

The Labours of Heracles (labours 8, 9 and 10)

The Mares of Diomedes

Heracles' eighth labour took him to Thrace, which today would be the North of Greece. The people of Thrace in those days were very warlike, and none more so than King Diomedes. Now this king had four horses known as the Mares of Diomedes. Their names were Podagros the fast, Lampon the shining, Xanthos the blond, and Deimos the terrible. They were totally mad and quite uncontrollable – quite the wildest horses that there ever were. In fact, they were man-eating horses. Nobody had ever succeeded in riding them – until one night. Heracles crept into their stables and tied their mouths shut. Then he tied the four horses together and rode off on the back of Deimos while leading the others behind them. King Eurystheus was impressed to see Heracles riding on the back of a man-eating horse, but he did not want the horrid creatures for himself. He ordered the hero to set them free on Mount Olympus so that Zeus could decide what to do with them.

The Belt of Hippolyte

Heracles' ninth labour was a more delicate mission. The daughter of King Eurystheus was going to be 18 years old, and he had promised her a very special birthday present – a particularly beautiful belt studded with precious stones. The only problem was that this belt belonged to Hippolyte, the Queen of the Amazons. The Amazons were a fierce tribe of women fighters who lived on the shores of the Black Sea. The belt had been given to Hippolyte by her own father, Ares the god of war. King Eurystheus would never have promised such a gift to his daughter if he did not have Heracles to fetch it for him. Now, Heracles might have been a strongman, but he was no fool. He understood that it is always better to try talking before turning to war. He met Queen Hippolyte on her royal boat and he turned on all his charm. The warlike queen took a liking to the man of muscle, and she agreed to give him her belt. Hera, as always, was keen to cause trouble for Heracles, so she thought that this was all way too easy. She appeared amongst the Amazon guards and called out that Heracles was trying to kidnap their queen. They rushed in with their swords drawn and Heracles did not get away without a fight he had not wished for. He took the belt back to Eurystheus in time for his daughter's birthday and she was very pleased with her present.

The Cattle of Geryon

Heracles' labours were getting further and further away from home. For his next task, he had to cross the Libyan desert to get to the other side of Africa. His orders were to get the cattle of Geryon, a three-headed monster. Getting

there was worse than the deed itself, for the rays of the sun burned Heracles' skin each day until it blistered. He wasn't used to taking punishment without giving as good as he got, and so Heracles fired one of his own arrows up into the sun. Apollo, the god of the sun, was so impressed that he appeared in his chariot and drove Heracles to the shore of the sea. There he gave him his golden cup which floated like a boat, and Heracles rowed out to the island where Geryon and his cattle lived. As he came onto the beach, a double-headed guard dog charged at him. He hit the dog's heads with his club. Next three-headed Geryon came at him, with three swords and three shields, all growing out of one body. He did not bother Heracles much – our hero shot the monster with one of his arrows which were poisoned with the blood of the hydra. He loaded the cattle onto a ship, and sailed them back to the mainland.