

Critically consider the representations of Herakles/Hercules' labours in
Graeco-Roman literary and artistic sources.

The twelve labours of Herakles, as found in the Bibliotheca¹, are as follows:

- Slay the Nemean Lion
- Slay the nine-headed Lernaean Hydra
- Capture the Ceryneian Hind
- Capture the Erymanthian Boar
- Clean the Augean Stables in a single day
- Slay the Stymphalian Birds
- Capture the Cretan Bull
- Steal the Mares of Diomedes
- Obtain the Girdle of Hippolyta
- Obtain the cattle of the monster Geryon
- Steal apples from the Garden of the Hesperides
- Capture Cerberus

Throughout this essay I will focus individually on significant labours with relation to their counterparts in artistic symbolism, exploring how the changes in stylization relate to the social factors from the time.

Herakles' origins show links to other mythology from around the world, most from much earlier than the Herakles we are familiar with today. Bremmer refers to the Sumerian god Ninurta, who defeated and brought to his city twelve legendary monsters. These texts are dated to the 22/21st century BC, many years before the figure of Herakles². There are also other similarities. Ninurta, son of the ruling 'storm god', is identified on Mesopotamian seals³ as a figure with club, bow, and animal skins, the signs also commonly associated with Herakles.

In Swan's article on Herakles and the Augean Stables, she discusses the origins of Herakles' labours, and the suggestion that Herakles was seeking expiation for the murder of his children, as well as his quest for immortality⁴. Eurystheus, King of Mycenae, was the overviewer of his labours, and chose several labours that would benefit the civilised populace, yet as Herakles' words in the Odyssey show, "Son of Zeus that I was, my torments never ended, forced to slave for a man not half the man I was: he saddled me with the worst heartbreaking labors"⁵, he resents them all.

Griffiths gives a critical analysis of Euripides' 'Herakles', and the role Herakles' children played in the development of the play. In this play, the origins of Herakles' labours stem from punishment from Hera for a crime he is yet to commit, the murder of two of his children.⁶ The punishment inflicted is madness, which then in itself leads Herakles to commit the

¹ Bibliotheca Pseudo-Apollodorus, first printed in Rome, 1555

² Bremmer, J., *Interpretations of Greek Mythology*, Croom Helm Ltd, (1987)

³ Collon, D., *Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum: Cylinder Seals, Vol II*, London 1982, no. 213

⁴ Swan, G. M., 'Hercules Cleaning the Augean Stables on a Roman Bronze Plaque', *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University*, Vol. 69 (2010), pp. 30-41

⁵ Homer, *Odyssey* 11.620-23, trans. by Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1996), 269-70

⁶ Griffiths, E. M., *'Euripides' "Herakles" and the Pursuit of Immortality*, *Mnemosyne Fourth Series*, Vol. 55, Fasc. 6 (2002), pp. 641-656

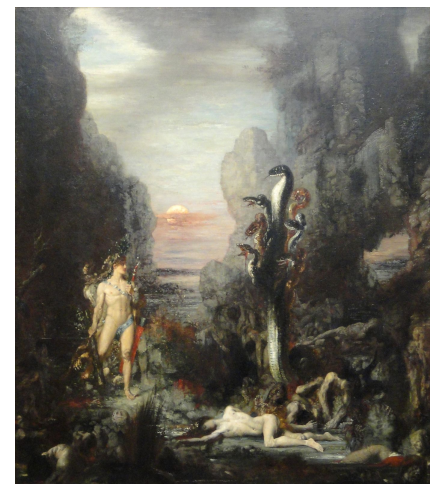
crime. As Silk states, a potential cause is also Hera's jealousy of Zeus' bastard son⁷, leading to his punishment vis-à-vis the Twelve Labours of Herakles.

The Nemean Lion

The first of Herakles' Labours was to slay the Nemean Lion. Hesiod situates the Nemean Lion "in the wheat fields of Nemea ..., lording over Nemean Tretos and Apesas"⁸, and it was said that the lion had hide impenetrable by "iron, bronze and stone"⁹. When the conflict between Herakles and the lion is underway, the lion flees by retreating into a cave with two entrances.¹⁰ Herakles outsmarts the lion by blocking up one entrance, and when the lion tries to escape he wrestles with it and chokes it to death.¹¹ Tyrrell discusses the reversing of symbols becoming the undoing of the Nemean Lion. For example, he highlights the opposing forces of the mountain, the name of which translates to 'perforate', and the impenetrable Nemean lion. The demise of the Nemean lion is brought about when the perforate mountain is filled in by Herakles, and the impenetrable lion is strangled.¹² Again, creative and unconventional thinking allows Herakles his first victory and foreshadows his success throughout the labours.

The Lernaean Hydra

Second of his labours, the Lernaean Hydra has come to represent many ideas across time, especially in some more contemporary settings. In Moreau's painting 'Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra'¹³, the images of Herakles and the fallen, motionless man in the front of the artwork, and the lighter sea and sky between Herakles and the Hydra, are made to stand out in very light paint, while the monster and the boulders around it are emphasised in black. He emboldens these opposing forces by creating an ethereal light surrounding Herakles and the male, keeping the Hydra still surrounded by darkness. The often symbolised battle between



Gustave Moreau, *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra*, c.1876. Oil on canvas; 179.3 x 154 cm (70 1/8 x 50 in.).¹⁴

good and evil, had more hidden meanings than just this, one that relates to politics and nationalism at the time. Some scholars think that the painting could represent France's (then) recent, antagonising loss to Germany during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71,

⁷ M.R. Silk, 'Heracles and Greek Tragedy', G&R 32 (1985), 1-22

⁸ Hes. Th. 33

⁹ Diod. Sic. 4.11.3

¹⁰ Apollod. 2.5

¹¹ Diod. Sic. 4.11.1

¹² Tyrrell, W. B., 'On Making the Myth of the Nemean Lion', The Classical Journal, Vol. 98, No. 1 (2002), pp. 69-71

¹³ Moreau, G., 'Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra, c. 1876', Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies, Vol. 26, No. 1, Maineri to Miró: The Regenstein Collection since 1975 (2000), pp. 76-77+96

¹⁴ Moreau, G., 'Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra, c. 1876', Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies, Vol. 26, No. 1, Maineri to Miró: The Regenstein Collection since 1975 (2000), pp. 76-77+96

with France portrayed as the valiant Herakles, as well as Germany being the demonic Hydra.

¹⁵ The easily appealing sense of honour and bravery surrounding Herakles has drawn many countries to make him their symbol.

The Ceryneian Hind

Second of Herakles' labours, capturing the Ceryneian Hind, a creature sacred to Artemis, is frequently represented in art as a hand-to-horn struggle, with Herakles' brute strength against the beast. This depiction appeared on the fifth-century metope found in the Athenian treasury at Delphi, with the laid-aside weaponry of Herakles completing the imagery.¹⁶ The setting of this labour is usually supposed to be Olympia, which presents significant ideas surrounding mortality and power of the gods. Herakles is shown a glimpse of what could be his if he succeeds, whilst fighting a sacred creature in the god's own homeland. This could symbolise the constant reinforcement in Ancient Greek religion that it is always worth striving for Olympia because it's closer than you think. This provides an increase in offerings and donations to temples and therefore is highly sought after by the religious hierarchy.

The Erymanthian Boar

Frequently in illustrations, at the moment that Herakles reveals the live Erymanthian boar to the timid and frightened King Eurystheus, who decides to tactically retreat to a nearby barrel, the tree next to is commonly used as a rest or stand for all of his weaponry and equipment.¹⁷ However, a difference in the presentation of Herakles in Olympia, the revealing of the boar and the king is often missing its practical counterpart.¹⁸ Different styles and eras will always reveal what the priorities of the intended audience seemed to be; beauty, reality, absurdity all seem to be varying factors responding to current events from the time. Therefore it is interesting to look at artwork and variations in traditional representations to discern a vague idea of the public energy at the time.

The Augean Stables

The cleaning of the Augean Stables has never been presented as a simple task. In Hellenistic and Roman textual sources, the superhuman difficulty of the task is highlighted by giving the animals a divine pedigree, usually the Cattle of Helios,¹⁹ the inconceivable number of herds²⁰, and the enormous amount of dung.²¹ The usual way that this myth ends is with Herakles diverting a river to wash away everything he

¹⁵ According to letters by Corot to Madame Gratiot cited in Etienne Moreau-Raout, *Par lui-même* (Paris, 1924), vol. 2, pp

¹⁶ Schefold, 1978, 100-102, 101, fig. 125. For earlier weapon traditions, see Br 21, 23. LIMC, v, 1, 48-53, s.v. "Herakles' Labours, E. Herakles and the Keryni

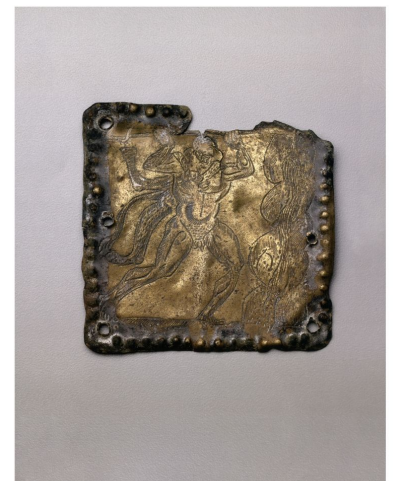
¹⁷ E.g., London, British Museum E 44, attributed to Onesimos: Beazley, ARV Addenda2, 214; Schefold and Jung, 145, fig. 183. For early representations, P 96-100. See also Brommer, 19-20; LIMC, v, 1, 43, 45, 46, no. 2133, s.v. "Hera Herakles and the Erymanthian Boar (Labour III)" (W. Felten).

¹⁸ Cf. the former reconstruction with a tree trunk in Ashmole and Yalouris, 18

¹⁹ Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 2.5.5 and Theocritus, *Idylls* 25.

²⁰ Theocritus, *Idylls* 25.

²¹ Pausanias 5.1.9.



had to clean, therefore subverting the authority of Augeas. Despite the comic potential, and in fact the ancient tradition of portraying Herakles as a comic figure,²² over time throughout the Ancient Greek and Roman-dominated worlds, Herakles was hailed as an example of stoicism, perseverance, and as a brave and selfless hero. The iconic pose shown on this plaque commemorating the success of Herakles emphasises the power and heroic potential that is a keen thread

<u>Record of the Art</u> <u>Museum, Princeton</u> <u>University²³</u>
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through many depictions of Herakles throughout time. The message behind this particular Labour seems to be focusing on clever solutions to impossible problems.

The Stymphalian Birds

When Herakles faced and defeated the Stymphalian Birds, due to their flight he overcame them using either rocks or his bow and arrows. Depictions and symbols of this labour are rare, and. Herakles, depicted on the Attic black-figure amphora of 550 B.C. attributed to Group E, chooses to use the sling and rocks.²⁴ The version of Olympia, however, show not the battle but the moment after victory, when the easily-recognisable Pausanios holds up a dead stymphalian bird to Athena. This version of a symbol is mostly common when using metatope because when representing a battle with longer ranged weapons, space is an issue. However - in the current thought this is very important - an object shown in Herakles' hand, always shown to be a bow,²⁵ could plausibly have been a sling to show the rock weapons. This possible misinterpretation of Archaic art could change the way these images were meant to be observed, and therefore change the suspected observers.

The Cretan Bull

Interestingly, this labour is the single labour that is set outside of the Peloponnese, and for the special occasion Herakles is very infrequently seen using his traditional weaponry, and instead has to come up with something different.²⁶ Herakles has to rope the bull in, yet the fact that he is always holding a club in his right hand is rarely questioned.²⁷ Strength is a key

²² See the section on "The Comic Hero" in G. Karl Galinsky, *The Herakles Theme: The Adaptations of the Hero in Literature from Homer to the Twentieth Century* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1972), 81-100

²³ Swan, G. M, '*Hercules Cleaning the Augean Stables on a Roman Bronze Plaque*', *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University*, Vol. 69 (2010), pp. 30-41

²⁴ London, British Museum B 163; Beazley, ABV2, 134, no. 28; Beazley Addenda2, 36; Carpenter, fig. 189; and 124, for Herakles' use of a club against the birds. See in general LIMC, v, 1, 54-57, 56, no. 2265, s.v. "Herakles' Labours, F. Herakles and the Stymphalian Birds (Labour V)" (S. Woodford); Brommer, 26-28; Schefold, 1978, 102-3. 91.

²⁵ Treu, 161; a hole is bored through Herakles' left hand for some object added in bronze. Cf. Ashmole, 68-71; Carpenter

²⁶ Brommer, 31 and pl. 31. On mid-6th-century Laconian examples, see Pipili, 4-5. LIMC, v, 59- 62, s.v. "Herakles' Labours, H. Herakles and the Cretan Bull (Labour VII)" (L. Todisco)

²⁷ E.g., Treu, 162-64; Ashmole and Yalouris, 26 Schefold and Jung, 151; LIMC, v, 1, 62, no. 2338 (as in n. 105). Stewart (as in n. 75), 145.

virtue in depictions and writings about this particular labour, and it has over time been one of the more popular labours to represent.

The Mares of Diomedes

Imagery of the ferocious mares of Diomedes never gained the popularity and status as the other representations of the labours. The solutions Herakles found was either to tame them by feeding them the owner of said mares, child of Ares, King of the Bistodians, or the groom that cared for them²⁸ On most vase artwork, the rare pieces we know about, of ca. 520-510 B.C., Herakles chooses to use his club as the weapon.²⁹ On metopes, generally a single mare is used to represent several, in this case the whole stable. Metopes of this labour often relate to the Cretan bull art of the same style, as even without a clear weapon, generally one can assume that it would have been the club.³⁰

The Cattle of Geryon

In Bremmer's 'Interpretations of Greek Mythology', she refers to Burkert's³¹ studies suggesting that the capture of the cattle of Geryon is closely analogous to the Vedic myth of Indra's combat against Visvarupa, a demon, as well as to mythology surrounding hunting in the peoples of Siberia and the Arctic. Multiple Archaic weapon traditions of bow, sword, or club also existed for Herakles' duel with the three-bodied warrior To complete the labour, Herakles had to murder Geryon, and steal his cattle. Commonly, images or symbols of this labour feature not only Geryon and Herakles, but also Eurytios, Orthos and potentially the cattle.³² Residing in Munich, Euphronios's Attic red-figure cup, of ca. 515 B.C., depicts Herakles holding his club with his right hand, and also his bow and arrows in his left, which highlights the symbolic rather than practical aspects of the imagery.³³ Continuously, Herakles finally wins and completes this labour using his bow, shooting Orthos, and firing an arrow through the eye of one of Geryon's bodies.³⁴ The tradition of the bow being the weapon chosen to fire the final shot continues right up to the mid-first century.

²⁸ LIMC, v, 1, 67-71, s.v. "Herakles' Labours, I. Herakles and the Horses of Diomedes (Labour VIII)" (J. Boardman)

²⁹ D. Kurz, "The Man-Eating Horses of Diomedes," *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, xcv, 1975, 171-72, pl. 18. Carpenter, 124-25, fig. 194

³⁰ Ashmole and Yalouris, 27; Brommer, 36; Scheffold and Jung, 154. LIMC, v, 1, 68, no. 2419 (as in n. 107); cf. nos. 1703 and 1706: Herakles' weapons in the fragmentary Diomedes metopes from the Athenian Treasury, Delphi, and the Hephaisteion, Athens, are lost.

³¹ Herakles: Burkert, overlooked by Blázquez Martínez, J. M., 'Gerion y otros mitos griegos en Occidente', *Gerion*, 1 (1983), 21-38

³² Geryon's cattle, e.g., Chalcidian amphora, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Médailles 202, Charbonneaux (as in n. 18), 81-82, figs. 86-87. On the Athenian Treasury, Delphi, Geryon's cattle must have occupied three of the west metopes; de la Coste-Messelière (as in n. 41), 141-45, metopes nos. 23, 24, 25, pls. 66, 67. For the Geryonomachy, see also above nn. 15 and 20

³³ Munich, Antikensammlungen 2620; Beazley, ARV², 16, no. 17; Beazley Addenda², 153. On Herakles' gesture, see Venit (as in n. 17), 111-12, with nn. 59-60, but cf. LIMC, v, 1 (as in n. 10), 73.

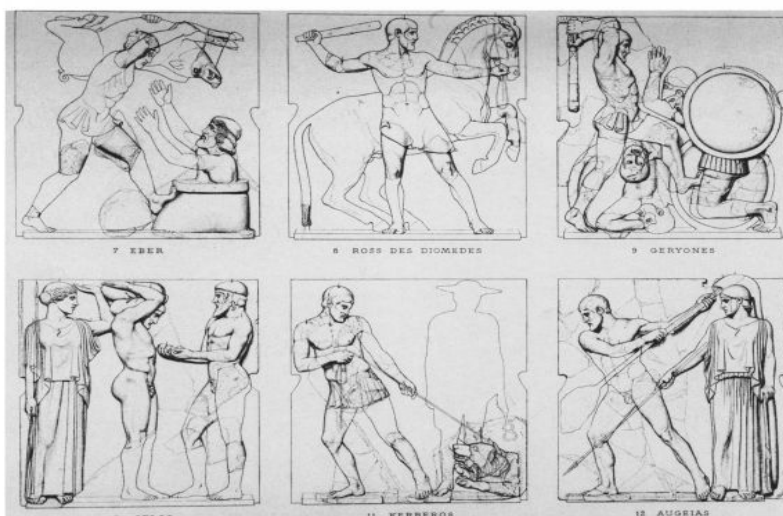
³⁴ See H. A. Shapiro, "Narrative Strategies in Euphronios," in *Euphronios: Atti del Seminario Internazionale di Studi*, Arezzo 27-28 Maggio 1990, Florence, 1992, 37-43. Cf. the bronze relief cited above in n. 15.

The Garden of the Hesperides

Usually, breaking into and stealing from the Garden of the Hesperides is shown to be the last labour, and therefore can symbolize Herakles' last step along the journey to immortality. However in plenty of images, Herakles' supports the sky for Atlas whilst he goes to get the fruit.³⁵ Athena steps in to assist Herakles' when he begins to falter, and to comfort him as he struggles. There are few to none traditional weapon attributes shown in artistic representations of this labour.³⁶

The Capture of Cerberus

King Eurystheus had to see that Herakles could kidnap the guard of the underworld, Cerberus. Two different interpretations of this labour have been that either Herakles bounded up to Cerberus, and enthusiastically lead him away, or that he crept up to him and coaxed or enticed him away.³⁷ In some representations, Hermes stands by and watches the timid approach, and in work such as Treu's reconstruction, Herakles clutched the lead with both hands whilst pulling Cerberus away.³⁸ In some works, there are suggestions that Herakles holds something in his hand, a callback to the much earlier compositions where the club was used.³⁹



Herakles and the Hesperides
5; Ashmole and Yalouris, 28;

e lekythos, Athens, National Ar-
chaeological Museum, inv. no.
1018; J. Boardman, *Athenian*
Black-Figure Vase-Painting, 1975,
cat. no. 16, fig. 16, p. 10. The
Athena may have held Herakles'

Herakles' Labours, M. Herakles and
 the F 204, Beazley, ARV2, 4, no. 11;
 and Eleusis," *Journal of Hellenic*

tue base, Athens, National Mu-
and v, 2, pl. 95, no. 2579. On the
addition

17.1-12 Metopes from the Temple of Zeus, Olympia,
Labors of Herakles, reconstruction drawings by M. Kiuhnert⁴⁰

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⁴⁰ Cohen, B., *'From Bowman to Clubman: Herakles and Olympia'*, *The Art Bulletin*,
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