

Heracles

Roman name - Hercules

*text by Fran de la Rosa
photos from Google
Burlson 2014*

Heracles was half man and half god. His mother was a mortal. But his father was a king - a very special king, the king of all the gods, the mighty Zeus. But Heracles did not know he was part god until he had grown into a man.

Right from the beginning, Hera, Zeus' wife, was very jealous of Heracles. She tried all kinds of ways to kill him, including sending a couple of big snakes into his crib. Heracles crushed those snakes in a flash! Heracles was incredibly strong, even as a baby!



mortal - human; does not live forever

Zeus loved his little son. He figured that sooner or later Hera might actually find a way to kill little Heracles. To keep his small son safe from attack, Zeus sent him to live with a mortal family on earth. Heracles grew up loved and noble. But he didn't fit in on earth. He was too big and too strong. One day, his earth father told him he was a god, well, part god anyway.

The rest of the story of Heracles is a bunch of little stories that together tell the tale of how Heracles earned his way into the heavens, to take his place with the gods.

As the story goes.....

Heracles had a cousin named Eurystheus. Eurystheus was the king of a little village in the city-state of Argos. He was an evil man. He thought everyone wanted to steal his crown, especially Heracles. One day, when Hera and Eurystheus were chatting about their mutual hatred for Heracles, Hera came up with a plan - a plan to kill Heracles!



Hera helped Eurystheus design 12 Labors (missions or tasks) that Heracles had to complete. Supposedly, when Heracles had completed the 12 Labors, he would earn his immortality, or so Hera promised. But really, Hera and Eurystheus were certain that one of their "labors" would surely kill Heracles, probably the very first one.

mutual - having in common; thinking the same thing
immortality - ability to live forever (like the gods)



Heracles was no fool. He asked the Oracle of Delphi if this was a smart thing to do. The oracle agreed that it was. Actually, the oracle had said, "If you complete 12 Labors, immortality will be yours." Being an oracle, she never explained what she meant by "immortality" - would he live forever in legend or for real? Heracles never asked. (She would not have told him anyway.)

Heracles not only lived, he had great adventures, discovered true friends, and rid the world of some really nasty critters.

the oracle of Delphi - a priestess who prophesized the future

The 1st Labor of Heracles The Nemean Lion

The Nemean Lion had huge teeth, and skin so tough that it could not be pierced by arrows. Everyone in the land of Nemean was scared to death of it. Many hunters had tried to kill the beast, but none had succeeded.

The Nemean Lion was also smart. Several hunters had tried to trick it with poisoned meat. The lion never ate the meat. He did, however, eat the hunters.

The lion was strong. But Heracles was stronger. Heracles lured the beast into a trap and strangled it. He made a coat out of the lion's fur. He wore the lion's head as a helmet. With the cheers of the grateful people of Nemean ringing in his ears, Heracles headed for home, delighted with his new clothes.

When King Eurystheus saw the lion's head approaching, he went screaming into his castle. It took Heracles most of one day to convince King Eurystheus that the lion was dead.



The 2nd Labor of Heracles *The Lernaean Hydra*

His second labor was to get rid of the Lernaean Hydra.

The Hydra was a big snake, big big snake. It had nine heads. One of its heads was immortal - you couldn't kill it. King Eurystheus made it quite clear that he did not want Heracles returning with any part of the serpent. No snake skin boots or hat or gloves.



King Eurystheus and Hera both knew that anyone who approached the monster's den in the swamp was killed by the monster's poisonous breath. Heracles did not have a chance!

But Heracles lured the monster out of the swamp. With the help of his servant, Iolaus, he clubbed off the monster's nine heads. He burned them. But one head refused to die. It kept coming back to life. So Heracles crushed that head and buried it deep in the ground, and to this day, it was never seen again.

The 3rd Labor of Heracles The Wild Boar of Erymanthus

His 3rd labor was to bring the wild boar of Eurystheus back to the castle, alive.

Boars are wild pigs with tusks that can cut you. And they're smart. And mean. The wild boar of Eurystheus was a gigantic boar, which made him even more dangerous.

Heracles chased the huge boar up and down the mountains for almost a week before the boar dropped in exhaustion. Heracles was barely winded. He was glad he did not have to kill the boar. Heracles had gotten quite fond of the tricky fellow.

Heracles slung the boar around his neck, and carried him home. By the time he arrived at the castle, the boar had begun to recover. Heracles dropped the boar at King Eurystheus' feet. The boar lifted its heavy head and snorted angrily. King Eurystheus screamed and ran away. No one saw the king for the rest of the day. As for the boar, he disappeared. Some say Heracles gave him a lift home, back to the forest.



The 4th Labor of Heracles

The Stag of Artemis

There were many stags in the mountains. But this one was special. The stag of Artemis was known for its incredible beauty, its golden antlers, and its remarkable speed. It was not dangerous. It was just fast.

Heracles tried to catch the stag for a very long time without success. He had hoped to catch it without injuring it. But the stag was too fast for him. Finally, Heracles shot the stag with an arrow, being very careful to hit the stag in its leg, so the wound would heal. He tied the stag gently to a tree, and left the stag there, while he looked around for a witness who would agree to swear to King Eurystheus that the stag had been captured. Heracles intended to let the beautiful animal go free once he could prove he had captured it.



It took a while to find anyone who was willing to speak up to King Eurystheus , or to any king for that matter. By the time Heracles returned, dragging his witness with him, he found the goddess Artemis standing next to the empty tree where Heracles had tied the stag. Artemis was furious when she heard that King Eurystheus had sent Heracles after her favorite stag. But she was not furious with Heracles. She offered to be his witness. As she told Heracles, she was going to be speaking soon with King Eurystheus anyway.

The 5th Labor of Heracles

The Stymphalian Birds

The Stymphalian birds were just plain nasty. The people in the area spent their days and nights hiding from these scary birds. The Stymphalian birds had pointed beaks and ripping claws and their feathers were made of razor sharp bronze. They were the stuff of nightmares!



What the Stymphalian birds loved to do more than anything was to fly high in the sky looking for anyone or anything they could attack. They especially loved to drop their sharp feathers on children and animals. You can see why everyone kept their children inside, and sheltered their animals as best they could.

Heracles made a large shield of sturdy bronze, to protect his body from the feathers. He used poisoned arrows to shoot all the Stymphalian birds as they flew by overhead. When the last bird fell, the people hiding inside their huts and homes rushed outside.

Heracles made many new friends that day.

The 6th Labor of Heracles *The Augean Stables*

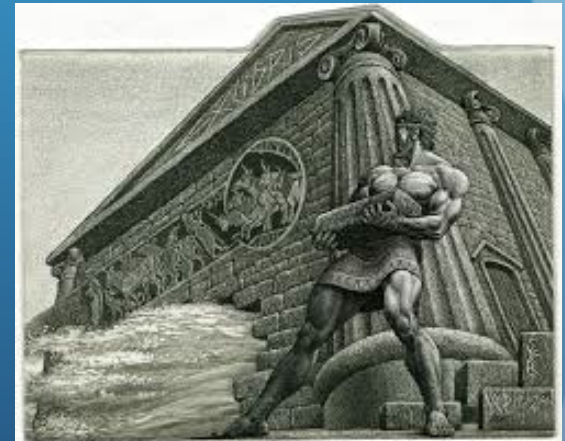
His 6th labor was to clean the Augean Stables in one day.

Augean, the King of Elis, had many sheep and cattle. All his sheep and cattle slept in the royal stables. This might sound nice, but the stables had not been cleaned for several years. It was not nice at all! The most horrible smell greeted Heracles when he stuck his nose in the stable door.

Obviously, it would take a great deal of water to wash away all the filth. Heracles used his mighty strength to push the riverbeds of a couple of nearby rivers so that the rivers would rush through the stables, and clean them out! The job was done in just a few hours.

Heracles put most of the river beds back where they were. But he left one babbling brook for the comfort of the animals.

When all of the animals who lived in the stable came home that night from the fields, they found clean beds of hay, warm buckets of oats, and fresh running water. They could not have been more happy.



The 7th Labor of Heracles *The Cretan Bull*

His 7th labor was to capture the Cretan bull.

The Cretan bull had walked out of the sea. The bull found himself on the island of Crete. It was a beautiful island and beautiful bull. The island sparkled with sunshine and happy people. And the bull was huge, with silvery horns, and snow white skin. They seemed to fit.

There was a tribe of people on the lovely island of Crete. These people, the Minoans, had a favorite sport enjoyed by both boys and girls - bull jumping. Shortly after it arrived, the Cretan bull had been captured to use in the games. But the bull was not happy to be captured. The bull tossed and gored and trampled anyone who tried to leap over it. One day, it escaped.

To the Minoans, bulls were sacred. It was against their religion to kill a bull. They tried to recapture it, without harming it, but they did not succeed. The bull hid during the day. At night, it ripped destruction from one end of the island to the other.

When Heracles finally found the bull, who was hiding in the forest at the far end of the island, the bull threw its head down and pawed the earth. While the bull has its head down, and was not looking, Heracles quickly grabbed the bull by its horns and threw it to the ground. It made the bull dizzy for a minute. Before the bull could recover, Heracles had him tied tightly up with rope. Heracles carried the bull back to King Eurystheus, much to the relief of the Minoan people of ancient Crete.



The 8th Labor of Heracles The Girdle of Hippolyta

For his 8th labor, King Eurystheus told Heracles that he had to bring back the golden girdle of the Amazon queen. The Amazons were a tribe of fierce women. They were very warlike. Any men they met, they captured and kept as slaves.

This was not King Eurystheus' idea actually. It was his daughter's. Hera had told her that wearing the girdle would make her as strong as an Amazon. That was pretty strong. King Eurystheus' daughter wanted to wear the girdle. She wanted to be as strong as the Amazon queen. King Eurystheus' daughter did not care that this was an especially difficult mission, even for Heracles. She thought only of herself.

Heracles also thought this might be a difficult labor, but he was surprised. It was not difficult, not at first anyway. Hippolyta, the Amazon queen, had heard tales of the mighty Heracles. She knew Heracles would be a good friend to have in times of war. In the spirit of friendship, she willingly gave the girdle to Heracles to take back to King Eurystheus' daughter.



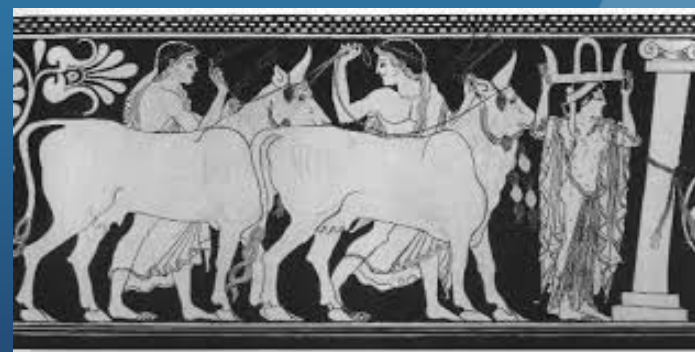
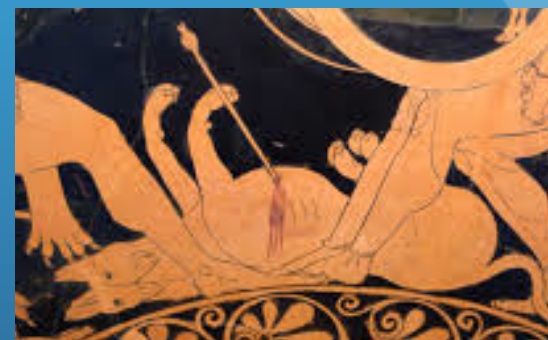
As Heracles reached for the golden girdle, the Amazon women thought Heracles was reaching for their queen. They attacked him. During the fight, Hippolyta was accidentally killed by her own people. That started a big fight among the Amazon women. While they were fighting among themselves, Heracles managed to escape with the golden girdle.

The 9th Labor of Heracles The Cattle of Geryon

His 9th labor was capture the entire herd of the cattle of Geryon and present them to King Eurystheus .

The Geryon was part man and part monster. He had two legs, the size of tree trunks. Three bodies grew from his waist, each with its own head and arms. He was very mean. And very strong. He owned a herd of red oxen that he kept on the island of Erythia. The island helped to protect his cattle from thieves. So did his two-headed dog.

Heracles had to fight the Geryon and his two-headed dog. Finally at last, when both lay quietly, either dead or exhausted (Heracles didn't actually care by then), Heracles herded the nervous red oxen aboard his ship and sailed for home.



The 10th Labor of Heracles The Mares of King Diomedes

His 10th labor was to capture the mares of King Diomedes.



The mares were horses. The mares were fed on human flesh. Heracles knew he needed help to capture these fearsome animals. Together with some good friends he had made on his travels, Heracles and his band of volunteers journeyed to the land of Thrace.

The mares were gentle. That surprised Heracles. He led one out of the stable. The other mares followed. Things were moving along nicely when Heracles was attacked by King Diomedes and the king's men. In the heat of battle, the king was thrown from his horse. His horse ate him.



When the king's men saw what had happened, they jumped from their horses and ran away. The mares ran after them. Heracles quickly gathered up the fleeing animals. With the help of his volunteers, Heracles muzzled the mares, then led them to King Eurystheus.

The 11th Labor of Heracles *The Golden Apples of the Hesperides*

His 11th labor was bring the legendary golden apples of the Hesperides back to King Eurystheus.

There was a rumor that the apples were hidden in the garden of the Hesperides. It was rumored that the apples gave immortal life to anyone who ate them, but hardly anyone believed the rumor. In fact, no mortal knew if the legendary golden apples really existed.

The Hesperides were magical creatures who lived a long way away. It took Heracles several months to reach the land of the Hesperides. When he finally reached the garden, he had to slay a dragon who was guarding the garden gate, before he could search for the apples.

The apples were poorly hidden. They were in plain sight, hanging on the apple tree in the center of the garden. It took Heracles no time at all to round them up. Heracles was tempted to take a bite and give himself immortal life. But he had heard another rumor. He had heard that the apples did not give immortal life, but rather, took immortal life away. That was not his goal at all.

Several months later, when he reached home, he gave the apples to King Eurystheus. Eurystheus gave the apples to his wife. His wife returned the apples to the Hesperides with her apologies.



The 12th Labor of Heracles *The Capture of Cerberus*

His 12th and final labor was to descend into the underworld, and bring back Cerberus, the three-headed dog who guarded the gate to underworld, home of the powerful god, Hades.

Heracles knew how much Hades loved that fierce, bad tempered dog. Heracles asked Hades' permission to briefly capture Cerberus, and told him why. Hades agreed that Heracles could try, as long as he used no weapons.

Heracles used his bare hands. He scooped all three heads up at once, and strangled Cerberus until he was unconscious. He gently carried the dog off to King Eurystheus. Cerberus began to regain consciousness as Heracles approached the king. The king scurried behind his royal throne.

Heracles explained he had to get the dog home right away. King Eurystheus stuck his head out from behind his throne and quickly agreed that Heracles should leave immediately for the underworld to return Hades' beloved dog. Heracles promised to be right back.

After Heracles delivered Cerberus safely home, Heracles quickly returned to the palace, eager to be granted immortality. But Hera was nowhere to be found. Neither was King Eurystheus.



After many more adventures, Zeus finally granted Heracles immortality. Zeus brought him to the heavens.

