**HERCULES**

The greatest of all heroes in Greek mythology, Hercules was the strongest man on earth. Besides tremendous physical strength, he had great self-confidence and considered himself equal to the gods. Hercules (called Heracles by the Greeks) was not blessed with great intelligence, but his bravery made up for any lack of cunning. Easily angered, his sudden outbursts of rage often harmed innocent bystanders. When the fury passed, though, Hercules was full of sorrow and guilt for what he had done and ready to accept any punishment for his misdeeds. As a young boy, Hercules became aware of his extraordinary strength—and his temper. Like most Greek youths, he took music lessons. One day Linus, his music master, was teaching Hercules to play the lyre. Hercules became frustrated, flew into a rage, and banged the lyre down on Linus's head. The blow killed Linus instantly. Hercules was shocked and very sorry. He had not meant to kill his teacher. He just did not know his own strength. Only supernatural forces could defeat him, and it was magic that ended his mortal life. In Greek mythology, only two figures with half-mortal, half-immortalparentage—Hercules and Dionysus—became fully immortal and were worshiped as gods.

***Birth and Early Life.*** Hercules was the son of Zeus\* and Alcmena, the wife of Amphitryon, a distinguished Greek warrior and heir to the throne of Tiryns. One night while Amphitryon was away, Zeus came to Alcmena disguised as her husband. The next day, the real Amphitryon returned and slept with his wife. Concerned that Amphitryon did not remember being with Alcmena on both nights, the couple consulted the blind prophetTiresias, who told them that Zeus had slept with Alcmena the first night and predicted that she would bear a child who would become a great hero.

Alcmena bore twin boys—Hercules, the son of Zeus, and Iphicles, the son of Amphitryon. When the goddess Hera discovered that Zeus had seduced Alcmena and fathered Hercules, she was furious. Hera was fiercely jealous of Zeus's lovers and children and pursued them mercilessly. She tried to kill the infant Hercules by having two poisonous snakes placed in his crib one night. However, the infant grabbed the snakes and strangled them. Though Hera failed to kill Hercules, she persecuted him throughout his life, causing many of the events that led to his great suffering and punishments.

While still a young man, Hercules went to fight the Minyans, a people who had been forcing Thebes\* to pay tribute. As a reward for conquering the Minyans, the king of Thebes gave Hercules the hand of his daughter, Megara. Hercules was devoted to Megara and the three children she bore him.

One day after Hercules returned home from a journey, Hera struck him with a fit of madness during which he killed his wife and children. When he came to his senses, Hercules was horrified by what he had done. Devastated with sorrow and guilt, the hero went to the oracle at Delphi\* to ask how he could atone for his misdeed. The oracle told him to go to King Eurystheus of Tiryns and submit to any punishment asked of him. The oracle also announced that if Hercules completed the tasks set before him, he would become immortal.

***The Twelve Labors of Hercules.*** King Eurystheus gave Hercules a series of 12 difficult and dangerous tasks. Known as the Twelve Labors of Hercules, these were his most famous feats. The hero's first task was to kill the Nemean Lion, a monstrous beast that terrorized the countryside and could not be killed by any weapon. Hercules strangled the beast with his bare hands and made its skin into a cloak that made him invulnerable.

For his second labor, the hero had to kill the Lernaean Hydra, a creature with nine heads that lived in a swamp. One of the beast's heads was immortal, and the others grew back when cut off. With the help of his friend Iolaus, Hercules cut off the Hydra's eight heads and burned each wound, which prevented new heads from growing back. Because he could not cut off the ninth head, he buried the creature under a great rock.

The next task was to capture the Cerynean Hind, a golden-horned deer that was sacred to the goddess Artemis\*. After hunting the animal for a year, Hercules finally managed to capture it. As he was taking it to Tiryns, Artemis stopped him and demanded that he return the deer. The hero promised that the sacred animal would not be harmed, and she allowed him to continue on his journey.

The fourth labor of Hercules was to seize the Erymanthian Boar, a monstrous animal that ravaged the lands around Mount Eryman-thus. After forcing the animal from its lair, Hercules chased it until it became so exhausted that he could catch it easily.

The hero's fifth task was to clean the Augean Stables in one day. King Augeas, the son of the sun god Helios, had great herds of cattle whose stables had not been cleaned for many years. Hercules accomplished the task by diverting rivers through the filthy stables.

The sixth task involved driving away the Stymphalian Birds, a flock of birds with claws, beaks, and wings of iron that ate humans and that were terrorizing the countryside. Helped by the goddess Athena\*, Hercules forced the birds from their nests and shot them with his bow and arrow.

Eurystheus next ordered Hercules to seize the Cretan Bull and bring it back to Tiryns alive. This savage bull had been a gift from the first task of Hercules' Twelve Labors. Hercules captured the bull and brought it back alive.

For his eighth task, Hercules was ordered to capture the Mares of Diomedes, a herd of horses that belonged to King Diomedes of Thrace and that ate human flesh. Hercules killed Diomedes and fed him to the mares. Then the hero tamed the horses and brought them back to Eurystheus.

The ninth labor consisted of obtaining the Girdle of Hippolyte, the queen of the Amazons\*. Hippolyte greeted Hercules warmly and agreed to give him the girdle. But then Hera caused trouble, making the Amazons think that Hercules planned to kidnap their queen. They attacked, and Hercules killed Hippolyte and took the girdle.

For his tenth labor, Hercules had to capture the Cattle of Geryon, a monster with three bodies that lived in the far west on the island of Erythia. After a difficult journey by sea and across the desert, Hercules killed Geryon, a herdsman, and an enormous guard dog. He then took the cattle and returned with them to Tiryns.

The eleventh labor involved bringing back the golden Apples of the Hesperides, a group of nymphs who lived in the far west. According to one account, Hercules requested help from the Hesperides' father, the giant Atlas, who held up the sky. Hercules offered to take Atlas's place under the sky if he would fetch the apples from his daughters. Atlas agreed and obtained the apples, but then he refused to take back the sky. Hercules asked Atlas to hold the sky for a just moment while he got a pad to ease the burden on his shoulders. Atlas agreed. But as soon as Atlas took back the sky, Hercules grabbed the apples and fled. In another version of this story, Hercules obtained the apples by himself after killing a dragon that stood guard over the tree on which they grew.

Hercules' final task was one of the most difficult and dangerous. He had to descend to the kingdom of Hades and captureCerberus, the fierce three-headed dog that guarded the gates to the underworld.Hades said Hercules could take Cerberus if he used no weapons to overcome the beast. Hercules wrestled Cerberus into submission or gave him drugged food and carried him to Eurystheus.

***Other Adventures and Later Life.*** Hercules had many other adventures during his lifetime. He killed other beasts and monsters, engaged in numerous battles against his enemies, joined the expedition of Jason\* and the Argonauts, and even fought the god Apollo\*. Throughout, he faced the hatred of Hera, who continued to persecute him because he was the son of Zeus.

Later in his life, Hercules married Deianeira, a princess whose hand he had won by fighting the river god Achelous. Hercules also saved Deianeira from a centaurnamed Nessus, who tried to harm her. As Nessus lay dying from Hercules' arrows, he urged Deianeira to take some of his blood, telling her it would act as a magic potion that could secure her husband's love forever.

Some years later, fearing that Hercules had fallen in love with another woman, Deianeira took the potion and smeared it on a robe for her husband. The potion was really a terrible poison, and when Hercules put on the poisoned garment, it burned his skin, causing an agonizing pain that could not be stopped. When Deianeira discovered what had happened, she killed herself.

The dying Hercules ordered his son to build a funeral pyre, and the hero lay down upon it. As the flames of the pyre grew, a great cloud appeared, a bolt of lightning struck, and the body of Hercules disappeared. Hercules, now an immortal god, had been taken to Mount Olympus to be with his father, Zeus, and the other gods. Even Hera welcomed him and allowed him to marry her daughter Hebe.