

The most famous feats of Hercules are collectively known as "The Labors of Hercules". Hera's jealousy of Hercules caused her to drive him insane and as a result he killed his children. When his sanity returned, he received instructions from Pythia, the priestess of the oracle in Delphi, to go to Tiryns and perform any ten labors devised from him by king Eurystheus. By successfully completing these labors, Hercules would not only pay for his crime, but also achieve immortality and take his rightful place among the gods. Reluctantly, Hercules agreed to submit to the will of the hated Eurystheus, to whom Hera had given the throne that Zeus had intended for Hercules.

Hercules Nr. 1: The Nemean Lion

In the first of the labors of Hercules, Eurystheus commanded the hero to bring him the hide of the Nemean Lion. At first, Hercules tried to shoot it with his arrows, but seeing that the lion's pelt could not be pierced, he attacked it with his clubs. The lion ran away and hid in a cave with two entrances. Hercules blocked the one entrance, then wrestled with the lion and strangled it. He then skinned it and wrapped himself in its skin and returned to Mycenae with the lion thrown over his shoulder. Seeing Hercules dressed in the lion's pelt, Eurystheus was so frightened that he ordered him to leave all his future trophies outside the city's gates. Thereafter, whenever Hercules approached, the cowardly Eurystheus hid in his jar and had a messenger relay his next orders to the hero.

Labors of Hercules Nr. 2: The Lerna Hydra

Hercules's second task was to kill the Lerna Hydra, who lived in the marshes of Lerna, devouring people and animals. She was a horrifying monster with huge dog-like body and many serpentine heads (some say as few as seven, others claim 10,000), one of which was immortal. She had foul, poisonous breath that killed anyone who inhaled it. Hercules's aide on this labor was his nephew and charioteer Iolaus. They arrived together at the Amynone Spring, which was the monster's hideaway. Hercules forced the beast out by shooting flaming arrows into the lair. Much to his surprise, Hercules saw that for every head he shot off, two more sprung in its place. He then sought Iolaus's help, instructing him to sear each new wound with burning branches. This checked the flow of blood and prevented the growing of new heads. After he killed the Hydra, he buried the monster's head in the road and placed a rock over it. Although Hercules completed this labor, Eurystheus refused to give him credit for it, because he claimed Hercules had received assistance (from Iolaus) to accomplish the feat.

Labors of Hercules Nr. 3: The Cerynithian Hind

The third of the labors of Hercules was to capture alive the Cerynithian hind, which lived in the Sanctuary of Artemis on mount Cerynea. A wonderful deer with golden antlers and brass hoofs, this hind roamed the hills of Cerynea. Because the hind was sacred, Hercules hoped to capture it unharmed. After pursuing it for almost a year, the hero finally managed to capture the animal on the banks of the river Ladon.

While returning to Tiryns with the deer on his shoulders, Hercules met Artemis and Apollo. Artemis chastised Hercules, but let him pass with her deer when he insisted that Eurystheus should be blamed for this insult.

Labors of Hercules Nr. 4: The Erymanthian Boar

For his fourth labor, Hercules was ordered to capture the boar that lived on the Mount Erymanthus. Hercules first chased the boar out of its hiding place in the forest, pushed it into a snow-covered ravine causing it to be unable to move from the cold, and then captured it in chains.

Labors of Hercules Nr. 5: The Augean Stables

Perhaps to humiliate him, Eurystheus assigned Hercules as his sixth labor, to clean the stables of Augeas. Augeas, who had taken part in the expedition of the Argonauts, had countless herds. When Hercules asked for one-tenth of the king's animals as his fee for cleaning the stables, the king agreed because he was convinced that the task was impossible. But Hercules, proved to be cleverer than the king had imagined: He tore down a wall and diverted the waters of the nearby rivers into the stables. The stables were cleaned in a matter of hours, but Augeas refused to keep his promise, insisting that Hercules had a duty to perform this labor for Eurystheus. To make matters worse, Eurystheus refused to give him credit for accomplishing the labor, contending that he had done it as a job for hire.

Labors of Hercules Nr. 6: The Stymphalian Birds

The sixth of the labors of Hercules was to rid Lake Stymphalus in Arcadia of its vast flocks of man-eating birds. These Stymphalian birds had claws, beaks and wings of bronze and they fed on both humans and beasts. With the assistance of Athena, who lent him a pair of bronze castanets forged by Hephaestus, Hercules drove the birds far away from Arcadia: The noise of the clattering castanets frightened the birds, who flew as one into the air. Hercules shot with his arrows a great many of them, while the others quickly fled the scene.

Labors of Hercules Nr. 7: The Cretan Bull

The seventh of the labors of Hercules sent him to Crete to capture the Cretan bull, which was said to be the father of the Minotaur by Pasiphae, wife of the Cretan king Minos. Hercules captured the beast after a lengthy struggle. He brought it all the

way back across the sea to Tiryns, to present it to Eurystheus. He then set the beast free. It then roamed around Laconia and Arcadia, crossed the Corinth Isthmus and ended up in Marathon, to be later captured and killed by Theseus.

Labors of Hercules Nr. 8: The Mares Of Diomedes

Eurystheus next sent Hercules to Thrace, to capture the four man-eating mares of king Diomedes. The son of Ares, god of war, Diomedes fed his savage mares on the flesh of his innocent guests. On his way to Thrace, Hercules enjoyed the hospitality of Admetus, king of Thessaly in northeastern Greece. Admetus was cursed by one of the gods to die at a young age. He could only be saved, if one of his parents or his wife accepted to take his position. When he was seriously ill, his beautiful wife, Alcestis, offered herself to take his place. When Hercules reached their palace, Alcestis was dying. Touched by her sacrifice, Hercules decided to rescue her. He entered her room and when he saw Thanatos (Death) by her bedside, he wrestled with him and beat him. After rescuing Alcestis, Hercules continued on to Thrace. There, he stole the king's horses and drove them to the sea. When Diomedes and his subjects pursued him, Hercules managed to kill the subjects, wrestle with Diomedes and feed him to his own mares. Hercules then harnessed the untamed mares to Diomedes's chariot and drove them all the way back to Tiryns. Eurystheus released the horses into the wild.

Labors of Hercules Nr. 9: The Belt of Hippolyte

Admete, the daughter of Eurystheus, asked her father to have Hercules bring her the exquisite belt of Hippolyte, queen of the Amazons. The belt was a gift of Ares, the god of war. The hero thus was off to the land of the Amazons, the famous tribe of female warriors who lived near the Thermodon River. Hippolyte, after meeting with Hercules, at first agreed to offer her belt to him. But Hera, who continued to track the hero, changed into an Amazon and spread the rumor among the Amazons that Hercules wanted to abduct their queen. The Amazons thus rushed to attack their enemy. In the battle that followed, Hercules killed Hippolyte and obtained the belt. He and his companions then defeated the Amazons and returned to Tiryns with the prize.

Labors of Hercules Nr. 10: The Cattle of Geryon

For his next labor, Eurystheus sent Hercules to a faraway place in present-day Spain, with the order to fetch the cattle of Geryon. Geryon was a monstrous giant with three upper bodies. He owned a herd of beautiful red cattle, kept under the watchful eye of Eurytion. When Hercules reached the Strait of Gibraltar, he erected pillars on both sides (one in Europe, one in Africa) to mark the great distance he had traveled. Although both Orthus and Eurytion attacked him as he approached the cattle, Hercules killed both of them with a single blow of his mighty club. As he drove the cattle towards his ship, Geryon tried to stop him. Hercules, however, managed to kill him by shooting a single of his poisonous arrows through all his three bodies. After leaving Spain, Hercules had a long and hard journey back to Tiryns. Eventually, the Greek hero landed at Ambracia where he gathered the Geryon's cattle and guided it to the Hellespont.

Labors of Hercules Nr. 11: The Apples of Hesperides

With the turning over of the cattle to Eurystheus, the labors of Hercules completed amounted to ten, equal to the number of labors originally postulated by the oracle of Delphi. But, since he was denied credit for the second (The Lerna Hydra) and fifth labors (Augeian stables), Hercules had to perform two more labors. For his eleventh labor, Eurystheus sent Hercules to the westernmost part of the then known world, to the Garden of Hesperides. There, he had to obtain three Golden Apples from the tree that Gaia had given her granddaughter Hera. A vicious hundred-headed dragon named Ladon guarded the golden-fruited tree. Over the garden towered the titan Atlas, who bore the heavy burden of holding up the sky. First of all, Hercules had to find the location of the Garden. When he arrived at the Eridanus River, the nymphs there instructed him to ask the sea god Nereus, who was an oracle. Since the god was reluctant to reveal the information to Hercules, the hero tied him up until he succumbed. Apart from giving Hercules directions to find the Garden, he also advised him to talk Atlas into obtaining the fruit for him. So, when Hercules finally reached the Garden, he offered Atlas to relieve him of his huge burden in return for the small favor of bringing him the apples. However, when Atlas returned with the apples, he seemed unwilling to relieve Hercules of his position of holding the sky. Instead, he offered to take the apples to Eurystheus himself. Being shrewd not only strong, Hercules complained that his shoulder ached from the huge load and pleaded Atlas to take his position for a little while, until he could put a cushion over his head to mitigate the load. The gullible titan agreed. As soon as Hercules was relieved from holding the heavens, he walked off with the precious apples.

Labors of Hercules Nr. 12: Capturing Cerberus

The last of the twelve labors of Hercules was the most dangerous and horrifying of all: Hercules was ordered from Eurystheus to bring from the Underworld Cerberus, the hideous three-headed guard dog of Hades. Before setting off to complete his task, the hero was initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries. Accompanied by Athena and Hermes, he descended into the dark kingdom of the souls through a crevice known as Taenarum. After freeing Theseus and killing Hades's herdsman Menoetes in a wrestling match, Hercules presented himself before the ruler of the Underworld and explained his mission. Hades allowed Hercules to take Cerberus with him, provided that he would capture him with his bare hands and that he would return him back, after showing him to Eurystheus. Hercules remained true to his promise. After a fierce fight, he managed to capture the monstrous dog and, accompanied by Hermes, he ascended to earth from a gap near Troezen. Then, after presenting Cerberus to Eurystheus in order to receive due credit, he returned him to Hades.