

HERAKLES

THE STRONG MAN



Famed for his bravery and superhuman strength, Herakles is perhaps the most popular of all the ancient Greek heroes. Many stories are told about him, of which the most famous is his epic performance of the twelve labours. But during the course of these twelve labours, Herakles was also involved in a number of other quests and adventures. One of these adventures was with Jason on the Argo.

According to legend, Herakles was the son of the mortal woman Alkmene and the mighty Zeus, king of the gods - which explains Herakles' godlike natural strength. But it also explains why Hercules was bound to awaken the anger of Hera, Zeus' formidable wife. A famous story is told about Herakles' strength even as a newborn child: Hera sent two snakes to strangle the infant Herakles in his cradle. Instead, the child sprung up and strangled the monsters with his bare hands!

But Hera was not finished stirring up trouble for the hero. As a young man, Herakles was happily married to Megara, the daughter of Kreo, King of Thebes, and together they had five children. One day, Hera sent Herakles into a fit of insanity, causing him to murder his wife and all their children. When he emerged from the fit and realised what he had done, the grief-stricken Herakles sought the advice of the wise oracle of Apollo at Delphi.

The oracle advised him to offer his services to his cousin Eurystheus, the King of Mycenae, Tiryns and Argos, in order to redeem himself from the terrible crime he had committed. With Hera's encouragement, Eurystheus came up with the most challenging and dangerous tasks possible for Herakles- just as Pelias had sent Jason to find the Golden Fleece, a task most believed to be impossible. Eurystheus's tasks for Hercules were known as the famous twelve labours of Herakles. They included feats such as killing the ferocious Nemean Lion, stealing the golden apples of the Hesperides (which were guarded by a hundred-headed dragon called Ladon), and capturing Kerberos, the guardian of the underworld of Hades.

During his performance of the twelve labours, Herakles often found himself in the midst of other adventures along the way. These included a duel with Hades to rescue Alcestis from the underworld and slaying a sea-monster to rescue the nymph Hesione (daughter of the Trojan king Laomedon). Another of Herakles' famous deeds was to accompany Jason and the other Argonauts on their journey in search of the Golden Fleece.

On the voyage of the Argo, the first stop was the island of Lemnos. The sole inhabitants of this island were vengeful women who had slain their unfaithful husbands - along with all the other men on the island. The only man to survive had been the father of Queen Hypsipyle. For the Queen had placed her father in a cask and cast him adrift on the ocean. When the Argo approached the shores of Lemnos, the women saw an opportunity to have strong men around again, to work in the fields and protect them against enemies. And so, the women welcomed the Argonauts with open arms and the heroes remained on the island for a year, partnering up with the women and fathering many children. Herakles was the only Argonaut who did not settle down on Lemnos and, protesting against the laziness and distraction of his companions, he persuaded them to set sail once more.

Herakles remained in the crew of the Argo for just a short while longer. Following their stay in Lemnos and a rather unpleasant encounter with some six-armed monsters, the Argonauts arrived in Mysia. Now, Herakles had taken with him on the voyage a young man named Hylas, who was his lover. When Herakles was away fetching water, his companion Hylas was snatched away by a water nymph, who had fallen in love with him at first sight. When Herakles returned to find that Hylas had disappeared, he bellowed with anger and charged off in pursuit of the kidnapper. But while Herakles was searching for Hylas, the other Argonauts, seeing that the weather was good for sailing, decided to continue their voyage. It was only when the sun rose the next day that the Argonauts realised they were missing their greatest warrior.

After leaving the Argo, Herakles continued with his twelve labours. Eventually his death was to come about not through a heroic adventure, but instead through a mishap involving his jealous wife Deianeira. Misled by the centaur Nessos, who had been wounded by Herakles, Deianeira unwittingly poisoned her husband in an attempt to win back his affections through magic. Despite this messy end, Herakles' lifelong heroism was not forgotten. After his death, he was made immortal, and lived on as a god on Mount Olympus.