

The Heroes of Mythology

Academus Mythology Crash Course 2021

What is a Hero?

The word 'hero' has kept a consistent meaning since the days of antiquity, but who exactly is considered a hero is something that can change over time. The modern concept of a hero is something that is culturally specific and ever evolving.

In modern colloquial use, a hero could be almost anyone, including ordinary people. Generally a hero refers to someone who does good things or is representative of a positive morality that is worthy of emulation. It can also mean people who achieve things that are out of the ordinary. Variations that come to mind may be NHS heroes, military heroes, sporting heroes. Some may consider people they admire to be personal heroes.



'Game Changer' by anonymous artist Banksy (2020)

Modern Heroes

Our understanding of heroes in popular culture is heavily dominated by the 'superhero', a motif which does draw upon precedents set by figures from antiquity. Although the phrase 'superhero' has been in use since 1917, it was popularised by media, particularly the so-called 'Golden Age of Comic Books' from 1938 to 1956.

The Golden Age of Comic Books solidified in popular imagination what it meant to be a hero. The superhero archetype that formed during this era was deeply influenced by the catastrophic events of World War 2 and some have seen the desire for this new concept of the superhero as a reaction to fascism and to the technological and scientific advancements during the war that opened up new possibilities that had been unimaginable the generation before.



Ancient Greek Hero Cult

Stories of ancient Greek heroes were told not just as a form of entertainment, they also served an important role in a complex network of religious hero worship. Hero worship developed from ancestor worship, as many of the prominent heroes of antiquity were also founders of cities in addition to familial dynasties. Heroes varied in prominence and importance locally and were believed to occupy an important role in civic religious ritual for their designated sites. Unlike worship of deities, who were omnipotent, heroes were not believed to have ascended to Olympus and were still confined to the Earth. This emphasised the importance of local hero cult worship as particular heroes had special influence in the areas that held their tomb and helped cultivate a sense of civic identity. These dedicated hero tombs were known specifically as heroa.

In the Hellenistic era it became possible for individuals from living memory to be worshipped as heroes.



Ruins of a heroön, in Sagalassos, Turkey.

Are Heroes Immortal?

“It is clear in the epic, however, that the father of Achilles is mortal, and that this greatest of heroes must therefore be mortal as well. So, too, with all of the ancient Greek heroes: even though they are all descended in one way or another from the gods, however many generations removed, heroes are mortals, subject to death. No matter how many immortals you find in a family tree, the intrusion of even a single mortal will make all successive descendants mortal. Mortality, not immortality, is the dominant gene”

Gregory Nagy, ‘The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours’ (2013)

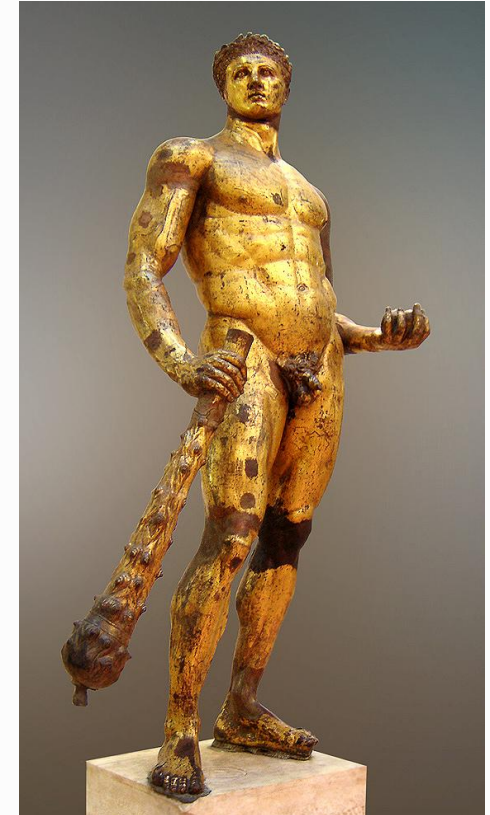


The Wrath of Achilles by Louis Édouard Fournier (1881)

What is an Ancient Mythological Hero?

The ancient hero however is a very different concept. Rather than being an ambitious everyman or a morally upstanding individual, an ancient Greek hero was situated in very specific parameters and was a particular class of individual. An ancient hero was always associated or somehow descended from the divine and must be endowed with some ability or quality that set them apart from the everyman. Ancient heroes were motivated not by a sense of positive morality or desire to protect or do good, but by their pursuit of glory, or **kleos**.

Kleos is derived from the Greek verb, **kluein** or 'to hear' as a crucial part of glory is how other people speak of you. It is not enough to achieve magnificent deeds, these deeds must be known and must be spoken of for you to truly be considered a hero. Ancient Greek concepts of the afterlife were complex, but it was widely believed that for most individuals personal consciousness stopped with death. It was therefore especially crucial for your deeds to be spoken of, so that could live on.



Gilded bronze statue of Heracles, 2nd century CE.

Cadmus

Cadmus is one of the earliest heroes in Greek mythology. Son of Phoenician royalty, brother of Europa, Cadmus was descended from the god Poseidon on his father's side. Cadmus is most famed for slaying a dragon and creating the Spartoi, the founding of Thebes, and for bringing the Phoenician alphabet to the Greeks who used it to create their own language.

Cadmus' marriage to Harmonia, in some traditions the daughter of Ares and Aphrodite, is credited as the first mortal marriage ceremony in the Greek world and was celebrated by all the gods. However the union of the couple brought many troubles and many of their children suffered misfortunes including his unfortunate descendant, Oedipus.



Cadmus fighting the Dragon by Hendrick Goltzius (1573 – 1617)

Pursuit of Europa and the Delphic Oracle

Cadmus' sister, Europa, had been kidnapped by Zeus. Cadmus' father had sent him to retrieve her and was instructed not to return without her. Cadmus travelled west, with various companions depending on the source tradition. While searching for his sister, Cadmus came to the sacred oracle at Delphi. He consulted the oracle to ask if his sister could ever be retrieved and was instructed to give up his search, in part because it was against the will of the Gods.

Instead, the oracle instructed Cadmus to follow a sacred cow, marked with a half moon on her flank, until the cow laid down to rest. There Cadmus was to found a great city, which would become the ancient city of Thebes. The area around Thebes, Boeotia, derives its name from 'bous', ancient Greek for cow.



Cadmus Asks the Delphic Oracle Where He Can Find his Sister, Europa by Hendrick Goltzius (1558 – 1617)

The Dragon, Thebes, and the Spartoi

Cadmus intended to sacrifice the cow in honour of the Gods. He sent two of his companions to a nearby river to draw water, however his companions were killed by a water dragon that protected the river. Cadmus then slayed the dragon and was told by the goddess Athena to pluck the dragon's teeth and sew them into the ground. From these teeth sprung the Spartoi, five of whom became the legendary founders of the royal households of Thebes. With the help of the Spartoi Cadmus founded the city of Thebes, and the acropolis of the city was known as the Cadmeia in his honour.

Unfortunately for Cadmus, the dragon that he slayed had been sacred to the war god Ares. According to some traditions Cadmus was required to serve Ares for eight years to atone for the death of the dragon. After eight years of servitude Cadmus was rewarded with Ares' daughter, Harmonia, in marriage.



Cadmus Sowing the Dragon's teeth, by Maxfield Parrish (1908)

Enduring Misfortunes

At Cadmus and Harmonia's wedding many gods were present and the couple were gifted divine items, including the unfortunate Necklace of Harmonia. This piece of jewellery crafted by Hephaestus and cursed to bring misfortune to the descendants of whoever it was gifted to, although it allowed whichever women who wore it to retain her youth and beauty. As a result of this, or perhaps lingering punishment on Cadmus for his slaying of a sacred dragon, all four of Cadmus and Harmonia's daughters, Ino, Agave, Autonoe and Semele met tragic ends.

Cadmus and his wife had a strange end. According to one version, while lamenting on his enduring misfortunes, Cadmus announced that if the gods were still punishing him on account of their fondness for the slain dragon he wished he could also be as loved as the dragon. For this Cadmus was transformed into a serpent and Harmonia, seeing her husband's transformation, wished to join him. In other versions the pair are transformed after their deaths.



Harmonia and the Serpent
by Evelyn de Morgan (1877)

Bellerophon

Bellerophon was a Corinthian hero, son of either Glaucus or Poseidon. He was a renowned hero in antiquity for his exploits and was the ancestor of many other known heroes of the ancient world.

He is mentioned by Homer as his grandsons, Glaucus and Sarpedon, both fought in the Trojan War.

Bellerophon is most known for taming the divine winged horse Pegasus and for slaying the fearsome chimera, a monster usually depicted as a lion with a protruding goat's head and a tail that becomes a serpent. Bellerophon's fall from grace was immortalised in a play by Euripides, which is now lost.



Bellerophon on Pegasus spears the Chimera, Attic red-figure epinetron, 425–420 BC

Bellerophon's Quest

Bellerophon's quest began when he was exiled for murder, having killed either his brother or some other enemy. Bellerophon took shelter with King Proetus of Tiryns, who cleansed him of his crime. While staying there, the King's wife became enamoured with him. When Bellerophon turned down her advances, the Queen told her husband that Bellerophon had attempted to seduce her. The King was furious but was unable to harm Bellerophon as he was protected by the sacred right of *xenia*, or guest friendship.

To get around this, Proetus sent Bellerophon to visit his father in law, Iobates King of Lycia, with a note telling the King to kill Bellerophon for his attempted seduction of the Queen. King Iobates did not read this note immediately and treated Bellerophon as a guest. By the time he read the note, Bellerophon was again protected by *xenia* so the King sought an alternative. He sent Bellerophon on a seemingly fatal mission: to kill the Chimera.



The Chimera on a red-figure Apulian plate, c. 350–340 BC

Pegasus and the Chimera

Bellerophon began his quest and as he travelled he met the famed Corinthian seer Polyeidos. Polyeidos prophesied that in order to be successful he would need the companionship of Pegasus, the divine winged horse. In order to gain this help Bellerophon slept in the temple to Athena. There are different versions of exactly how Bellerophon was able to gain Pegasus' assistance, either through the help of Athena or Poseidon.

Bellerophon flew to the Chimera, which had been terrorising the land of nearby Caria. At first Bellerophon faced difficulties fighting the Chimera on account of its fiery breath until he had an idea. Bellerophon took a large block of lead and shoved it into the creature's mouth so that as the monster attempted to blow fire the lead melted and blocked the Chimera's throat, suffocating it.



Bellerophon on the back of Pegasus, in Hamilton Wright Mabie, 'Myths Every Child Should Know' (1914)

Other Quests and Downfall

Bellerophon returned victorious, but Iobates was disappointed. He sent Bellerophon on a number of other quests intended to kill him, such as battling the Amazons, and eventually sent assassins. Bellerophon was victorious against all opponents and eventually Iobates relented, giving Bellerophon his daughter Philonoe in marriage.

Bellerophon began to grow arrogant as stories of his heroic deeds circulated. He believed that he was owed a spot amongst the Gods for his bravery and achievements, and rode Pegasus in an attempt to storm Mount Olympus. He was unsuccessful, and fell from Pegasus back down to Earth. Bellerophon, who was blinded in the fall, lived the rest of his life in obscurity and misery.

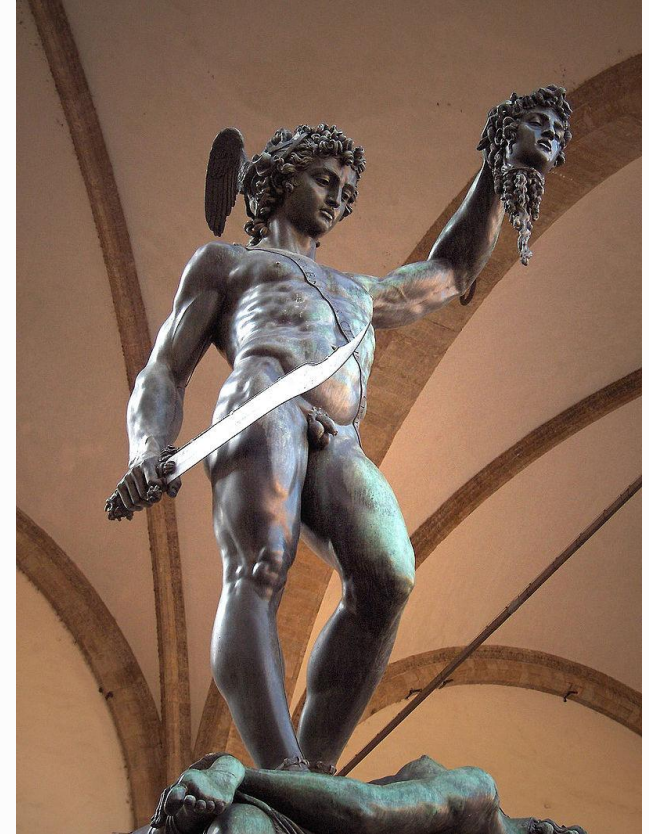


Bellerophon riding Pegasus and chasing the Chimera, Red-figure plate, c. 350 – 300 BCE.

Perseus

Along with Cadmus and Bellerophon, Perseus was one of the older great Greek heroes. He is best known as the legendary founder of Mycenae and as an ancestor of several heroic dynasty. Perseus' greatest heroic deed is arguably his killing of the gorgon Medusa, a story which has been wildly influential in popular culture. He is also well known for his killing of the sea monster Cetus and rescuing the princess Andromeda, whom he later married.

Perseus had a long and successful life, and is the direct ancestor of many other great heroes and cultures. Through his son Perses he is alleged to be the ancestor of the Achaemenid Persian royal family. He is an ancestor of Helen of Troy, the twins Castor and Pollux, Clytemnestra, Penelope and Telemachus, and numerous other prominent figures from ancient Greek history and mythology. According to ancient biographies, he is both the half brother and great-grandfather of the great hero Heracles.



Perseus with the Head of Medusa by Benvenuto Cellini (1554)

Conception and Prophecy

One of the most famous stories regarding Perseus is the prophecy surrounding his conception. Acrisus, King of Argos, was disappointed with his lack of sons. He consulted the famed oracle at Delphi to ask if he would ever have a son, but was told that while he would not his daughter Danaë would and this son would be responsible for Acrisus' death. Wishing to avoid this, the King locked his daughter in a tower with no doors or windows, only a skylight. Zeus desired Danaë and visited her in the form of a shower of gold, which resulted in a pregnancy.

Acrisus, afraid of the prophecy but unwilling to directly harm his daughter, ordered her and the child to be cast into the sea in a chest. With the help of Poseidon, the infant Perseus and his mother safely washed up on the shores of Seriphos which was ruled by King Polydectes.

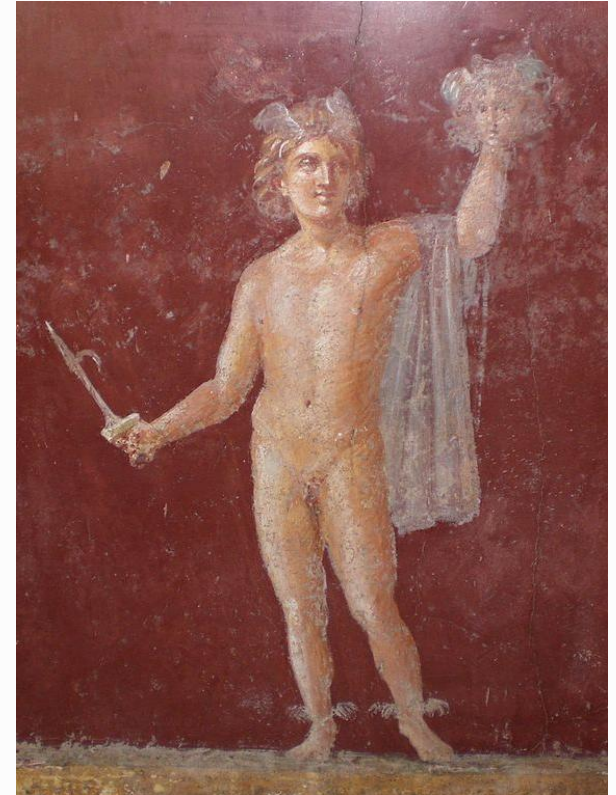


Danaë by Gustav Klimt (1907)

The Gorgon Medusa

When Perseus was a young man, the King Polydectes was interested in marrying Danaë, who did not return his affections. Perseus protected his mother from the king's advances, until the King sent him on a quest intended to kill him: to slay the only mortal gorgon, Medusa.

Athena assisted Perseus in this task and instructed him to visit the Hesperides, sibling nymphs who guarded divine weapons. To find them Perseus visited the Graeae, three sisters related to the Gorgons who shared only one eye and one tooth between them. By taking the eye hostage Perseus learned the location of the Hesperides. From them he took divine weapons and armour that would help him on his quest: a divine bag to hold Medusa's head, a harpe, the helm of Hades, and winged sandals. Using these Perseus slayed Medusa, from whose body sprung Pegasus and Chrysaor.

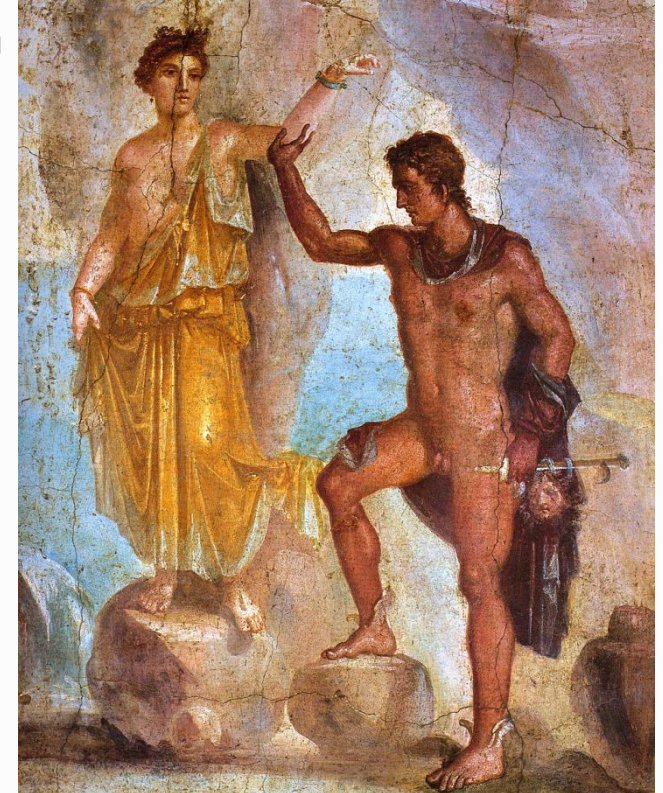


Roman fresco depicting Perseus with the head of Medusa

Andromeda and Cetus

While travelling back to Seriphos, Perseus stayed in Aethiopia which was ruled by King Cepheus and Queen Cassiopeia. The Queen had previously boasted that her daughter Andromeda was as beautiful as the Nereids, sea nymphs and daughters of Poseidon, and this had angered the god of the sea. Poseidon sent a great sea serpent, Cetus, to terrorise Aethiopia and the oracle of Ammon stated the only way to appease the god and stop the terror was to offer Andromeda as a sacrifice.

Hearing this, Perseus sought to slay the monster Cetus and upon doing so claimed Andromeda's hand in marriage. A fight ensued as Perseus was challenged by Andromeda's previously betrothed, Phineus, and Perseus petrified Phineus using Medusa's head. When Perseus returned to Seriphos the King Polydectes had not stopped his advances on Danaë and so Perseus killed him with Medusa's head, leaving Polydectes' brother as king.



Roman fresco depicting Perseus freeing Andromeda

Fulfilling the Prophecy

During Perseus' later travels he fatally crossed paths with his grandfather, Acrisus. There are several different versions of this tale. In the most common versions Acrisus is killed by Perseus by accident. Several versions involve an athletic contest of some kind, usually a discus throwing event, where Acrisus is struck by a projectile thrown by Perseus and killed accidentally. In some versions Acrisus is there just visiting, but in others he has gone into voluntary exile from his kingdom after hearing of his grandson's fame.

In every version Perseus is struck with guilt and shame over his grandfather's death. Feeling unworthy to assume his place as King, Perseus swaps kingdoms with his cousin Megapenthes and becomes king of Tiryns, while the other becomes king of Argos.



Amphorae depicting Perseus rescuing Andromeda from the sea serpent Cetus