

# HEROES AND MONSTERS—SUMMARY

## LEGENDS OF ANCIENT GREECE

### EXPLOITS OF PERSEUS TO THE DEATH OF HERCULES

Greek folklore only begins with the stories of the Greek Gods. The second category of Greek mythology involves human, or semi-human heroes, and a spectacular array of monsters and villains. These hero legends are often associated a specific town or region and may have been loosely based on historical characters, since the aristocratic classes in many Greek cities claimed descent from them. The four most important Greek heroes are [Perseus](#), [Jason and the Argonauts](#), [Theseus](#), and [Hercules](#).

There are elaborate stories detailing the exploits of the four heroes mentioned above, most of which involve fending off some of the most creatively horrible monsters ever imagined. Perseus, for example, needed to capture the head of Medusa, a snake-haired gorgon whose horribly ugly visage turned men instantly into stone. Theseus, a prince of Athens, is most famous for killing the Minotaur, a man-eating half-man, and half-bull, responsible for the deaths of hundreds of young Athenian.

Jason and the Argonauts met with dozens of adventures on their voyage, including run-ins with fire-breathing bulls, bronze giants wielding gigantic boulders, flying witches who stole food from sailors' mouths, bewitching maidens who lured soldiers to their death, a sorceress who turned men into animals and a sea-monster who sucked ships into a giant whirlpool.

And all of the monsters so far discussed are just a prelude to the amazing creatures that contended with Hercules, the greatest of the Greek heroes. Lions with impenetrable fur, man-eating horses, a three-headed guard-dog of Hades, birds with metal beaks, serpent-shaped dragons, a multi-headed water monster, and a gigantic rampaging boar, were just a few of the monsters that Hercules was tasked with killing. And beyond these famous champions, are dozens of lesser known heroes such as Bellerophon, the tamer of Pegasus, Atalanta, the huntress, Daedalus, the ingenious craftsman, and Castor and Pollux twin heroes gifted at the arts of Boxing and Wrestling.



PERSEUS AND THE GORGONS

Yet even the well-known hero/monster tales so popular with young people of all ages are only one part of the great panoply of Greek folklore. The stories of Greek mythology are rich, complicated, and varied, and they provided the basis for a great deal of the Greek literature of the classical age. Many of the plays of the great Greek tragedians were based on Greek mythological characters and heroes. The story of Oedipus, the king of Thebes who unintentionally killed his father, is the basis for the famous trilogy by [Sophocles](#). The story of the homecoming of Agamemnon is the subject of the Oresteia tragedy by [Aeschylus](#). The death of Hercules, the murderous jealousy of Jason's wife, the debauchery of Dionysius, and the punishment of Prometheus are just a few other mythological stories that became the subjects of famous Greek playwrights.

A great deal of what we know about Greek mythology comes from the poems, plays, dialogues, and other literary masterpieces of classical Greece. The Gods, heroes, and sorcerers of Greek mythology personified important ideas, virtues, and vices and are still used to symbolize abstract concepts. The story of Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection, gave his name to our word for self-love. The story of Icarus, who flew with waxen feathers too near the sun, is a parable of the dangers of hubris. The myth of Echo tells of a talkative nymph who was cursed by Hera to only repeat the words of others.

These and hundreds of other familiar stories are so intertwined with common words and ideas that it is impossible to understand the roots of Western Culture without a good introduction to Greek mythology. The world of Greek folklore, and the extraordinary sophistication and intelligence of the ancient Greeks is a subject of enormous fascination. From [Aesop's Fables](#), which have delighted children for over 2500 years, to the works of the great [Greek Tragedians](#), which are still studied today, Greek mythology and folklore are as foundational to the study of Western Civilization, as Greek history itself.