

Heracles entry, Brill's New Pauly

[1] Greek hero

The most prominent Greek hero ([Hero cult](#)) in myth and cult. In his myths, which have not resulted in any outstanding work of poetry that is focussed on him, he is connected especially to Thebes, Argos and the countryside around Trachis; in the cult he is honoured almost panhellenically, without any place being able to display a hero's grave.

Graf, Fritz (Columbus, OH)

I. Cult and Myth

A. Name

His name was connected with [Hera's](#) already in antiquity: it follows the customary formation of Greek anthroponyms like Patro-kles ('he who brings his father fame') or Dio-kles/Zeno-kles ('he who brings Zeus fame'). But the relationship to Hera is problematical: she is H.'s bitter opponent out of anger at H.'s mother, her rival [Alcmene](#) (since Hom. Il. 15,25-28; 18,119); the ancient explanation of the name (since Pind. fr. 291), that H. came to fame through Hera's challenge, tries to understand this paradox. This is all the more urgent since (since Pind. fr. 291) the opinion has been documented that H. was originally called Alcides (or Alcaeus, Diod. Sic. 1,24,2) and received his second name because of Hera; this misunderstands the patronymic Alcides, which marks H. as the grandson of Alcaeus the son of Perseus, the father of Amphitryon (Apollod. 2,47).

More radical but very hypothetical are a few modern attempts to bring the name together with *hērōs* in the sense of 'young man' [1].

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B. Myth

Myths about H. are almost too numerous to be counted [2]. Although numerous poets have composed H.-epics from archaic times, which are devoted to his complete biography (especially [Peisander of Rhodes](#) and [Panyassis of Halicarnassus](#)) or single episodes (conquest of Oechalia, [Creophilus of Samos](#); H. on Cos, [Meropis](#)), no poetry has organized and canonized the myths, and only few tragedies are about him (death: Soph. Trach.; madness: Eur. HF); summarizing representations are preserved first by Diodorus (4,8-39) and Apollodorus (2,57-166), who refer back to older reports, especially by [Herodorus](#) (FGrH 31 F 13-37) and [Pherecydes of Athens](#) (FGrH 3, Book 2 and 3 of the Historiai).

H. is the son of Zeus and [Alcmene](#) (Hom. Il. 14,323f.), the wife of the Theban king [Amphitryon](#) (Hom. Od. 11,266-268, cf. Il. 5,392), by whom she gives birth to H.'s half-brother Iphicles, the father of H.'s comrade at arms [Iolaus](#). He gives a first proof of his divine origins when he strangles two snakes that Hera sent into his cradle (Pind. Nem. 1,39-59).

In the centre of his myths are the twelve labours which he performed at Hera's command in the service of [Eurystheus](#) of Argus; this service with its numerous labours (*áthloi*), bringing Cerberus up out of Hades and Athena's support are already assumed by the *Iliad* (Hom. Il. 8,362-369; 15,639; 19,132f., cf. Od. 11,621-626), his final transfer into heaven and the marriage to Zeus' daughter [Hebe](#) are assumed by the *Odyssey* (11,601-604). The deeds

(called the 'Dodekathlos' in modern scholastic diction) were canonized in their entirety and in their order of occurrence only at the end of the archaic period (Pind. fr. 169; metopes of the temple of Zeus in Olympia, [3. no. 1705]), while earlier cycles also describe adventures that do not belong to the later cycles ([3. no. 1698-1703], cf. Eur. HF 359-435). Always certain was the fight with the Nemean lion as a youthful adventure, in which H. obtains the invulnerable lionskin as protection that is typical for the iconography (cf. Stesich. fr. 52). The canonical order of the killing of the Lernaean Hydra, the Erymanthean boar, the Cerynthian hind, the Stymphalian birds and cleaning the stables of [Augias](#) follow, and they all take place in the Peloponnese. The Cretan bull (south of the Peloponnese), the man-eating horses of the Thracian Diomedes (north), capturing the belt of the Amazon (east) and the cattle of [Geryoneus](#) (west) reach out into the four cardinal directions; bringing up Cerberus leads into the Underworld, the apple of the Hesperids to the (western) edge of the world, where heaven and earth meet ([Atlas](#) [2]). These adventures have all been recorded individually in archaic literature and art: Homer mentions Cerberus (Hom. Il. 8,367f.; Hom. Od. 11,623-626), Hesiod mentions Geryoneus, the Hydra and the lion of Nemea (Hes. Theog. 287-294; 313-318; 327-332); the Nemean lion, the Hydra, the hind, the birds and Geryoneus are attested (fr. 2-5) for the epic *Herakleia* of [Peisander](#) (7th cent.); [Stesichorus](#) composed a *Geryonēid* and a *Kérberos*.

Not taken up in this list of twelve labours but connected from an early stage are the conflicts with the [Centaurs](#) (Peisander, Stesichorus), with [Antaeus](#), the son of [Gaia](#) (Peisander), the conquest of Troy under [Laomedon](#), a generation before the Trojan War (Hom. Il. 5,640-651) - which since Pindar was connected with the campaign against the Amazons, later also with H.'s participation in the [Argonaut](#) journey (Pind. Nem. 3,36f., cf. Hellanicus FGrH 4 F 26; Diod. Sic. 4,32) - and the battle against the Meropes, the original inhabitants of Cos, which is described in detail in a local late archaic epic, the *Meropis* ([4], cf. Hom. Il. 15,25-28; Pind. Isthm. 1,31).

The large majority of these tales show H. in battle with wild, monstrous and dangerous animals (a giant boar, man-eating horses) or monstrous people (the triple-bodied Geryoneus, the virago Amazons, the invulnerable Antaeus); H.'s mission to civilize was read into this at an early point already, and this becomes clear in the story of his murder of the Egyptian king [Busiris](#) [3] and the termination of his human sacrifices (Hdt. 2,45; Isoc. Or. 11,45; [5]). Behind many of these stories is traditional and partially ancient story material, which can be traced into the Indo-European, and even Stone Age past [6; 7; 8]; there are also clear narrative parallels to the Near East and to the Egyptian ideology of kings (summarizing [9. 458-472]).

The complex of myths around H.'s battle against the [Minyae](#) of Orchomenus and their king [Erginus](#) is closely connected to Thebes. H. gets the Theban king's daughter [Megara](#) as a reward, with whom he has several sons. Struck mad by Hera, he kills (the mother and) his sons. This narrative, which exists in several, strongly divergent versions, is tied to the Theban cult of H. (Pind. Isth. 4,80-86); the definitive description is from Eur. Heraclid. (cf. Sen. Herc. f.).

Another wife of H. is [Deianira](#), the daughter of King Oeneus of Calydon and the sister of [Meleager](#); H. fights for her against his rival suitor [Achelous](#) [2] and wins her (Archil. fr. 286; Pind. fr. 249a; Bacchyl. 5,165). While crossing a river, the Centaur [Nessus](#), who is

supposed to be carrying Deianira, assaults her; when H. shoots him with an arrow poisoned with the Hydra's blood, the dying Centaur advises her to keep his blood as a love-charm. When Deianira uses it to defend herself against her rival [Iole](#), she kills H. (in detail Soph. Trach.; on the religious background [10]). [Hyllus](#) is a son from this relationship, and the eponym of the Doric Hylleis.

The story of Iole is integrated into a complex plot, which connects the conquest of the city [Oechalia](#) in Trachis (north-east Greece) with the service to Omphale in Lydia and the final immolation on the Oeta, the highest mountain near Trachis. Iole is the daughter of [Eurytus](#) [1] and the sister of [Iphitus](#) from Oechalia; H. takes her as his concubine, killing her father and brother - in the best-known story, because he wins Iole in an archery competition, but is sent away without her; he takes revenge by murdering Eurytus and Iphitus (differently Hom. Od. 21,13-37, where H. kills Iphitus because of his twelve mares, even though he was his host). Because of the murder he is overtaken by a disease, about which he tries to get information in Delphi, but the Pythia does not want to answer the murderer. So he steals the tripod, and Apollo resists (often portrayed since Attic black-figured vase painting, [3. no. 2947-3071]), until Zeus intervenes. Slave labour for [Omphale](#) in Lydia brings healing; with her he has the son Acheles, eponym for the Lydian river Acheles, whose waters heal him (Panyassis fr. 20). The identification of H. with the Lydian hero Masnes might be behind this [11]. Another son is [Tyrseus](#), eponym for the Etruscans (Dion. Hal. Ant. Rom. 1,28,1; Paus. 2,21,3); the genealogy - which competes with others since Hdt. 1,94 - is an expression of the Lydian descent of the Etruscans.

In the *vulgata*, which is attested since Soph. Trach., H. conquers Oechalia after his service with Omphale and brings the young Iole back; in order to win back his affections Deianira sends H. a robe that is smeared with Nessus' blood. It eats its way into his body; the pain can only be stopped by H. letting himself be burned alive on the peak of Mount Oeta. This self-immolation is later understood as a means of apotheosis (Cic. Tusc. 2,20), but it is the aition of a fire cult with the sacrifice of a bull and agons on the peak of Oeta, which has been archaeologically located [12; 13].

In countless local myths H. also appears as the founder of a royal genealogy. This is well developed for the Spartan kingship, whose role is substantiated with the story about the return of the Heraclids, but it may apply to the Lydian or Macedonian kings as well (Hdt. 1,7,2; 8,137f.); in this respect the Egyptian royal legend about the fathering of the Pharaoh by the most supreme god is taken over and is the starting-point for the story of [Amphitryon](#) (especially exploited from stage since the Middle Comedy and Plautus).

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II. Iconography

Among the earliest pictorial records of the hero is a bronze clasp with H. and the Hydra that dates to around 700 BC. The pictures on vases from the late 7th cent. BC with all important H.-scenes are numerous: H. feasting (Eurytus Krater, Paris, LV, 7th/6th cents. BC), H. introduced into Olympus by Athena (bowl by the [Phrynos Painter](#), London, BM, 550/530 BC), his deeds and adventures. In 6th-cent. Attica the hero is painted more often than any other mythological figure, especially in the times of the Peisistratids, whose influence on the

figure of H. cannot be proven with certainty however (but cf. the procession of [Peisistratus](#), which is reminiscent of H.'s entry into Olympus). In earlier representation H. mostly appears bearded, towards the end of the 6th cent. BC more often beardless. His weapons are the club or bow, sometimes a sword, he points a harpoon at the Hydra. He is often portrayed naked or with a short [chiton](#), with the lionskin, above all, from the end of the 6th cent. BC.

The western poros pediment of the old temple of Athena on the Athenian Acropolis (1st half of the 6th cent. BC) shows H. battling the fish-bodied old man of the sea Nereus or Triton, in the eastern pediment of the Siphnian Treasury in Delphi is the battle between H. and Apollo for the Delphic tripod (around 525 BC); H. appears as an archer with a lion's head helmet in the eastern pediment of the temple of Aphaia on [Aegina](#) (around 490 BC). Various series of metopes have preserved H.'s cycle of labours: the Athenian Treasury in Delphi (north and west metopes; around 490 BC), the Temple of Zeus of Olympia (around 460 BC), the Hephaestum in Athens (450/440 BC). His decisive participation in the battles of the [Giants](#) are described on the Parthenon in Athens (east metope 11, 442-432 BC) and on the Pergamum Altar, eastern frieze (around 160 BC). H. appears almost without exception with Athena on document-reliefs - as the eponymus (of Heraclea, Thebes) or as the patron of the honoured person.

Single portrayals of H. have been passed down from about the middle of the 6th cent. BC (especially bronze statuettes). H. Cherchel (possibly after a bronze original of the 2nd quarter of the 5th cent. BC) characterizes the bearded H. standing with his weight on his right leg; cf. H. Farnese (Naples, MN, early 3rd cent. AD after an original of the 3rd quarter of the 4th cent. BC, ascribed to [Lysippus](#)); the youthful H. from the Baths of Caracalla in Rome, (TM, 1st/2nd cents. AD, original around 430 BC) is presumably Polycleitic; the not extant colossal seated statue of the hero in Tarentum (cf. funerary relief of the Haterii, Rome, MV, beginning of the 2nd cent. AD; Byzantine ivory box in Xanten) is by Lyssipus. The Heracliscus motif of the snake-strangling child H. has been repeated from early classical times. The H. figure takes a unique pose in the legitimization of ruling dynasties and the efforts of various poleis to expand, in particular from the 4th cent. BC.

The Italian Hercules, honoured latest from the early Republican times at the Ara Maxima on the Forum Boarium ([Roma](#)), has been recorded on numerous frescoes and mosaics, often on cameos. Small bronzes show, among others, H. *bibax* (new find from the *burgus* of Lich, presumably motif from the 4th cent. BC). His image was part of the statuary outfit of the Villa dei Papiri in Herculaneum. Sarcophagus reliefs of the 2nd-3rd cents. AD almost always show his deeds. H. can be seen in Roman state art from Republican times (Victory monument of Bocchus on the Capitol, Rome, Palace of the Conservatori, 91 BC), from Trajan again stronger in representations of imperial politics (Trajan's Arch at Beneventum, AD 114) and especially popular with the army.

Ley, Anne (Xanten)