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Myths and Mythology: How Stories Shape the World Heroic Humans: Herakles

Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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Herakles/Hercules

- Perhaps the most popular mythological character in both ancient and modern times
- Literature: Herakles present in written sources from Homer onwards
- Art: Herakles represented in vase paintings from early on, through to late antiquity
- 'Mehercle!' 'Alexikakos!' – colloquial expressions testament to the myth's pervasiveness



Commodus (emperor
180-192 AD) as
Hercules

Geographical Spread

- Herakles cult particularly in...
 - Thebes (birth place)
 - Mount Oeta (death)
- Many minor cult centres all around the Greek world
 - Exception: Crete
- Rome: Herakles part of the foundation myths of numerous cities
 - Additionally, god of trade



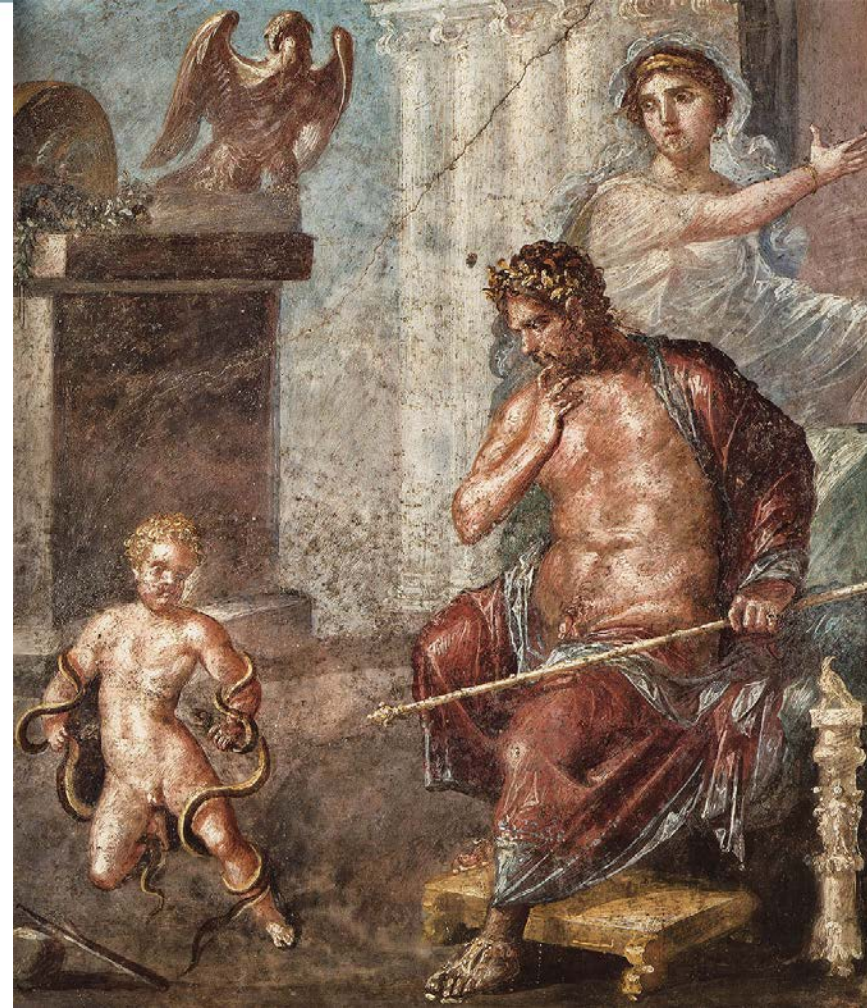
Herakles Hero Cult

- A hero cult was centred on Herakles from the 8th century onwards
- This is a period of revival in Greek society and culture
 - The Homeric epics are written down
 - Having a history and (mythological) ancestry important to create a sense of identity
- Festive meal a feature of the hero cult
 - The source of depictions of Herakles as a laughable, gluttonous character?



Who Is Herakles?

- Father: Zeus
- Mother: Alkmene, the wife of Amphitryon
- Much like Castor and Pollux, Herakles has a mortal 'twin' brother, Iphicles
- Pursued by Hera, wanting revenge on Zeus for his affair with Alkmene:
- "When Herakles was eight months old, Hera, wanting to destroy the child, sent two huge serpents to his bed. [...] Herakles leapt up and killed the serpents by strangling them, one in each hand." (Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.4)



Wall painting from the House of the Vettii, Pompeii

Herakles' 12 Labours

- There are a number of stories dealing with the early career of Herakles, but...
- the most famous feature of the legends surrounding Herakles is the 12 labours performed for King Eurystheus of Mycenae
 - A punishment for killing the wife Megara and their two children in a fit of madness
 - Hera's way of avenging herself on Zeus



12 Labours – Popularity

- Herakles performing the 12 labours is an immensely popular motive on vase paintings
- 7th-5th century BC
- The travelling hero appeals in an age of colonisation and trade expansion
 - Note the finding place of many of these vases!



Third labour: the Cerynean Hind



Votive relief in marble showing Herakles holding down the Nemean lion. The Cretan bull is depicted in the right hand corner. From the Herakleion at Porthus, Attica. C. 400 BCE.

Amphora c. 550 (Eretria) showing Herakles and Iolaus killing the hydra at Lerna. Now in the National Museum in Athens.



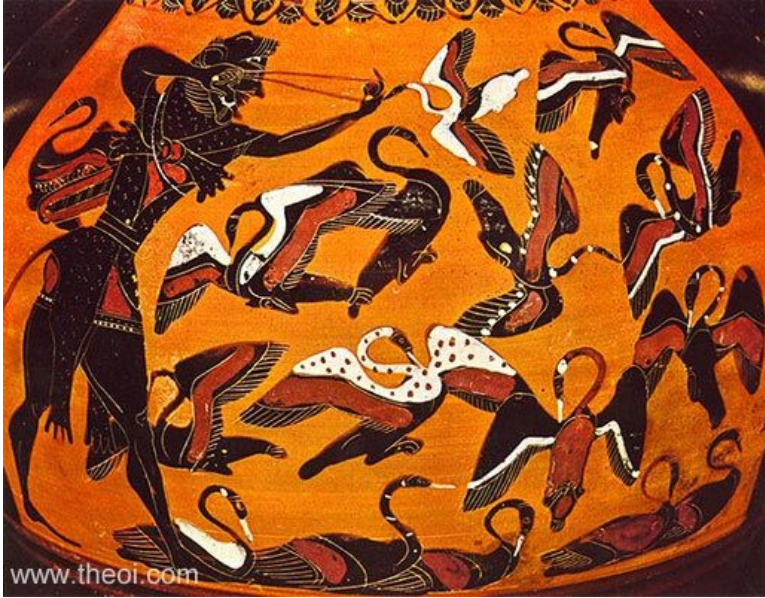
And again she bore a third, the evil-minded Hydra of Lerna, whom the goddess, white-armed Hera nourished, [315] being angry beyond measure with the mighty Heracles. And her Heracles, the son of Zeus, of the house of Amphitryon, together with warlike Iolaus, destroyed with the unpitying sword through the plans of Athena the spoil driver. (Hesiod *Theogony* 313-318)



Left: Hydra metope from Olympia, 5th C BCE. Right: hydra relief found at Lerna, 3rd C BCE.



Cretan bull (left) c. 400 BCE from Attica;
Erymanthian boar (above) 6th C from
Attica, with Athena.



The Stymphalian birds



Bringing Kerberos

Folk Tale Motives in the Labours

- The evil stepmother (Hera) threatening the hero
- The hero protecting common people by slaying dangerous beasts
- The hero has to enter into the service of a master less competent than himself



Herakles in Olympia

- All 12 labours depicted in the metopes of the Zeus temple at Olympia
 - Built 465-457 BC
- Why Herakles?
 - Local appeal – the first six labours all in northern Peloponnese
 - Pan-Grecian appeal – a hero known to all the Greek world highly suitable for a cult centre important to all of Greece
- Their depiction here contributes to establish a canon of 12 labours

One of the earliest attested labours

...and the Nemean lion, which Hera, the good wife of Zeus, brought up and made to haunt the hills of Nemea, a plague to men. (Hesiod *Theogony* 327-332)



Vase paintings:
Most intense moment of the fight

The Herakles metopes



The Nemean Lion: Reconstructions



Tired hero, thoughtful onlookers

New concerns:
The price paid by the hero



Olympia metopes: Apples of the Hesperides (above) and Augeas' stables (right)



A Changing Trend



- This new take on the Herakles legend is developed in Hellenistic art...
- ...and in (esp. Roman) literature
 - The madness of Herakles: Euripides' *Herakles*, Seneca's *Hercules furens*
 - The death of Herakles: Sophocles' *Thracian Women*, Seneca's *Hercules Oetaeus*

Herakles' Moral Dilemmas

- Several of the labours are metaphoric explorations of death and mankind's efforts to come to terms or defeat death
- However, literary treatments (especially in Roman times) focus on Herakles' fight and ability to overcome his own destructiveness
 - The killing of his sons and wife Megara in a fit of madness
 - Herakles' death: caused by his second wife Deaneira – facing death in slow motion



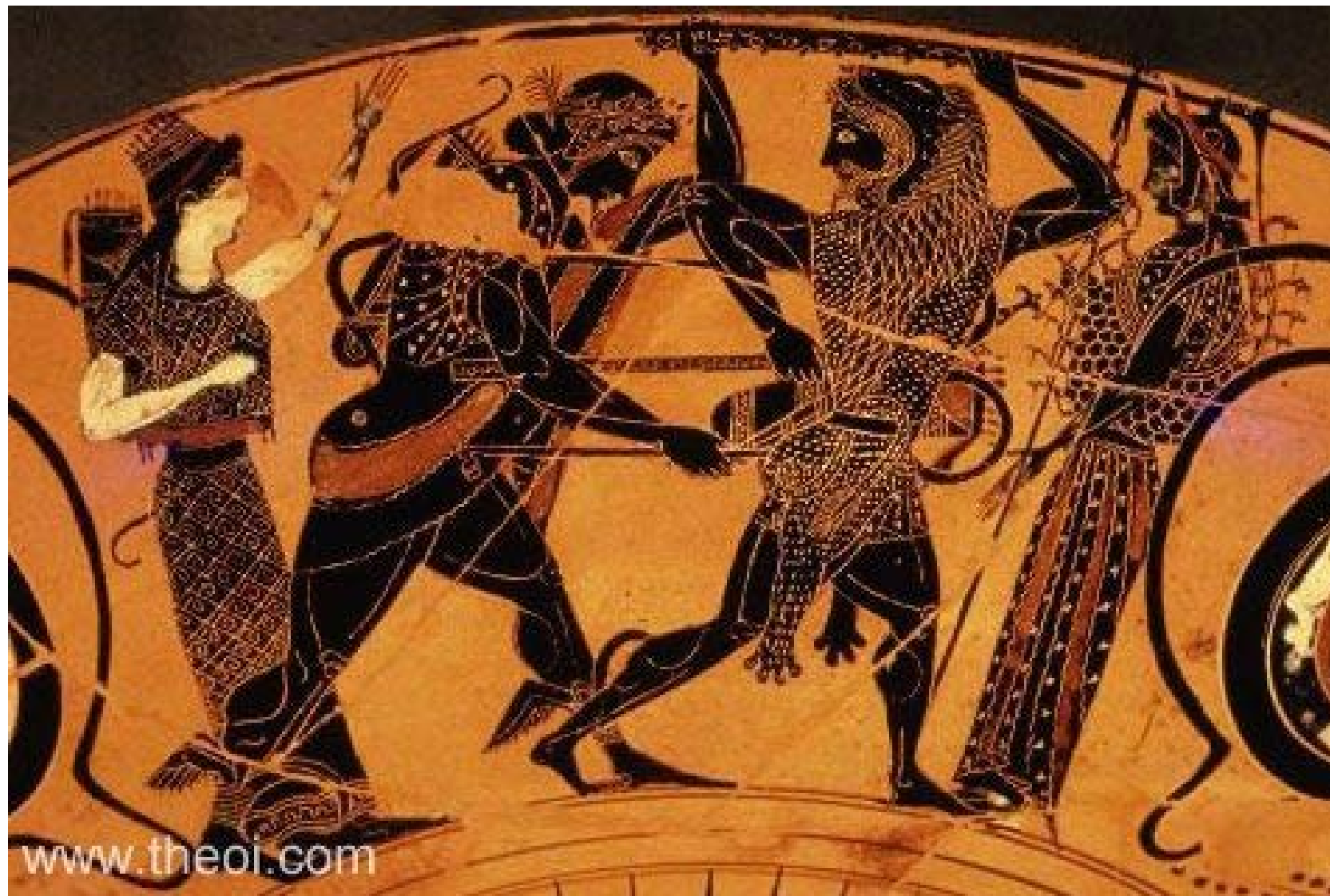
The *parerga*: Other Deeds

- Apart from the legends about his 12 labours, a huge number of stories are associated with Herakles
- These traditions are less stringently developed than those of the labours, and the events are often said to have taken place on the way to or from one of the 12 chief deeds.
- Heroic deeds near-by Mycenae (Thespius daughters, the Minyans)
- Participates in: early raid against Troy, the Gigantomachy, the Argonaut expedition

Stealing Pythia's Tripod



“He was struck by a terrible disease as the result of the murder of Iphitos, and went to Delphi to ask how he could be delivered from it. When the Pythia refused to grant him a response, he wanted to plunder the temple and tried to carry off the tripod to found an oracle of his own.”
(Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.6)



Herakles and Queen Omphale

- “[the oracle told him] that he would be delivered from his illness if he was sold into slavery [...]”
- This story popular esp. in Rome
- Allows for the testing of gender norms



- Prop. 4.9.45-50:
And if my looks
and shaggy lion-
skin and hair
bleached by Libyan
sun should frighten
anyone, I too, clad
in Sidonian robe,
have done a
servant's chores
and a daily stint
with Lydian distaff.
A soft breast-band
confined my hairy
chest; I was a
proper girl, though
heavy-handed.



3rd C CE mosaic showing
Hercules spinning and
Omphale holding

Aetiology with a twist, too

- The story of Hercules and Cacus told by Vergil in *Aen.* 8
- Vergil's emphasis is on the defeat of Cacus while closing with the construction of the Ara Maxima
 - The episode thus helps unite past and present
 - Role of *Aen.* 8 as foreshadowing of the Augustan Rome
- Propertius mentions the building only in passing (l. 68) and favours a fantastical etymology for the Forum Boarium (named after the mooing of the cattle)
 - More plausible suggestion by Varro – named in parallel to neighbouring fora
- The authority of Propertius *Elegy* 4.9's aetiological value is already undercut...



Temple of Hercules Victor in the Forum Boarium, between the Tiber and the Palatine

All About Herakles?

- Most legends concerning Herakles predate our written sources
- Similarities with mythological traditions of the Far East (e.g. Gilgamesh)
 - Herakles and the Nemean lion corresponds to oriental depictions of hero kings fighting wild beasts
- They may originally have been about different local heroes and only later become associated with Herakles
 - Why would this happen?

Literary Instantiations

- Homer: Herakles mentioned as a hero, but differs notably from the other epic heroes
 - Chief opponents – wild beasts, not other men
 - Way of solving problems – brute force
 - Lacking in civilised values – disrespectful towards the gods
- Comedy: Aristophanes and Euripides' satyr plays (and the *Alcestis*); Roman Comedy
 - Herakles the Glutton
- Hellenistic and Augustan poetry
 - Herakles the lover: Hylas and Deianeira