

ALCHEMICAL  
MEANING OF THE  
TWELVE LABORS  
OF HERCULES





## INTRODUCTION

This is about Hercules and his twelve labors, or trials, mainly from an alchemical point of view. They can be looked at from an astrological point of view too. Here is the background to this Greek myth.

Hercules is the son of the king of the gods, Zeus ('Jupiter' in Latin) and a human woman called Alcmene. As with all of Zeus' amorous affairs, his wife, the queen of the gods was very jealous about it. For example, after Zeus turned Io (another one of his lovers) into a cow to try and conceal from her, Hera set one of the giant titans, who had a hundred eyes, to watch her so that she couldn't shape-shift back again. There are many stories of Zeus' lovers (female and male) being persecuted by Hera. But it was the children of Zeus, by mortals, that Hera especially hated – and none more so than Hercules.

It is interesting how many Greek heroes have 'eus' at the end of their names. It means 'of Zeus'; so there's Perseus, Theseus, Zethus, etc. Remember, this is not Latin, not 'deo' as in 'god' – this is Greek, meaning 'of Zeus'. What is strange about Hercules name ('Herakles', to be exact) is that it translates as: 'Hera's gift' (or 'the gift of Hera').

Even as a baby, in his cot, Hera tries to have him killed by two big snakes which try to strangle him. Hercules was famous for his strength. (For those of you who believe tv series, Hercules is now clean-shaven and films in New Zealand).

Of course, Hercules is a hero and a 'hero' means 'a noble person'. The Sanskrit meaning is a 'refined person' – one who tries to live their dharma, to fulfill what their soul came into incarnation to do.

Hercules has lots of trouble. But, like in the Arthurian myth – or in the song: '*You have to search for the hero inside yourself*' – this is what spiritual quest is all about. It is the unfoldment of the spiritual qualities that lay dormant within us.

For the sake of brevity, I am going to use anthropomorphic language to describe spiritual evolution. God doesn't want childish people for company; neither does he want worshippers (in the sense that most people mean 'worship'). If God wanted worshippers, there are the Angels of Praise, who are better than any earthly choirs. The saying is: 'God wants good company', meaning 'experienced noble souls' who are able to appreciate and understand what He does and why.

Some of you have brought up children or have looked after them. They are ok as company for a day or two but – after a while – you get starved for adult company, you start to go a bit stir-crazy; you get desperate for some intelligent conversation.

Hercules is one of the most famous and complex of the hero figures. What is very interesting about him, particularly to modern people, is this:



at one point he falls under some kind of spell and he spends eight years living and dressed as a woman, convinced that he is a woman.

Then, there is Hyacinth, one of Hercules' young male lovers. This is during the expedition with the Argonauts on the quest for the Golden Fleece (which is a symbol for the Philosophers' Stone). By the way, the entire Argo myth is an alchemical legend. While they berth at an island, Hyacinth looks into a pool and the water spirits pull him in, and drown him. Hercules can't find Hyacinth's body – and so he remains, mourning, and the Argonauts leave without him. Hercules has several female lovers in his story too.

What makes Hercules interesting is that it is an archetype with both male and female energies; so it teaches that the 'hero' is a human being. Not some over-the-top Conan the Barbarian figure – but a human with sensitivity. Each human being, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation, has the capacity to be noble.

The twelve labors were forced on Hercules by his very own cousin, Eurystheus, who was king of one of the many small Greek kingdoms. Because Hercules owed him a debt (he was vowed to him), Eurystheus gives him a series of tasks, or labors, in the hope that each one would defeat Hercules. So, the labors became increasingly harsh. In alchemical lore, each of these twelve labors enshrines a teaching about our evolution – about the Great Work.

You must understand that most of these teachings are about purifying the subconscious mind. The earlier stage is purifying your personal subconscious mind. At a deeper level there is the Collective Unconscious, which contains a record of the whole history of humanity, and therefore holds the fears and pains that any incarnate species has. These too have to be overcome if the individual is going to become 'more than human', become Self-realized.



## THE FIRST LABOR THE NEMEAN LION



Hercules gets given these labors to fulfill. The first one is **Slaying the Nemean Lion**. Whenever I say things like ‘Nemean’, it simply means the place-name where the labor happened. There was this big lion in Nemea, killing people and livestock, so Hercules was sent to deal with it. He kills the lion, and he strips it of its hide which he makes into a garment – like a hooded cloak. If you see pictures or statues of Hercules he is usually shown with this lion’s head on his head and the pelt of the lion falling behind him like a cloak.

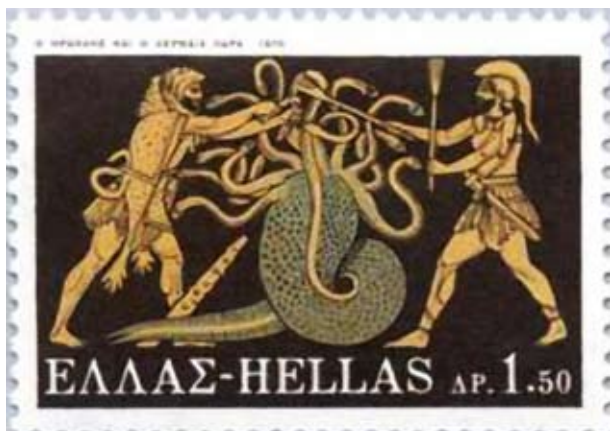
Thinking of this labor in terms of Key 8 of Tarot, ‘Strength’, then the meaning becomes clear. The taming of the Red Lion of Kundalini by purified Shakti. Hercules has conquered the lion, and now he has added its strength to his own. So the labor of conquering the Nemean lion is simply mastery of animal appetite stored in the subconscious. You might be surprised to find how quickly people, who are spiritual practitioners to a certain degree, stop being spiritual if you put them on a fast from food.

Once a physical appetite is challenged (even in our society where “I can always get lunch later”), the temper of the beast will snarl. This goes back to times when people didn’t know where their next meal was coming from, or what this year’s harvest was going to be like.

It is a big challenge. You should see some would-be practitioners first thing in the morning, before they have their coffee or whatever fix they have – not quite a wild beast, but you wouldn’t want to get too close to them (chuckle).



## THE SECOND LABOR THE HYDRA



The second labor is **The Destruction of the Hydra**. The Hydra was a nine-headed serpent, whose poison polluted the land, and killed animals and humans. Hercules was sent to kill it. He used his sword (gifted to him by Hermes-Mercury, the analytic mind), but he found himself in trouble, because every time that he cut off one of the Hydra's heads, two would grow to replace it. Added to which, the Hydra's central head was immortal.

In the end he dealt with this by using a sword and a torch. Here you see the skilled use of Kundalini. He used the sword to cut off the head and then he cauterized the neck before a new head, or two could grow. This is extremely alchemical, using the analytic mind to identify the problem and then using the Secret Fire to transmute it. What of the immortal head? The Hydra's immortal head represents the 'prime obscuration', the principal problem that we bring into an incarnation to work out. Well, Hercules cut off the immortal head and then put a rock on top of it; and, of course, the rock is a symbol of the Philosophers' Stone.

So again we are dealing with these obscurations, it is because of these obscurations that you physically die. It is these qualities – that are born out of anger, fear, hate and lust – that give rise to death if they are not dealt with. They are all prime examples of dualistic consciousness. After all, you can't get angry if you are completely fulfilled; or be ignorant if you are all knowing; or obsessively desire something if you have access to everything. So these mental habits 'obscure' (block) the light of our Divine Nature, preventing us from recognizing the Eternal Self. These obscurations are what cause us to keep being reborn into short-lived, suffering lives – until we deal with them.

The heads of the Hydra being constantly replaced represents the fact that until obscurations are dealt with – at their root – they will keep reappearing, and multiply. We end up not just fearing only one thing – or desiring one thing or hating just one thing – but many things. Just like the wall of thorns surrounding Sleeping Beauty's castle – but that's another story!

The prime obscuration is that we are deluded, we mistake the false for the Real. The Philosophers' Stone represents the perfect union of our personal consciousness with Supreme Consciousness; when that happens the prime obscuration is overcome.

The venom of the Hydra was the most fatal poison in Greek myth. Why this is important is that Hercules then dips the heads of his arrows into the poison of the Hydra. Later this venom



### THE THIRD LABOR THE ERYMANTHEAN BOAR

accidentally kills a friend (unskillful use of Kundalini's power, through careless thought). Yet, later still, the Hydra's venom is what makes Hercules into an immortal.



On Mount Erymanthus there is a giant boar, which is ravaging all the countryside around, and so Hercules is sent to subdue it. (It is important to notice that he is not sent to kill the boar.) After a long chase, Hercules drives the boar into a snow-drift, captures and binds it. He then brings the live wild-pig back to his cousin. Frightened, King Eurystheus hides in a metal vase to get away from it. Hercules, knowing that Eurystheus is inside the vase, jokingly pretends that he is going to drop the boar into it. Eurystheus cries out – and so gives away where he is hiding.



This **Labor of the Erymanthian Boar** is all about taming the sex impulse. The original Hebrew wording of the Seventh Commandment, ‘thou shalt not commit adultery’, is literally, ‘thou shalt do no piggish thing’. In Judaism, pigs are regarded as unclean, so they are used as symbols of impurity. Notice that this commandment is linked to Netzach, the seventh Sphere on the Tree of Life. But we must not get hung up here. The teaching is about ‘taming’ the sexual force, it is not about suppressing or denying it. Sex is holy! It is a manifestation of the Divine’s desire to experience delight. In truth, sex is every bit as holy as the Song of the Angels, and the Samadhi (the ‘Great Bliss’) of the Sages.

Alchemy is about taming, sublimating, the energy that usually expresses itself as sexual activity. It is the raising of the Libido to experience higher aspects of creativity and longer-lasting joy. To understand the wisdom portrayed in this labor, we need to read its symbolism. In Hermetic symbolism, the subconscious awareness (mind-stuff) is represented as water; usually by a free-flowing stream or river. It is a good symbol because the subconscious is always active beneath the surface mind, and it will pour itself into anything to which we give our attention. The Libido is part of the ever-active subconscious. Snow is frozen water, the water has been transformed, its flowing movement has been arrested, and now it stays in one place. In this way, snow represents the state when the mind-stuff has been transmuted and stilled – when it is resting

in its Self. That is, when the tremendous force of the Libido is directed to the Non-dual State, into Cosmic Consciousness.

Hercules does not ‘kill’ the Boar (the pig), he drives it into a snow-drift. In other words, he directs it into a place where it can no longer be destructive (there is always a violence/death connotation with sex). Now the pig is ‘tamed’, it is obedient and helpful. So much so, that Hercules can now playfully use the Boar as part of a joke – because it is no longer dangerous.

The ‘king’ hidden inside the Vase of the Art represents our hidden royal potential. So, the sublimated Libido – the Kundalini – reveals the ‘royal’ (Divine) presence.

Incidentally, Greek myth often contains influences from Ancient Egypt. This is because the Greek sages went to Egypt to undergo initiation there. This particular labor of Heracles is related to the struggle of Horus and Set (Typhon).



## THE FOURTH LABOR THE AUGEAN STABLES



The fourth labor of Hercules is **The Cleansing of the Augean Stables**. This meant he had to clean out the stables (cattle-yard) of a large herd of beautiful cattle, which belonged to a Hellenic king. King Augeias was the wealthiest man on earth, in terms of flocks and herds. He must have had a large herd of cattle because the story says there were 512 stud-bulls alone.

The dung in the stables hadn't been cleansed away for years. They were knee-deep in cattle manure. Although this didn't seem to disturb the cattle, there was so much of it that it was spreading disease through the region. (A similar thing has happened in modern-day Holland – the Netherlands – where the manure from the vast number of farmed animals has poisoned the soil.) So you can see that Eurystheus' idea in giving Hercules this trial, was to shame him, and making him spend a long time shoveling bullshit (to be blunt about it).

But when Hercules gets to the Augeian Stables he says that he will cleanse them totally in one single day! But nobody believes him.

So, Hercules swears the first and last vow of his lifetime, swearing to accomplish the labor before sunset.

What Hercules did was to divert a river to flow through the stables and wash all the manure away. This way, he cleansed the stable in a day, restored the region to health, without even soiling his little finger.

What is this strange myth telling us? What Alchemical teaching does it hold? Alchemically, the Cleansing of the Augean stables is the purification of the subconscious mind by 'washing' it free from the muck of suppressed desires, un-forgiven hurts, unacknowledged pains, and the automatic negative emotional reactions that pollute it. Cattle are animals – symbolic of the habitual lower mind. Cattle are also social animals; so this legend is telling us about the existence of the beliefs, taboos and judgments that our personal-subconscious has been imprinted with, by our societies, cultures, religions, classes, families and our genders.

Now, the purely psychological method would be to pick up in turn, each hurt, pain, or desire, for analysis. Symbolically this is like wading into the dung-filled stables, picking up each dung-pat, breaking it up in your hands, to see what's inside. It is a very long process – and you also get all the emotional crap over you in the process.





## THE FIFTH LABOR THE STYMPHALIAN BIRDS

When people start authentic spiritual work, they discover things deep inside that shock them; often just suppressed desire. And in most cases, the reason it was suppressed is because our family, or tribe, told us that it was wrong. But later, we may discover there was nothing wrong with it at all, quite harmless really. We are so horrified because of our upbringing (“How can I have such a terrible thought?”). It is just part of the negative patterns in the Collective Unconscious. The human mind is like a radio set. It is receiving all the time. You shouldn’t blame yourself, as if you were the source of origination; see it for what it is. All thoughts, feelings and desires are as fleeting as ‘writing on water’. They only have to power to hurt and cripple us if we give them that power by believing in them. It all has to do with the growing ability to distinguish between Divine Law and human laws (which are often just mores). We should see the wisdom in alchemical maxim about: heating our copper (desire) until it becomes white (Divine).

Hercules shows what the Alchemist should do – (for Alchemist, read the ‘hero’, the ‘one who dares to go within’). By understanding the nature of consciousness, and the transient nature of thoughts, desires and feelings, we allow the river of consciousness itself to flow through, unimpeded. A flowing river carries away silt and rubbish – resulting in a clear life-giving flow. We can then skillfully turn the manure into rich compost, and so make our inner kingdoms fertile and beautiful.



Hercules’ next labor is to **Kill the Stymphalian Birds**, a flock of large man-eating birds of prey. Legend says, they were the size of ibises, and had metal beaks, claws and feathers. Hercules uses his venom-dipped arrows to kill them.

These man-eating birds represent the destructive powers of air, in other words, evil habits connected with the use of the Life-Breath. The Life-Breath here doesn’t just mean breathing, it means the use of Air (vibrating the vocal cords), resulting in speech. There are great evils that are caused by the power of speech. Every single day, millions of lies, falsehoods, spites and vicious words are spoken. (In this day-and-age of mass communication, there may well more wicked applications of Speech than ever before.) These are all distortions, negative uses, of the power of the all-creative Word. The power to speak is derived from the Holy Life-Breath. The Tarot symbolizes this sacred power of Speech by ‘The Chariot’, and Eastern practice calls it Mantra.



Alchemically, it is very informative to see that Hercules uses the ‘venom’ of his own transmuted issues (when he conquered the Hydra) to overcome evil thought and speech. The Hydra (with the nine heads, that kept multiplying) represents the illusions and complexes stored in the subconscious mind, that are the result of our faulty interpretation of sense experience. Sense experience is simply: “That is cold, and I don’t like it”. Sense experience is simply the information of the physical senses to the subconscious mind. But then our complexes kick in and give a biased interpretation: “He is black, so I don’t like him”, or, “Something unpleasant happened to me with an Italian, therefore all Italians are bad”. In other words, the illusions and complexes stored in the personal subconscious come from faulty interpretations of sense experience.

You can see that the correct interpretation of senses’ data is a mark of maturity; and socially it is a mark of civilization. As a child you went to a dentist, a barber, a doctor etc. – and often you didn’t like the experience, so you squirmed and cried. But then you learnt, through experience, that it really was for your own good. If you have ever had severe toothache, you realize that the pain is much greater compared to what the dentist might do to you. But, if you had followed the conclusions based on your sense experience, you would have left it, and suffered tremendously. We have all learnt to do some things – even though our comfort-sense says “No”, because, through the higher power of

thought, we transmuted our habitual responses that were based solely on sensory experience.

The Stymphalian Birds are symbolic of thoughts that are grouped together due to associations based on fear, hate, and negative desire. These thoughts (mental chatter) express themselves as vicious speech: judgments, gossip, and lies.

It was because Hercules had dealt with his own prime obscuration – when he mastered the immortal head of the Hydra –, that he was able to deal with ignorant patterns in the storehouse of his subconscious.

By having realized his True Nature (God) – the indwelling center of his being – Hercules had the means to transmute anything in his psychological and physical makeup, as well as making his environment wholesome too. (Notice how the success of each labor doesn’t just defeat ‘the monster’, it also releases the surrounding region from terror or pain – all this is symbolic of Hercules’ own environment, of his neighborhood.)

All authentic change is from within. That is why God will always ultimately win, because the Divine changes us from inside out. The world tries to change us from the outside in; this is why, despite even noble reforms, the same problems will re-surface again later on.



## THE SIXTH LABOR THE CRETAN BULL

Like Hercules, practitioners of Alchemy ‘go within’ – into the inner realm of archetype and legend – there to defeat and to make wholesome all the negative subconscious patterns that prevent life from being wonderful and grace-filled.



Hercules’ next trial is to **Capture the Cretan Bull**. Some versions of this legend say this bull was the same creature that Zeus sent to rescue Europa from her enemies. She rode on the bull’s back as it swam across the sea, to a new land, that was subsequently named after her – Europe!

This labor is another teaching about control and skilled use of sexuality. The labor of the Erymanthian Boar was about sexual impulses, but this labor of the Cretan Bull is about the power that fuels sexuality itself, the force that drives it.

Our sexual impulses are stirred by sensory stimuli that have habitual responses that we have made/acquired: “Oh, that person is arousing me (they remind me of someone I was with once)” or, “Oh, I did that once and it was pleasurable, (so I must do it again)”. In an extreme case it becomes a fixation, a kink: “I’ve always got to do it dressed like this (because when I first did it in these kind of clothes it was a most intense experience)”.



These sexual impulses come up at odd moments. It is so habitual, that now it is automatic and you are not even aware that you are actually doing it. Controlling sex power, is about being conscious of what is going on with the libido. It doesn't automatically mean suppressing it either. It means not wasting its power on idle escapism – “Oh this job is boring! What can I do to relieve the monotony? Oh look, who's that? I'd like to ...” If you loath your job, use the power of imagination to vision what you want to do, and charge that image with all the inner passion and force, that otherwise gets wasted in escapist fantasies. This is an aspect of Alchemical sublimation, to ‘borrow strength from the eagle’. Interestingly, sometimes in this legend the Cretan Bull was described as breathing fire, like a dragon. It all about redirecting the fiery Life-Power to the upper centers of creativity and mastery.

Notice that this Labor is assigned to Taurus which is associated with the Throat chakra – the centre for imagination and higher knowledge. Taurus is portrayed in Tarot as Key 5, ‘The Hierophant’, and it is ruled Venus which is a sublimated force (imagination).

Why does Hercules have to capture the bull? To place it into the field of *Cheth* (this Hebrew letter means ‘a field’) so the bull is enclosed now – and therefore it becomes domesticated. This represents control of the chaotic forces of the unconscious – directing their strength to acquire power – like powerful bulls yoked to a plough

give the strength to prepare the field for harvest. In Alchemy these powerful forces are not denied or rejected – they are accepted, understood, and so tamed; here is the path to true Self-realization.



## THE SEVENTH LABOR THE MARES OF DIOMEDES



Hercules then has to **Capture the Savage Mares of Diomedes** (mares being female horses). Diomedes was a bandit king, who would kill his unsuspecting guests and feed their bodies to the four horses of his chariot. Hercules stuns Diomedes with his club, then feeds his still-living flesh to the mares.

A very gruesome tale, but is it preposterous? Sadly not. ‘Mad Cow Disease’ was the result of the bodies of dead cattle being made into ‘feed’ for living cattle, thus turning vegetarian cattle into flesh-eating cannibals.

The horses are symbols of solar energy, in both Vedic and Hellenic symbolism horses are symbols of the Sun. The domestication of the horse was a quantum leap in human history. It enabled humans to travel on the wide-open spaces that were too dangerous for people on foot; and to lay claim to vast territories. (Both the Aryans and ancient Greeks were ‘horse masters’.) In Greek myth, the Chariot of the Sun (the Gammadion), was drawn by four horses (the Four Seasons), and driven by Phoebus, or the Titan Helios.

So the horses are symbols of the solar energy being utilized to advance culture and development. The man-eating mares of Diomedes represent destructive use of that form-making power. The misuse of Atomic Energy is a clear example. Gun-powder – originally made for fire-work displays in ancient China – is another example. There are many discoveries, intended for the betterment of humankind, which have been made destructive through misapplied human creativity, for example guns, missiles, recreational drugs, tobacco industry. Sometimes, human creativity can be its own worst enemy.

You see in this legend’s symbolism that the horses are mares (feminine symbols of the animal subconscious) who devour humans. They are destructive aspects of the solar power expressed through human creativity. Some modern art has gone along that path – the German artist who put human body-parts in Perspex, or a slaughtered cow displayed as ‘art’.

After progressing to a certain point, a society or culture often begins to lose its drive, becoming *effete* (meaning ‘powerless’, ‘unable to create anything noble’). Then the culture either becomes over-sophisticated – like ornate Baroque – or regresses to levels that were previously outgrown.

An example is disharmonic music. It does not create melodic harmonies that stir the finer emotions and uplift; instead it seeks to shock and to ‘break up’ – a destructive impulse.



## THE EIGHTH LABOR THE ARCADIAN HIND

It's rather childish and rebellious. It is reacting against what went before for its own sake, not because there is any new vision there to inspire the Soul. Modern often sees itself as a commentary, often as satire.

True art, great art, uplifts the beholder. It doesn't need sophisticated commentaries to make sense of 'what the artist is trying to say', because you experience it directly through the experience of the art itself – it is a window to something higher.

You know, it took quite a few centuries to create the 'classic wine glass'. It can't actually be improved on now, because it was a result of hundreds of years of striving to get the right shape that just does the job efficiently and elegantly. But some 'trendy shops' sell square glasses and some determined shoppers buy them! Why? Subconsciously it is just because these square glasses are different to 'the glasses that mother had' – just teenage rebellion. We've all been teenagers – we thought we were highly individual, but we all wore the same clothes, and had our hair styled the same way. Today it's all iPods and designer baseball-caps (which the next generation would not be seen dead with).

This is why real Beauty (called 'Tiphareth' in Qabalah) is always a pleasing harmony of function and aesthetic, of efficiency and elegance. The need for Beauty is unique to the human soul – and, like evolution, it is a process. But, as the Mares of Diomedes warn us – it should uplift our humanity, not degrade it.



Hercules' next labor is **The Capture of the Arcadian Hind**, (sometimes called the Ceryneian Hind). A male deer is usually called a 'stag', and the female is called a 'doe'; but in Old English, some male deer were called 'harts' (the 'White Hart' of Arthurian legend), and the females were called 'hind'.

This Hind was sister to four other deer, who drew the chariot of the goddess Artemis (Diana of the Moon). And like her sisters, this deer was sacred to Artemis. They are described as being very beautiful, larger than bulls, with bronze hooves, and golden antlers, like a stag. To capture the Arcadian Hind, Hercules tirelessly chases her for one whole year; he captures the exhausted animal, and carries her back draped over his shoulders.

The esoteric significance of this labor is related to previous ones. The labors are grown in magnitude, as the Alchemist encounters powers that are deeper even than the personal subconscious, in the 'depth consciousness' itself. Notice that in the previous labors several of the 'monsters' are killed, while others are to be



captured. Symbolically ‘to kill’ is total eradication, because there is no good in them – they are evil distortions, whose forms have to be destroyed so that the energy within can be liberated, and new, life-enhancing forms can then be made for those freed energies. ‘To capture’ is different – capture means ‘to control’. Like a farmer controls a bull by deciding which cattle it will impregnate.

The deer is an esoteric symbol for the sacred power of Sound. Paradoxically, they are associated with Sound because traditionally they are silent. If you have walk in nature, you may suddenly turn around – and there is a deer. They make no noise, they are extremely quiet animals (apart from during the rut, when stags make a lot of noise). Rather like the swan, which in folklore only sings once – when it is about to die, it sings its ‘swan-song’.

Deer are not known for having any distinctive cries. So why then are they associated with sacred Sound? Because sacred Sound emerges from Silence, and returns back into Silence. This symbolism of the Deer appears in Eastern tradition too: in Taoist and Tibetan art the Immortal Sage is always attended by a pair of deer.

It takes Hercules a year to capture the deer, a complete cycle of the Zodiac. The Arcadian Hind is sacred to Artemis/Diana, a Moon goddess, who represents the subconscious mind. Notice, that Hercules uses no violence to capture this creature. This is because, the subconscious will

does not respond to forceful methods – that will make it clam up. Subconsciousness needs to be gently coaxed and skillfully tamed. In capturing the Arcadian Hind, Hercules gains control over those powers stored into his subconscious (the power of Sound, the power of Vibration).

Notice too, that in all labors Hercules is attended by a young man. He represents the Higher-Self (Key 20 in Tarot) who is always assisting the Alchemist. ‘He’ is the Holy Guardian Angel who presides over the Great Work.



## THE NINTH LABOR THE GIRDLE OF HIPPOLYTE



The ninth task is to **Steal the Girdle of Hippolyte**. Hippolyte was queen of the Amazons. The Amazons appear in Greek myths several times (and in the Trojan War). They were skilled women-warriors who fought as fiercely as any man. (They have made ‘a return’ in several tv series.) They were devotees of the Moon goddess Artemis, who was also a virgin, and an archer (the crescent moon was her bow).

The ‘girdle’ in this myth wasn’t a corset worn under the clothes; in ancient Greece and Rome, women wore it over their robes, tied just under their breasts to ‘give lift’. It was very symbolic, especially when it was removed in the wedding chamber. Hippolyte’s girdle was gold and studded with jewels; it had been the gift of Ares (Latin: Mars), the god of War. Hercules succeeds in stealing it, bringing it back for Eurytheus’ daughter.

Most of Greek esoteric wisdom came from ancient Egypt, to which their sages went for training and initiation. So, this girdle refers back to one worn by the great goddess Isis, the

mother of all beings. Isis too, was – amongst other things – a Moon deity. Her girdle was fastened with the Knot of Infinity. This girdle had to do with the interconnectedness of Life, and of the Astral Plane in particular. This jewel-studded girdle is similar in meaning to ‘Indra’s Net of Jewels’ in Hindu myth.

The Amazons represent one of the Inner Plane Sisterhoods. And their queen’s girdle symbolizes ‘control’ of the Astral Plane. The act of ‘stealing’ it, meant that Hercules had successfully brought power of a higher plane down to a lower one. (Many fairytales use the same theme.)

Alchemically, there is an even more important aspect to this labor. The Amazons were female and worshippers of the Moon – both are references to the Astral Body – which Alchemy often portrays as a ‘White or Silver Queen’. So, Hercules successfully finds the power of his own Anima; but more than that, he integrates the powers of his Astral Body within his physical body – an essential part of his journey to immortality.





## THE TENTH LABOR THE OXEN OF GERYON



Hercules' tenth labor was to **Steal the Oxen of Geryon**. Geryon was the grandson of the Gorgon Medusa; he was born with three heads, six arms and three bodies joined at the waist. His cattle were creatures of marvelous beauty. But Geryon and his oxen lived in the far west, so it was the great distances involved that made this labor hard, particularly when it came to droving a large herd all the way back.

The Hebrew letter Aleph ('The Fool' in Tarot) means 'Ox'. And 'The Fool' signifies the Divine Spirit within each person. It is the card (and letter) of the Universal Life-Power. In previous labors Hercules dealt with cattle (Augean Stables) and bulls (the Cretan Bull), but here we have oxen. An ox is a castrated bull, and they are huge and very strong. In the ancient world they were the farm tractors and the juggernaut lorries – they were the 'motive power' in these pre-industrial civilizations –, even horses could not compete with them for strength. Esoterically, Aleph means that the Divine Spirit is the power, the strength, that drives the universe.

Because the Spirit is always seeking more and more refined expression (that is the drive behind evolution), the ox symbolizes the cultural activity of the Life-Power. Culture is a sign of refinement in human society. Great art, music, architecture, all nourish the human soul; this is why the old priesthoods were patrons of the arts. Because true art elevates our consciousness and lifts us beyond time.

This evolutionary impulse flows into us from Superconsciousness, from the Over-Soul, the Higher Self. And that is what Aleph and 'The Fool' represent. In the old Tarot decks the Fool was called 'The Alchemist'. And we can see the huge contribution that alchemists have made throughout history to better the human condition.

The capture of these oxen, and their long trail back, represents the work involved for Hercules to become receptive to Superconscious states of awareness.

It was during the performance of this labor that the 'Pillars of Hercules' were made – which we now call the Straights of Gibraltar – dividing Spain from northern Africa. In the legend, the Mediterranean Sea was enclosed, separate from the Atlantic Ocean by a thin strip of land. Hercules gouged out the land so creating a waterway. This incident represents Hercules' personal consciousness – the sea – blending with Cosmic Consciousness, represented by the ocean. This is also an important detail in the next labor of Hercules.



## THE ELEVENTH LABOR THE GOLDEN APPLES



**The Apples of the Hesperides** is the eleventh labor of Hercules: he has to go and fetch some of the Apples of Immortality. The golden Apple tree was on the Blessed Isles at the western edge of the world (by ancient reckoning). Its fruit were the golden Apples of Immortality; and the tree was tended by the three goddesses of the Sunset, the Hesperides. There was also a guardian, a dragon coiled around the tree's trunk.

Now, the ancient Greeks thought that these 'Blessed Isles' were Britain. And it is significant that – under the Druids – Britain was famed for its sacred Apple orchards (and still so, in Glastonbury today). To get to the island Hercules

had to go through the Straights of Gibraltar (the Pillars of Hercules) that he had made in the previous labor.

On his way to the Blessed Isles, Hercules frees Prometheus, who had been chained to a mountain for thousands of years, from his punishment for giving humankind the gift of Fire.

Warned by a prophecy not to pick the apples himself, Hercules persuades the Titan Atlas to do it for him. In exchange for this favor, Hercules has to take Atlas' place holding the whole globe of the Earth on his shoulders, until Atlas returns. Hercules then takes the apples back, but he eats some of them and becomes an immortal.

Esoterically, the apple tree is, of course, the Tree of Life. The guardian dragon represents the Secret Fire that flows through the spinal-trunk of the tree (the 'Verbum Sap' of Alchemy).

Prometheus brings the 'Fire of the Gods' to Earth. Physically Fire is the basis of human culture and civilization. Metaphysically, Fire is the 'Secret Fire of the Sages', that can evolve us into spiritually Realized beings. Prometheus means 'forethought', the ability to think ahead. To achieve his goal, Hercules has to take the place of Atlas, to bear the weight of the world – this means, that after clearing his own personal stains and karma, he has to cleanse himself from 'poison' that infects the unconscious of humanity – the 'Illusion of Separateness'.



## THE TWELFTH LABOR CERBERUS

Eating of the Apples of Immortality means that Hercules can now prolong his life at will. This is in preparation for his ultimate '*apotheosis*' – when he becomes fully divine.



Finally, the last, and most difficult labor, was **The Capture of Cerberus**. Cerberus was the guardian of the Underworld; he was a huge three-headed dog. (He also made a brief appearance in the first of the 'Harry Potter' films.) The Greek idea of the Underworld was, that you could enter it but never leave; the myth of Orpheus illustrates this. So, to give Hercules the task of entering Tartarus (Underworld), exit it, and to bring its terrifying guardian up into the sunlit world of mortals, was insane.

But Hercules did it; he crossed the River Styx and entered Tartarus, there he mastered Cerberus, bound him with adamantine chains, and then brought this archetypal Hell-hound back to the court of King Eurytheus. Cerberus was later returned to his post – which he probably keeps to this day.

The esoteric teaching of this myth is: Cerberus is the great guardian of the Underworld; he is related symbolically to the Jackal god, Anubis of Egypt. Tartarus, the Underworld, means the store-house of the human collective.



To enter Hell, is for the Self-conscious mind to bring into the light of awareness the deep survival instincts that are in the Collective (all incarnate life-forms have these), so that these instincts can be examined, purified and directed to constructive end-results.

This is why great Sages are not attacked by wild animals, cannot be poisoned, cannot be harmed – unless they will it for their own high purpose. When you study the lives of great Sages they show a mastery of instinct. They have eradicated the instinctual fear-response. This doesn't mean that they don't feel it, but they know it for what it is, so it has no power to compel them.

By entering the Underworld, and mastering its guardian, Hercules has made death his servant. This completes his Twelve Labors.

Without esoteric understanding, the end of the Hercules legend is confusing. It says that, while about to make a burnt offering, Hercules puts on the sacrificial robe. Unknown to him an enemy has soaked the cloth with the venom of the Hydra. As soon as it touches Hercules' skin, he is in unbearable agony. He lights the holocaust (the burnt offering) and throws himself upon it. The gods then receive Hercules as one of their own number, on Mount Olympus.

The burnt-offering is the blazing of the Inner Fire within Hercules' own Etheric Body. The Robe is his Physical Body, which has already undergone much transubstantiation (through the labors purifying the twelve parts of the body

ruled by the Signs of the Zodiac), but the physical vehicle has not yet undergone its final 'apotheosis'. The venom of the Hydra is fuel of the Secret Fire – how so? Because the Hydra was defeated, only its immortal head remained – and this was placed under (= 'within') the Philosophers' Stone. Now that the power of the holy Fire Serpent penetrates every cell of Hercules' body, Hercules sacrifices himself. ('Sacrifice' literally means 'to make whole, complete'.) The hero, the Alchemist, has completed the Great Work and has become one with the ALL.

**MAY ALL YOUR LABORS  
MANIFEST IN BEAUTY.**



# HOW TO ACCESS LIFE'S GREAT SECRETS

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