

THE GREEK HEROES

HEROES & MYTHS

Greek myths take place in a world that does not correspond to any specific historic period; rather, the mythological world was developed and altered over time.

You may wonder why these myths are so important over 2000 years later. The characters, stories, themes and moral lessons of Greek mythology continue to influence our everyday lives. References to Greek mythology can be found in brand names like Nike and Amazon; in movies like Wonder Woman and Percy Jackson; and are used by NASA and other government bodies; in advertising and much more. A name, phrase, or image based on a familiar myth can speak volumes to those who have been absorbing these tales since birth, as they capture aspects of the human condition that are still relevant today.





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THE HISTORY OF MYTHS

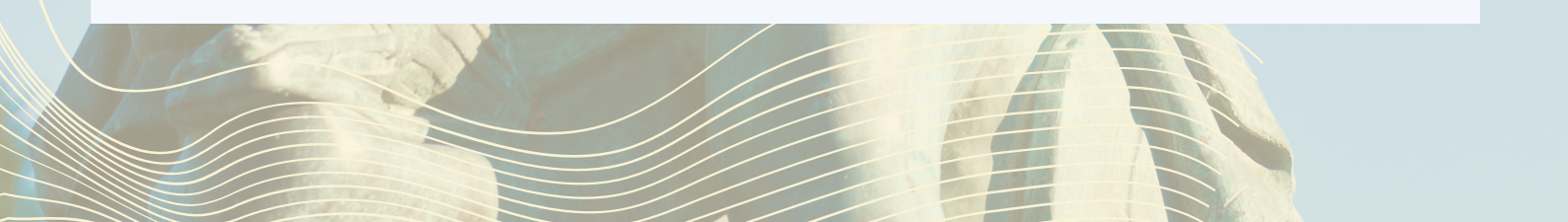
Without wide spread literacy, the dissemination of mythologies and historical events were part of an oral tradition that began in the Bronze Age. Their plots and themes gradually developed as written literature of the Archaic and Classical periods, and as a result, myths often have multiple versions, each slightly different.

Most myths explain or justify things in some way, be it the creation of the world, the cycle of life, the seasons, or the origins of a city. This is not to say that the Greeks believed these myths as the literal truth, nor should it be thought that they were wholly sceptical of them.

The first written record of Greece, known to us, comes from Homer's *Iliad*. Most likely produced in the 8th century BCE, it tells us of the mythical Trojan War as not only a divine conflict, but a human one as well. In this, the gods and goddesses used humans as their pawns, taking sides and warring among themselves.

Much like the mortal world, the mythological world was very hierarchical.

This hierarchy is a key factor to be considered as part of ethical decisions made by the characters in the myths, as different rules applied about how it was appropriate to treat people dependant upon their position in the hierarchy.



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THE HISTORY OF MYTHS

The hierarchy of Greek mythological world extends to the gods, who are at the very top. Like the nobles, the gods jealously guarded their place at the top of the hierarchy and brutally punished any person who disrespected them. This is why Greek myths often include many examples of people suffering - because they have affronted the gods.

Many of the myths had recurring characters: the gods and goddesses; heroes; monsters and other fantastic creatures (many of which were half human, half beast). The hero's quest is often a profoundly transformative experience and often marks the shift from youth to adulthood. Like life however, the quests, and myths in general, do not always have happy outcomes.



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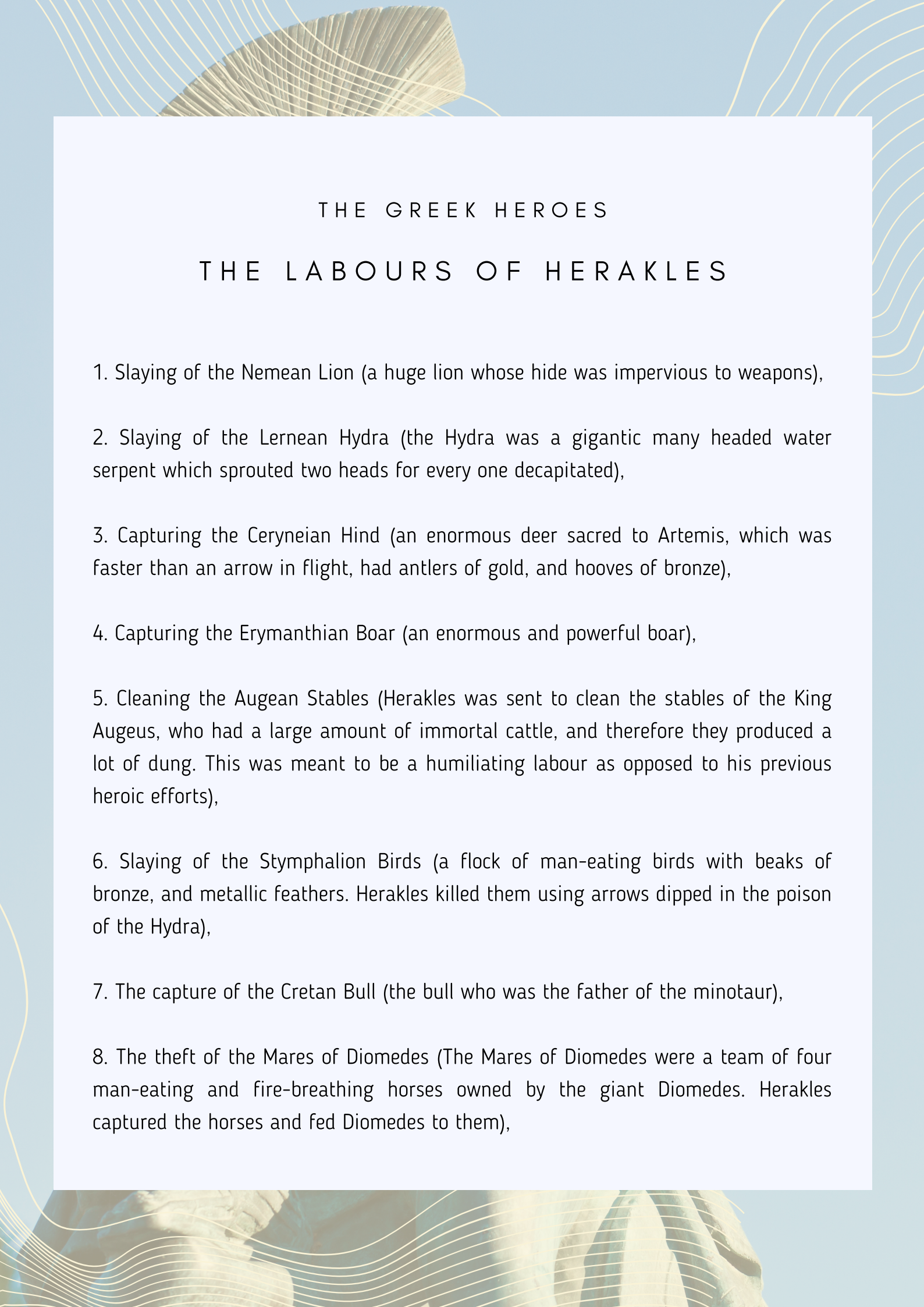
HERAKLES

Herakles was the greatest of the Greek heroes and is known as a prolific slayer of monsters. He was especially suited to this task as he was the half-god son of Zeus.

Zeus came to the home of a mortal woman, Alcmene, disguised as her husband Amphitryon. In this disguise, Zeus had an affair with Alcmene without her discovering his true identity. Hera, Zeus's wife, was outraged at her husband's infidelity however there was little she could do to him directly as Zeus was the all-powerful King of the Gods. Instead Hera took retribution on Herakles.

Hera's schemes to make Herakles' life miserable are a recurring theme of his mythic story. The myth of Herakles 12 Labours, became the most famous of his exploits:





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THE LABOURS OF HERAKLES

1. Slaying of the Nemean Lion (a huge lion whose hide was impervious to weapons),
2. Slaying of the Lernean Hydra (the Hydra was a gigantic many headed water serpent which sprouted two heads for every one decapitated),
3. Capturing the Ceryneian Hind (an enormous deer sacred to Artemis, which was faster than an arrow in flight, had antlers of gold, and hooves of bronze),
4. Capturing the Erymanthian Boar (an enormous and powerful boar),
5. Cleaning the Augean Stables (Herakles was sent to clean the stables of the King Augeus, who had a large amount of immortal cattle, and therefore they produced a lot of dung. This was meant to be a humiliating labour as opposed to his previous heroic efforts),
6. Slaying of the Stymphalion Birds (a flock of man-eating birds with beaks of bronze, and metallic feathers. Herakles killed them using arrows dipped in the poison of the Hydra),
7. The capture of the Cretan Bull (the bull who was the father of the minotaur),
8. The theft of the Mares of Diomedes (The Mares of Diomedes were a team of four man-eating and fire-breathing horses owned by the giant Diomedes. Herakles captured the horses and fed Diomedes to them),

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THE LABOURS OF HERAKLES

9. Obtaining the Girdle of Hippolyta (Hippolyta was the Queen of the Amazons. In some versions of the myth she is impressed by Herakles and gives him the girdle freely, whereas in others, he kills her and takes the girdle),

10. Stealing the Cattle of Geryon (Geryon was a with 3 bodied four winged giant who Herakles had to kill in order to steal his cattle)

11. Stealing the Apples of the Hesperides (either by killing a dragon or having Atlas get the apples for him),

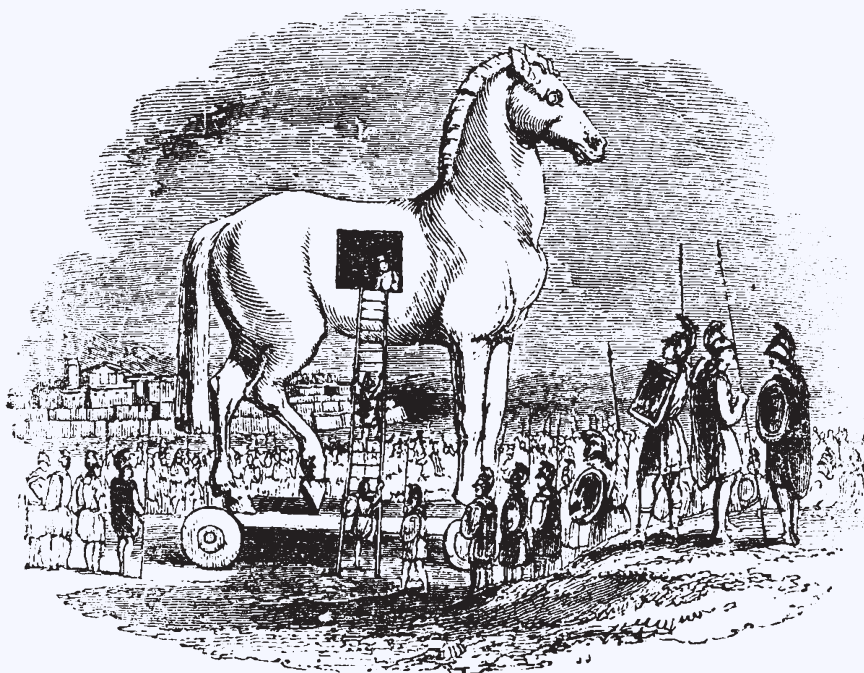
12. The capture of Cerberus from Underworld (Cerberus was the three headed hound who guarded the gates of the Underworld).



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PARIS

According to an ancient myth, Paris' mother, Queen Hecuba of Troy, dreamt that she would give birth to a flaming torch which would destroy her city. A seer subsequently advised her to kill her infant son Paris at birth. Instead of doing so directly, Queen Hecuba left the baby to die on a mountain. Here, the boy was rescued by a shepherd, who brought him up as if he were his own son. Eventually, a sequence of events led Paris back to his royal family, where he fulfilled the prophecy by eloping with (or abducting) Helen, instigating the Trojan War.





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ODYSSEUS

Odysseus was the King of Ithaca who fought for the Greeks during the Trojan War.

Known for his cunning and schemes he had many notable exploits during the war. In the *Iliad*, he and the warrior Diomedes went on a night raid which resulted in the death of many Trojans. He later obtained the armour of Achilles over rival warrior, Ajax by bribing the Greek elders.

Finally, he is the Greek who devised the plan to build the Trojan Horse which led to the final downfall of the Trojans and the end of the war.

Apart from these heroic exploits, Odysseus is best known as the protagonist of the *Odyssey*. In Homer's epic, Odysseus encounters a variety of both friendly and unfriendly people and monsters on his ten-year journey home. The most well-known of these are the Cyclops Polyphemus and the monsters Scylla and Charybdis. Others encountered, include the savage Laestrygonians, who hurled massive boulders at his ships, and the Lotus-Eaters who spent all day under the influence of drug like plants which made those who ate them forget all that was important. On his journey, Odysseus also encountered the witch goddess Circe, and the sea nymph Calypso, with whom he lived for a time.

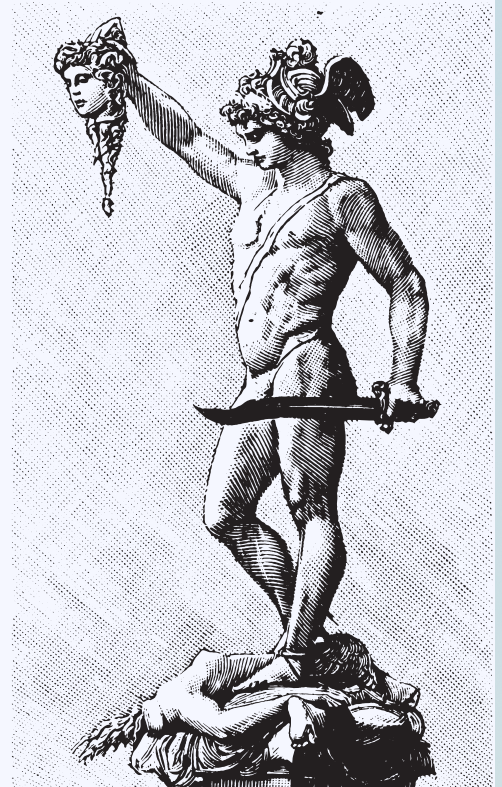
After these many adventures, Odysseus eventually made his way home to Ithaca where he killed the suitors who had been attempting to woo his wife Penelope, and was finally reunited with his family.

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PERSEUS

Perseus is one of the oldest Greek mythological heroes who was most famous for slaying Medusa. According to his myth, Perseus was the son of Zeus and a mortal woman, Danae. When he was grown, Perseus was sent on a quest to slay the Gorgon Medusa, a monster whose gaze turned people to stone.

With the guidance of Hermes and Athena, he travelled to meet the Graea, three sisters with a single eye and tooth between them. By holding these to ransom, Perseus discovered the location of the Nymphs who possessed the weapons which would kill Medusa: winged sandals, a bag to hold the Gorgon's head and Hades' helmet of invisibility. Hermes gave him an adamantine sickle, and Athena, a polished bronze shield. With these tools, Perseus managed to kill Medusa and escape the lair with her head as a prize.



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THESEUS

Theseus was a mythical hero and King of Athens. He is involved in a great number of exploits, the most famous of which is the slaying of the Minotaur.

According to the myth, King Minos of Crete housed a terrible monster, the Minotaur. A beast with the body of a man but the head of a bull. The creature lived in a labyrinth which was designed to be so difficult that anybody who entered would never escape. When the son of King Minos was killed in Athens, the king decided to take his revenge by ordering that 7 girls and 7 boys be sent to Crete every nine years to be fed to the Minotaur. They were left in the labyrinth for the monster to devour them one by one.

Theseus, the young son of the King of Athens, decided one day that it had been enough! Volunteering to go to Crete, Theseus vowed to kill the Minotaur and put an end to King Minos' human sacrifices. When he announced his intentions, King Minos only laughed as he trusted that even if Theseus could slay the Minotaur, he would never find his way out of the labyrinth.



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THESEUS

But Theseus had a secret! He had met with Princess Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos, who had fallen madly in love with him and decided to save his life. She gave him a thread to unravel as he walked further and further into the lair of the beast. Once Theseus had slain the Minotaur, he was able to use the thread to retrace his steps and escape the labyrinth.



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BELLEROPHON

Bellerophon was a Greek hero whose story largely took place in Anatolia. In the myth, he was sent on a mission to kill the Chimera.

In order to kill such a dangerous monster, Bellerophon needed to capture the winged-horse Pegasus who would help him in his quest. He went to the Temple of Athena (Parthanon), and while there Athena came to him in a dream and presented him with a golden bridle which he used to capture Pegasus. Bellerophon went to Lycia where the Chimera was ravaging the land and flew on Pegasus just out of reach of the Chimera's fiery breath and killed the beast with spears and arrows.



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JASON

Jason's quest to find the Golden Fleece is the myth for which he is best known. According to the story, Jason sailed toward Colchis on his ship, the Argo, with a crew of many famous heroes known as the Argonauts. Although the exact crew differs depending on the source, the various heroes counted as Argonauts include Herakles, Theseus, Orpheus, Castor and Pollux. During their quest to find the Golden Fleece, the Argonauts encountered hostile tribesmen, harpies (half-woman half-bird creatures) and the Gegenees (a race of six armed giants). Upon arriving in Colchis, the local King Aeetes agreed to give up the fleece if Jason could complete a series of tasks.

The first part of his tasks was to yoke and then plough a field with fire breathing oxen. Once this was completed, he was to sow dragon's teeth into the field. From these teeth, warriors would grow, which Jason would have to defeat. Jason agreed to the task not knowing that Aeetes knew no mortal could complete the task unaided. Jason, however, was supported by the goddess Aphrodite, who made Aeetes daughter Medea fall in love with him. Medea, herself a sorceress, helped Jason complete his tasks and retrieve the Golden Fleece.

