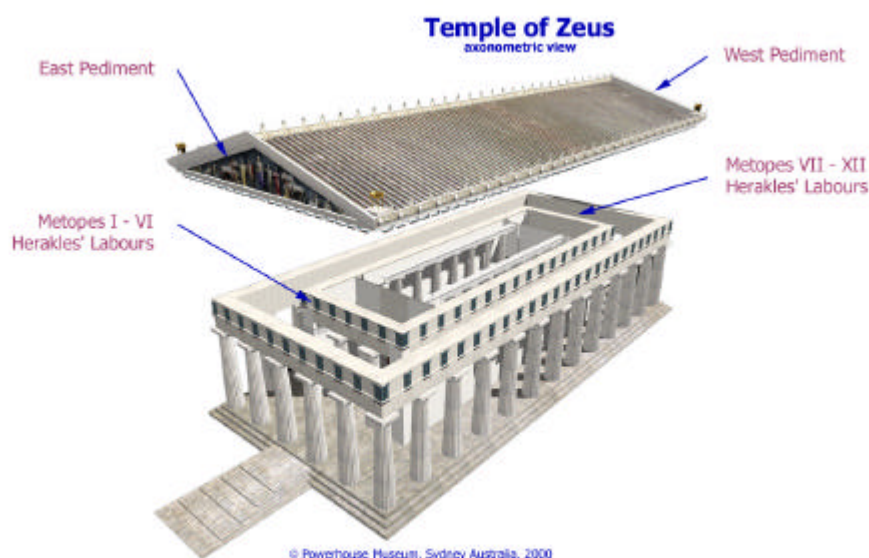




The Metopes of the Temple of Zeus



The decorated metopes, above the front and rear porches of the Temple of Zeus, were carved in Parian marble between 470 and 457 BC. Unfortunately, we have no knowledge of the sculptor or sculptors, though considerable research has focused on the stylistic context of the relief carvings. Traces of paint remained on the metopes when they were excavated, and dowel holes show where bronze accessories and bird deflectors were placed.

Herakles is the greatest hero of Greek myth. Many adventures and stories are attributed to him, some of which were clearly originally the adventures of other, less famous heroes. Herakles was neither completely good nor constant, but there was no doubting his strength or bravery. At some stage, a cycle of stories developed into the legend of his twelve labours (*Dodekathlos*), and the metope decorations at Olympia were extremely important in this process.



*Herakles (second from right) in a procession at Mt Olympus, with the other gods
Kylix (cup), Berlin F2278 © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin: Antikensammlung / bpk, Berlin 2000*

Herakles was the son of the great god Zeus and Alkmene (see the genealogical map for the complicated family tree of Herakles). Hera, Zeus' wife, became furiously jealous when she discovered the affair. First, she delayed his birth, so that Zeus' boast that the next child born would be king applied to Herakles' cousin Eurystheus of Mycenae. Hera attempted to kill the infant Herakles by sending two poisonous serpents, but in the first demonstration of his enormous strength, the child strangled them in his cot.

Herakles grew up with a particularly violent temper and in fact killed his tutor Linos, though was acquitted due to a claim of self-defence. He is credited with having killed the lion of Mt. Kithairon, and he helped defend Thebes from attack by the Minyai. In return for this he was given King Kreon's daughter Megara in marriage. Over time he calmed down, and lived happily with his wife. Hera, still jealous, made another attempt to destroy him – she caused him to go mad, and while insane, Herakles killed his own children and in some versions, Megara as well. When he came to his senses, distraught, he went to the oracle of Apollo at Delphi to ask what his penance would be, to be purified from the blood-crime. The oracle sent him to work for King Eurystheus of Mycenae, to perform the labours the king set him, after which he would become immortal.

At some stage Herakles married Deī aneira, the daughter of Dionysos. Due to some bother Herakles was in, the pair had to escape, during which they had to cross a flooded river where the centaur Nessos offered to ferry Deī aneira across. Mid-way, he began to ravish her, as centaurs are wont to do, so Herakles shot him. As he lay dying, Nessos whispered to Deī aneira to take some of his blood, to smear on Herakles' clothes as a love potion if she thought he had lost interest in her.

After some time, and many other adventures, Herakles fell in love with Iole. When Deī aneira found out, she smeared Herakles' cloak with the potion from Nessos. It was of course not a love-potion but a terrible poison, which glued itself to Herakles' skin, burning him terribly and without respite.

To end his torment, Herakles built himself a pyre on Mt. Oite and lay on it, begging passers-by to light it and put him out of his misery. Finally Philoktetes, or his father Poias, being promised the bow and arrows of the hero, lit the funerary pyre. That which was human of Herakles perished, and the immortal part rose to heaven. Reconciled, Hera allowed him to marry her daughter Hebe, who gave him eternal youth.

The Twelve Labours

The outlines of the labours here leave out most of the secondary adventures the hero had during the course of each task. The stories have been arranged in the order they were on the Temple of Zeus when Pausanias saw them, in around 160 AD. There are suggestions that they are not in their original positions, but that does not affect the meaning of each one. However, it is interesting to note that in Pausanias' order, the first labour (the Nemean lion) is on the west side of the Temple, which is normally thought of as the back of the building.

Bracketed numbers refers to the order of the labour in Apollodoros' list. There are other orders, and not all lists have these twelve tasks. In particular, the cleansing of the stables of Augeas is rarely depicted. It was probably shown at Olympia because it occurred locally. In every version of Herakles' labours, the killing of the Nemean lion comes first. From then on, Herakles is normally depicted wearing the lion's skin, but this is not the case at Olympia.

East side of Temple, over the *pronaos* (front porch)

Erymanthian Boar (4th)
King Eurytheus ordered the boar, which was causing havoc at Mount Erymanthos, to be brought back alive. After capturing the boar, Herakles brought it back to Mycenae on his shoulder. The boar was so terrifying that King Eurystheus leapt into a large jar he had prepared beforehand, knowing of the fearsome reputation of the animal.

This is one of the latest labours to enter the cycle of stories. Wild boar hunts feature prominently amongst Greek legend, with many of the Heroes involved in the Hunt for the Kalydonian Boar.

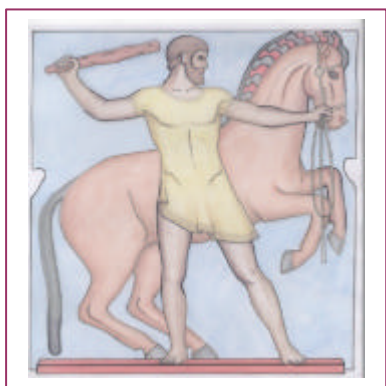
Most representations, like this metope, show this part of the story, which is not meant as a joke, but to show just how brave Herakles was.



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The Mares of Diomedes (8th)

Diomedes was king of the Bistones, in Thrace, and possessed fearsome, man-eating mares. Herakles went north with companions and captured the mares, so



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the Bistones attacked to retrieve them. Herakles gave the horses to his boyfriend Abderos to guard while he fought off the Thracians, but Abderos was torn apart by the mares. Enraged, Herakles killed King Diomedes and fed him to his own horses. Sated, the mares caused no more problems on the journey home. Apollodoros says that after King Eurystheus had seen them, they were released. The horses escaped to Mount Olympos where wild beasts killed them. But in Diodoros, Eurystheus kept the mares and bred from them, as they had been cured by eating their own master.

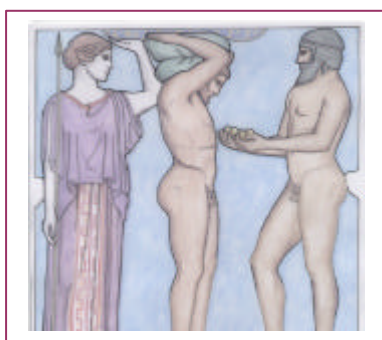
Cattle of Geryon (10th)

On an island in the west Mediterranean Geryon, a man with three bodies joined at the hip, kept a herd of famous cattle. On his journey to fetch the cattle for Eurystheus, Herakles tried to attack the Sun for dazzling him. The Sun, impressed by Herakles' bravery, gave him a golden cup, which the hero used to sail over the ocean to Geryon's island. Herakles had to kill Geryon in order to take his cattle away, and encountered numerous difficulties in getting the herd back to Mycenae. One bull was temporarily lost in Italy, and Hera sent a stinging fly to disperse the rest of the herd in Thrace. King Eurystheus sacrificed to Hera those cattle which Herakles finally brought to Mycenae.



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Because it could cause confusion with the Cretan bull story to show Herakles with cattle again, the artist here showed a more recognizable part of the story, leaving out the actual objects of the labour.



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Apples of the Hesperides (11th)

When Zeus and Hera were married they were given golden apples by their grandmother Gaia, and these were kept far to the west of the known world (i.e. in the Atlantic), guarded by a dragon and the daughters of Atlas and Hesperis. After travelling through the entire world, Herakles reached the land of the Hyperboreans where Atlas stood supporting the

universe. Herakles offered to hold up this burden while Atlas fetched the apples from his daughters. When Atlas returned, Herakles tricked him into taking back the universe. After Herakles gave the apples to Eurytheus, the king handed them back, and Athena, Herakles' protector, returned them to their proper place.

Apollodoros tells us that in another version, Herakles took the apples from their tree himself, after killing a guardian snake. In either version, this legend seems originally to have been about Herakles gaining immortality, and perhaps the return of the apples is a later addition to the story.

Kerberos, the Hound of Hell (12th)

Kerberos, the guard dog of Hades, had three heads and a biting tail, and in this labour, Hermes helped Herakles. While descending through the Underworld, Herakles passed Theseus and Peirithoos, who had become trapped when they went to kidnap Persephone to be Peirithoos' new wife. Herakles was able to free Theseus, but Hades made the earth shake, and Peirithoos remained bound to the Chair of Forgetfulness.

Hades allowed Herakles to take the ferocious dog, but he was not allowed to use any of his weapons.

Herakles overpowered Kerberos by the strength of his arms, ignoring the biting tail, until he was able to leash it. After he took the dog to Eurystheus, Herakles returned it to Hades.

This story probably originally was of Herakles attaining immortality by defeating Hades, and is one of the oldest of the Herakles legends, appearing in Homer.

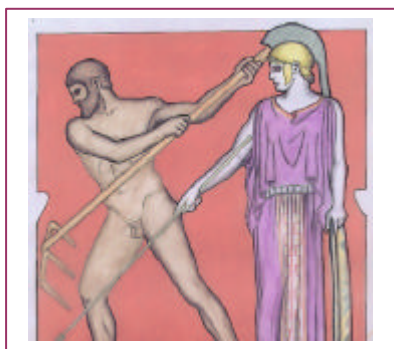
The Olympia metope, like several of the others, shows not the struggle, but a time after it. Kerberos is leashed and tamed, and Herakles is shown dragging it from the mouth of the entrance to Hell.



© Powerhouse Museum

Stables of Augeias (5th)

Augeias was king of Elis and possessed a huge herd of cattle. However, the dung was never cleared from his stables and the stench was overpowering the land.



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Herakles, without saying he was undertaking a command, offered to clear the stables in a day if Augeias would give him a tenth of the cattle. Augeias agreed, and with his son Phyleus as witness, watched as Herakles channelled the waters of the Alpheios river through the stinking cattle yard. Augeias refused to pay, either because he discovered that this was a task from Eurystheus, or that Herakles had used cleverness not strength to accomplish it. After some very lengthy, roundabout, and frankly, deceitful behaviour by Herakles, the hero conquered Elis, deposed Augeias, and installed

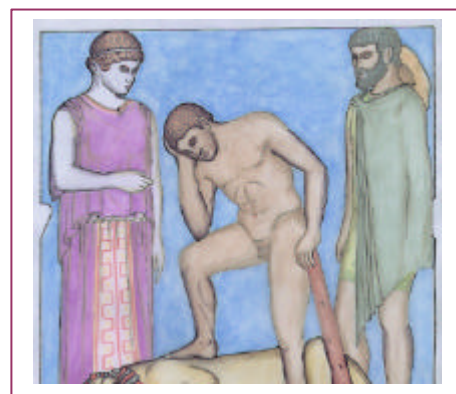
Phyleus as king. Eurystheus would not accept the labour, saying it had been done for pay, though it is not clear that Herakles ended up with any cattle at all. On the Olympia metope, Athena aids Herakles. We have restored a kind of rake to show Herakles pushing out the dung, but others suggest a crowbar to breach the cattleyard walls.

West side of Temple, over the *opisthodomos* (rear porch)

Nemean Lion (1st)
This was the first of Herakles' labours, to remove a ferocious lion from its cave near Nemea, just to the north of Eurystheus' kingdom. The lion, which may have been raised by Hera, had an impenetrable skin, so that Herakles' arrows were of no use. Finally, Herakles stunned the lion with his club, and then skinned it, using its own claws. From then on, Herakles is usually shown wearing the lion skin.

The symbolism of lion hunts is very ancient. A traditional way of describing the bravery of a hero or king is to show him killing a large lion.

This metope shows a moment of calm during this tremendous struggle. Herakles, still young and beardless, rests a moment after killing the beast. His divine protector Athena offers a helping hand, while, Hermes, the messenger god, stands in the background.



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Lernaean Hydra (2nd)
This water-snake infested a swamp near Lerna Land and was destroying the countryside. It had a monstrous body and nine heads. If one head was cut off, two grew from the wound. Herakles began by cutting heads off, but as well as the Hydra entangling his legs, Hera sent a large crab that bit him constantly on the foot. Because the crab was helping the monster, Herakles sent for his nephew Iolaos to help. Iolaos brought flaming torches and seared each wound as Herakles cut off the head. Eventually, they had all the heads off, and Herakles buried alive the immortal one. However, Eurystheus refused to accept this labour, as Iolaos had assisted.

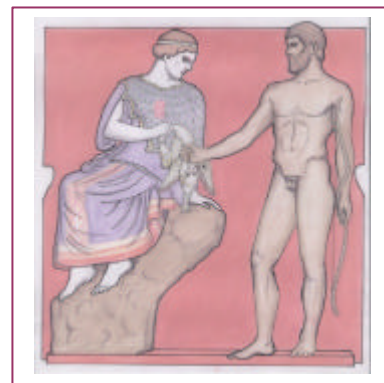
In the Olympia metope, the usual subsidiary figures of the crab and Iolaos have been left out. This no doubt was an artistic decision, as the small space is crowded enough with the writhing snake heads of the Hydra.

Stymphalion Birds (6th)

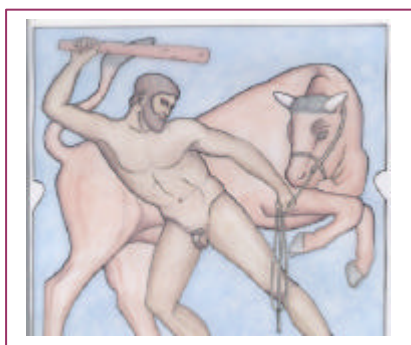
Lake Stymphalis in Arcadia had become infested with innumerable birds. Some sources say that their numbers were the problem, others that they were man-eating or their arrow-sharp feathers stabbed passers-by. Herakles was ordered to remove them.

Apollodoros combines two versions of the story, with Herakles first scaring the birds into the air with a loud rattle, then shooting them with his arrows.

Unlike most representations, which focus on the shooting, here the hero calmly presents proof of his success to his protector, the goddess Athena.



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The Cretan Bull (7th)

Herakles was sent to Crete to catch a notorious bull. King Minos of Crete had kept for himself a bull which Poseidon, god of the seas, had created, instead of sacrificing it as he had promised. Poseidon, in anger, caused Minos' wife Pasiphae to fall in love with the bull, giving birth to the monster Minotaur. Poseidon's bull then roamed wild and dangerous throughout the island. Herakles caught the animal unaided, and brought it to Mycenae to show King Eurystheus. The hero then set the bull free, and it wandered throughout the Peloponnese and then to Marathon near

Athens, where it continued to make trouble.

There are many bull stories in Greek legend, and this one seems to be an amalgam of them all: Androgeos, son of Minos, was killed attempting to kill the bull at Marathon; Minos demanded the sacrifice yearly of young men and women from Athens, to be eaten by the Minotaur; Theseus, the hero-king of Athens, travelled to Crete and killed the Minotaur; Theseus also killed the wild bull at Marathon, which may originally have been a different bull to the one in Herakles' story; Zeus appeared to Europa in the form of a bull and took her off to Crete where he seduced her.

Keryneian Hind (3rd)

The hind with golden horns was sacred to Artemis and Herakles was ordered to bring it alive to Mycenae. He chased the animal for a year into the mountains. In order to slow it down so he might catch it, Herakles fired an arrow, which just nicked the hind's leg. While he was carrying the hind back across the Peloponnese, Artemis and Apollo stopped him, accusing him of trying to kill an animal sacred to the goddess. After Herakles explained, they allowed him to continue.

This is Apollodoros' version, which seems to combine the two main variants of the story: one has Herakles killing the hind, the other that he catches it with cunning, either when it slept or with a net. The only constants in this story are that although the animal was female, it also had horns.



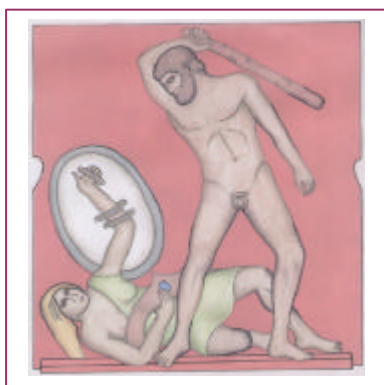
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Girdle of Hippolyte (9th)

Hippolyte, Queen of the Amazons had the belt of Ares, god of war, as a mark of her superiority over all other women. Admete, daughter of King Eurystheus desired it, so Herakles set out for the land of these warlike, barbarian women. Although

Hippolyte had agreed to hand over her girdle, Hera, disguised as an Amazon, told the crowd that Herakles was kidnapping the queen. During the subsequent battle, Herakles killed Hippolyte, and after taking the girdle, sailed away.

This is the version in the Olympia metope, where the battle is all but over. In another variant, Herakles kidnapped the Amazon general Melanippe, and ransomed her for the girdle. Usually, battles against the Amazons are shown in full flight, so this metope is quite different to the normal depictions.



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detail from exterior of Attic red figure *kylix* (cup); Berlin F2278,
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