with another, and she despaired. After some thought she decided that she would gift the shirt of Nessus to Hercules in the hope of restoring his love for her. One of her servants gave him the shirt and he put it on without thinking. As he began his sacrifice, the flames released the power of the venom, and, after enduring the pain for a while, Hercules roared and tried to pull off the shirt. However, it had stuck to his skin, and, if he pulled at it, he ripped his skin as well. As Hercules lay dying, Jupiter and the other gods feared for him, and so Jupiter said to them that he will accept the divine part of Hercules to Olympus, and so grant him the status of a god. Therefore, with his human part destroyed by the venom, Jupiter received the divine part of Hercules upwards into the realm of the gods, as one of their own.



Independent Research

There are many other myths associated with Heracles/Hercules. Research one or two of the follow myths, focusing on how each represents Heracles/Hercules as well as any differences that might exist between the Greek and Roman portrayals of the universal hero:

1. The birth of Heracles/Hercules and his defeat of the giant snakes
2. Heracles'/Hercules' sack of Troy
3. The rescue of Prometheus
4. Heracles'/Hercules' voyage with the Argonauts
5. The madness of Heracles/Hercules

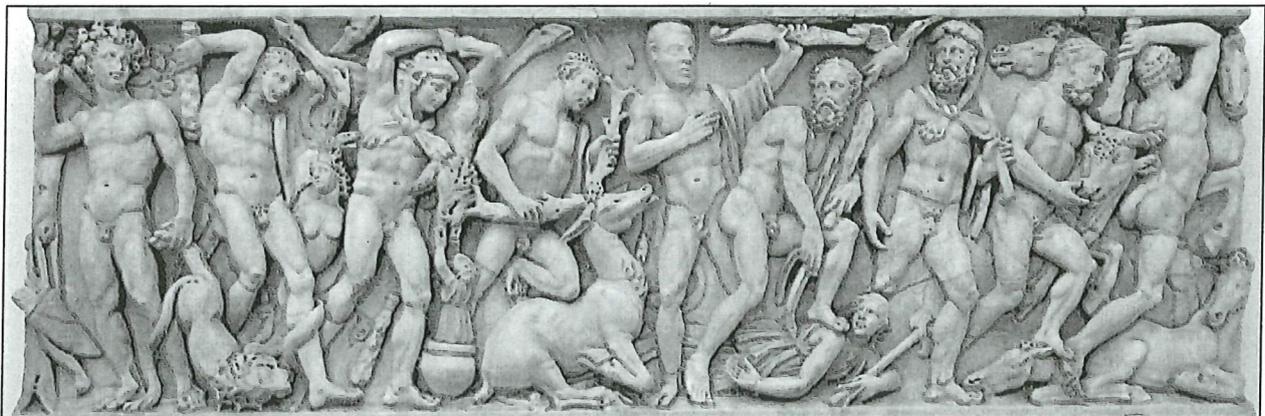
Consolidation Questions

- a) Why did Heracles/Hercules have to complete 12 Labours?
- b) What was the ultimate fate of Heracles/Hercules?
- c) How did the Romans relate Hercules to their city?

Source Questions

Classical source-based units include **unseen sources**. These are sources you are not expected to have seen before as they are not on the prescribed list. However, you will be expected to discuss them using the skills you have.

- 1) Look at the source below.



Now answer the following question:

**How does Heracles/Hercules change throughout his labours as depicted here?
What was the significance of this?**

- 2) Read the source below.

Look how the Loves delight in their spoils; look how, in childish triumph, they wear the weapons of the gods on their sturdy shoulders: the tambourine and thyrsus of Bacchus, the thunderbolt of Zeus, the shield of Ares and his plumed helmet, the quiver of Phoebus well stocked with arrows, the trident of the sea-god, and the club from the strong hands of Heracles. What shall men's strength avail when Love has stormed heaven and Cypris has despoiled the immortals of their arms!

Secundus 214, *On Statues of Loves*

What is the significance of the way that Heracles is discussed here?