

The Twelve Labours of Hercules

Part II

by Peter E. Lewis



Ruins of the Temple of Heracles at Agrigento in Sicily. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by José Luiz)

HERCULES (also known as Heracles) had been told by the oracle at Delphi that if he accomplished the tasks set for him by Eurystheus, the king of Mycenae, he would gain immortality. Part I dealt with the first six of these labours and Part II will deal with the remaining six.

The **Seventh Labour** was to capture the Cretan bull. This was a large bull that terrorized the people of Crete. (Figure 1 – map) Some say it was the bull that carried Europa on its back from Phoenicia to Crete. Others say it was the bull whose offspring became the Minotaur, a monster that was half man and half bull. The Minotaur lived in a labyrinth and ate people, but it was eventually slain by Theseus, another Greek hero. Heracles sailed to Crete, where sports involving bulls were popular. (Figure 2) After struggling with the bull for a long time Heracles eventually

overpowered it (Figure 3) and brought it to Greece. This labour of Heracles might reflect the subjugation of the Minoan civilization on Crete by conquerors from Greece in about 1450 BC.

The **Eighth Labour** was to capture the four wild mares that belonged to Diomedes, who ruled the fierce tribe of the Bistones in Thrace. The horses lived on human flesh and terrorized the country. Heracles gathered a band of volunteers and went to Thrace. On their arrival the Bistones attacked them, but Heracles had a clever strategy: when the Bistones were in a low-lying area he cut a channel from the sea and they had to flee from the water rushing in. Overtaking Diomedes Heracles stunned him with his club. He then dragged the body around the newly-formed lake and left it near the mares who hungrily devoured

their own master. With their appetites satisfied Heracles was able to control them (Figure 4) and with his way of dealing with them they were no further trouble.

The **Ninth Labour** was to obtain Hippolyte's girdle. Hippolyte was the queen of the Amazons, who were female warriors in Asia Minor. The word 'amazon' means 'no breast', and these women had their right breast cut off when they were young so that they were better able to use a bow. The girdle or belt that Hippolyte wore around her waist was made of gold and it had been given to her by Ares, the god of war. Eurystheus wanted to give it to his daughter and he sent Heracles to get it. Hippolyte came to meet the hero, and being a woman she was impressed by his muscular body. (Figure 5) She offered her girdle to him as a love gift. Meanwhile Hera, the goddess who was always trying to harm Heracles, had disguised herself as an Amazon and began to spread the rumour that the stranger was about to abduct the queen. The incensed Amazons jumped on their horses and charged towards Heracles. Thinking that Hippolyte had been trying to trap him he attacked her, pulling her hair. (Figure 6) He killed her and seized the girdle. With his men he defeated the Amazons and returned to Greece.

The **Tenth Labour** was to fetch the cattle of Geryon, the king of Tartessus in Spain. The cattle were on Erytheia, an island in the west. 'Erytheia' means 'the red place', and it was so-called because



Figure 1 – Map showing locations of Heracles' last six labours.

the setting sun caused a red glow in the west, and the cattle were red. They were guarded by Eurytion, who was the son of Ares. Eurytion had a two-headed dog called Orthrus. Moreover Geryon had three heads and three bodies joined at

the waist, and was reputed to be the strongest man in the world. So it was a particularly difficult task that Eurystheus had set for Heracles. When he reached Tartessus he erected a pair of pillars to mark the strait of Gibraltar,

one in Africa and the other in Europe. (Figure 7) According to the Greek historian, Herodotus, there were two pillars in the temple of Heracles at Tyre, and this was probably where the idea of the pillars at Gibraltar came from. Some



Figure 2 – Detail of a fresco from the palace at Knossos in Crete. It dates from 1600-1450 BC when bull-leaping was a sport. The athlete would grab the horns of a charging bull and somersault over its back. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 3 – Bronze coin of Nicaea in Bithynia. Obverse: head of Elagabalus, 218-222 AD. Reverse: Heracles wearing his lion's skin and holding a bull by its horn. **Seventh Labour**. (Nomos 6, Lot 185)



Figure 4 – Bronze coin of Heracleia Pontica in Bithynia. Obverse: bust of Macrinus, 217-218 AD. Reverse: Heracles subduing one of the mares of Diomedes. **Eighth Labour**. (Stack's Auction, January 2010, Lot 260)



Figure 5 – Marble statue of Hercules in the Naples Archaeological Museum. It is a copy made in the 3rd century AD of an original by Lysippos in the 4th century BC. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 6 – Bronze coin of Anchialus in Thrace. Obverse: bust of Gordian III, 238-244 AD. Reverse: Heracles pulls the hair of Hippolyte who holds the girdle aloft. *Ninth Labour*. (Numismatica Ars Classica, Auction 29, Lot 612)

say the two continents had been joined together and Heracles forced the cliffs apart creating a channel between them. Exasperated by the heat in Spain he fired an arrow at Helios, the sun god, but apologized afterwards. Impressed by Heracles' audacity Helios gave him his golden goblet, which was so big that Heracles used it as a vehicle to go to Erytheia. When he arrived there Othrus ran at him barking, but Heracles killed him with his club. He then struck Eurytion with his club, killing him. When

Geryon heard about it he hurried to meet the challenge, but Heracles killed him too by firing arrows at his three bodies. Some say he fired only one arrow that pierced all three bodies. Anyway he rounded up the cattle (Figure 8) for the journey to Greece.

Heracles returned to Greece via Libya, where the king was Antaeus, the son of Poseidon and Mother Earth. Antaeus forced strangers to wrestle with him, and he invariably defeated and killed them because whenever his body made



Figure 7 – Reverse of a Mexican 8-reales coin of Philip V, dated 1739. It shows the Pillars of Hercules with the Strait of Gibraltar and a crowned image of both sides of the globe between the pillars. Western Australia is clearly shown. The words on the pillars are PLUS ULTR (more beyond). (Ira & Larry Goldberg Auction 87, Lot 3381)

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Antiochus VII (138-129BC)
 silver tetradrachm, 16.16gms.
 Obv: Diademed head right.
 Rev: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΑΝΤΙΟΧΟΥ
 ΕΥΕΡΓΕΤΟΥ, Athena standing left
 holding Nike. Antioch mint.
 Refs: See Sear 7092, SC 2061.4d
Good Very Fine \$600

Antiochus VII was the Seleucid king who defeated the Parthian king Mithridates I and claimed back much of the East. While celebrating his victory, Phraates II, the son of Mithridates, raised another Parthian army and ambushed and killed Antiochus.



Figure 8 – Bronze drachm of Alexandria in Egypt. Obverse: head of Antoninus Pius, 138-161 AD. Reverse: Heracles and the cattle of Geryon. **Tenth Labour**. (Auctiones GmbH eAuction 22, Lot 53)



Figure 9 – Bronze coin of Tarsus. Obverse: bust of Caracalla, 198-217 AD. Reverse: Heracles lifting Antaeus. (Roma Numismatics, Auction May 2013, Lot 895)

contact with the earth his strength revived. Heracles tossed him to the ground and was amazed to see how his muscles swelled up. Realizing what was happening Heracles held him off the ground and squeezed him till he was dead. (Figure 9)

The **Eleventh Labour** was to fetch the apples of the Hesperides, who were the daughters of Atlas. He was a Titan who with the other Titans had fought against Zeus, the chief of the gods. When they were defeated Atlas was condemned to hold up the celestial globe on his shoulders. He was thought to reside in the Atlas Mountains in North Africa, and the myth probably arose from the

idea that high mountains supported the heavens. The apples were gold and they were the fruit of a tree that Mother Earth had given to Hera on her wedding, and it grew on the slopes of Mount Atlas. The tree had been entrusted to Atlas's daughters, and Hera set a serpent called Ladon to guard it. It was a golden apple that caused the Trojan War, but that is another story.

Heracles did not know what to do, so he sought the sea-god Nereus, who was an oracle. Heracles forced him to say how he could get the apples. He was told he must not pluck them himself but he should offer to relieve Atlas of his bur-

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Partners Saturday Night Dinner only: \$45.00

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Sunday morning: 9.00 am Resume conference

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Figure 10 – Etching, “Hercules and the Serpent Ladon,” by Antonio Tempesta and Nicolo Van Aelst, Italy 1608. (Wikimedia Commons)

den for a while so that he could get them. When Heracles made this offer to Atlas he said he was too afraid of Ladon. Heracles then went and shot Ladon with an arrow. In a drawing made in 1608 the artist imagined Ladon to be a dragon (Figure 10), but on an ancient Greek vase he looks like a large snake. (Figure

11) He also looks like a snake on a medallion from 200 AD. (Figure 12) What is surprising about this scene is how similar it is to pictures of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. (Figure 13) The similarity between the stories is probably due to the Phoenicians who colonized the coast of North Africa. They

were a Semitic people with roots in Mesopotamia where the story of Adam and Eve originated, but they also influenced Greek culture. It is likely that some of the mythology about Heracles came from the Phoenicians, from the stories about their god, Melqart, whom the Greeks equated with Heracles. (Figure 14)



Figure 11 – Attic red-figured hydria, c. 420-400 BC. It shows Ladon entwined around a tree from which the daughters of Atlas are plucking golden apples while being observed by Heracles. (Wikimedia Commons)

When Heracles killed Ladon Atlas accepted his offer. So Heracles bent down and took the weight of the heavens on his shoulders (Figure 15), and Atlas walked away pleased to be relieved of his burden. He returned with the apples that his daughters had plucked from the tree, but he now said that he would take them to Eurystheus himself. Realizing that Atlas would never return, Heracles pretended to agree and asked him to support the globe for just a minute while he put a pad on his shoulders.

Atlas was easily deceived and when he took on the tremendous weight Heracles grabbed the apples and ran.

The story of Heracles and the Hes-

perides differs from that of Adam and Eve in various ways. Instead of the serpent tempting Eve with an apple and rebellious ideas about good and evil,



Figure 12 – Bronze medallion of Perinthus in Thrace. Obverse: bust of Septimius Severus, 193-211 AD. Reverse: The serpent, Ladon, is entwined around the apple tree. Heracles stands on the left, and one of the Hesperides stands on the right. **Eleventh Labour.** (Numismatik Lanz München, Auction 102, Lot 698)



Figure 13 – Cast silver medal by Hans Reinhart the Elder, Bohemia, 1536, 66 mms. It was commissioned by Johann Frederick, duke of Saxony. Instead of the Hesperides it shows Eve reaching for an apple while Adam stands nearby. (Baldwin's Auction 67, Lot 2479)



Figure 14 – Sheqel of Tyre, 357-333 BC. Obverse: Melqart riding a hippocamp with waves below. Reverse: owl stands with crook and flail, which were Egyptian symbols, and they show how eclectic Phoenician culture was. (Gemini Action VII, Lot 596)



Figure 15 – Statue, "Atlas passing the celestial globe to Heracles," by J.M. Felix Magdalena. (Wikimedia Commons)

Heracles (the archetype of masculinity) just kills the serpent and gets the apples. (Figure 16)

The **Twelfth Labour** was to capture Cerberus (Greek: Kerberos), the dog that guarded the entrance to the Underworld. Before attempting this feat Heracles thought it wise to be initiated into the Eleusinian Mysteries, which were about Demeter, the goddess of the earth, and her daughter, Persephone, who was abducted by Hades, the god of the Underworld. He is also known as Pluto. Persephone's annual return to her mother

brings about the seasons. Heracles descended into the Underworld through a cave on a promontory in Laconia in the south of the Peloponnesus. He was accompanied by Hermes, who normally conducted the souls of the deceased to the Underworld, and because it was such a dangerous mission Athena went too. When they came to the river Styx, Charon the ferryman was so frightened when he saw Heracles' scowling face that he quickly rowed them across. Charon was the son of Nyx (also known as Nix), who was the goddess of darkness and night.

The ghosts that hovered about all fled except for Meleager, who had been one of the Argonauts, and Medusa who was a Gorgon, a horrible creature whose head was covered with snakes. Heracles



Figure 16 – Bronze coin of Tarsus. Obverse: bust of Gordian III, 238-244 AD. Reverse: Heracles stands with his club and holds the apples in his left hand while the serpent hangs dead in the tree. Presumably he has just whacked the serpent on the head with his club and grabbed the apples. This Heracles doesn't mess around. (Collection of St John's Cathedral, Brisbane)



Figure 19 – Bronze coin of Sebastopolis-Heracleopolis (modern Suluserai in northern Turkey). Obverse: bust of Geta as Caesar, 198-209 AD. Reverse: magnificent temple of Heracles. The balustrade prevented worshippers getting too close to the idol. (Jean Elsen & ses Fils S.A., Auction 117, Lot 380)



Figure 17 – Bronze medallion of Perinthus. Obverse: bust of Geta, 209-212 AD. Reverse: Heracles leading the three-headed dog, Cerberus, out of the underworld. **Twelfth Labour**. (Auctionshaus H.D. Rauch GmbH, Auction 82, Lot 410)



Figure 20 - Sestertius of Commodus minted at Rome in 192 AD. Obverse: head of Commodus wearing lion's skin. Reverse: Heracles' club dividing inscription: HERCVL ROMANO AVGV SC (to the Roman Hercules, the Augustus, by decree of the Senate). (Nomos Auction 8, Lot 234)



Figure 18 – Silver drachm of Troizen, c. 430-400 BC. Obverse: head of Athena. Reverse: trident of Poseidon. A conflict between Athena and Poseidon over Troizen was settled when the people decided to worship them both. (LHS Numismatics, Auction 96, Lot 1333.)



Figure 21 – A marble sarcophagus from the 3rd century AD in the National Museum of Rome. It shows nine labours of Heracles. From left: the Nemean Lion, the Lernaean Hydra, the Erymanthian Boar, the Ceryneian Hind, the Stymphalian Birds, the Girdle of Hippolyte, the Augian Stables, the Cretan Bull and the Mares of Diomedes. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 22 – Bronze coin of Sardes in Lydia, 2nd century AD. Heracles is on the obverse, while on the reverse Omphale stands naked except for the lion skin. The legend is *CAPAI ANQN* = of the people of Sardes. (Gemini Auction X, Lot 564)

drew his sword when he saw Medusa but Hermes explained that she was only a phantom.

Hades and Persephone came out to meet Heracles, but when he demanded the dog that was chained at the gates, Hades said he could have him only if he could master him without using club or arrows. Heracles grabbed the dog by the throat and immediately three ferocious heads grew out. But Heracles did not relax his grip until the dog was subdued. He then led Cerberus out of the Underworld (Figure 17) through a cave near Troizen in Argolis. Coins of Troizen from about 450 BC show the head of Athena, who was Heracles' helper. (Figure 18)

So the twelve labours were accomplished and eventually Heracles was taken up into the Olympian realm where he married Hebe, the goddess of youth. She was known to the Romans as *Juventas*, and there were several temples to her in the ancient world. Also there were temples to Heracles, who was now a god. (Figure 19) Some of the Roman emperors were particularly devoted to *Hercules*, notably *Commodus*, 177-192 AD, who identified with the god (Figure 20), and *Postumus*, 260-269 AD, who issued coins with the twelve labours on them. In 1977 Hans Voegtli discussed and illustrated almost all the coins of

Heracles' twelve labours in his book, which unfortunately is in German. It is entitled *Bilder der Heldenepen in der kaiserzeitlichen griechischen Münzprägung* (Images of the Epic Heroes in Greek Imperial Coinage). An additional coin was discovered by R.D. Weigel and published in ANSMN 31 (1986). It was minted at Nicaea in Bithynia. On the obverse there is the head of Geta (209-212 AD) and on the reverse Heracles swings a mattock to release a flow of water as in his fifth labour. Besides coins, Heracles was shown in paintings and statues, and even on sarcophagi. (Figure 21)

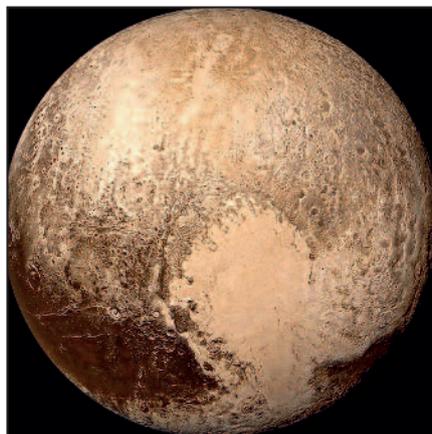


Figure 24 – Image of Pluto taken by the 'New Horizons' spacecraft. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 23 – Roman statue of Omphale and Heracles who wears a dress and holds spinning tools. (Wikimedia Commons)

In addition to his 12 labours Heracles had many other adventures, some of which appear on coins. Several ancient writers describe a strange episode during which Heracles was the slave of Omphale, Queen of Lydia. She wore his lion skin while he dressed in her clothes. (Figures 22 and 23) Modern transvestites should take heart from Heracles' behaviour in this instance.

Charon, Nix, Styx, Kerberos and Hydra are the names of the five moons of the dwarf-planet, Pluto, which was photographed by the NASA space-craft, *New Horizons*, in 2015. (Figure 24) Their names refer to the 12 labours of Heracles. This reference to Heracles is very appropriate because he accomplished apparently impossible tasks, and today human beings are set apparently impossible tasks: to go into space and travel to other worlds.