

Greek Heroes in the Constellations

Hercules: was a divine hero in Greek mythology, the son of Zeus and Alcmene, foster son of Amphitryon, and great-grandson and half-brother of Perseus. He was the greatest of the Greek heroes, a paragon of masculinity, and a champion of the Olympian order against chthonic monsters. Extraordinary strength, courage, and ingenuity were among the characteristics commonly attributed to him. Heracles used his wits on several occasions when his strength did not suffice, such as when laboring for the king Augeas of Elis, wrestling the giant Antaeus, or tricking Atlas into taking the sky back onto his shoulders.

Orion: One version of the Orion myth states that he had no mother but was a gift to a pious peasant from Jupiter, Neptune, and Mercury. "Orion supposedly was able to walk on water and had greater strength and stature than any other mortal. A skilled blacksmith, he fabricated a subterranean palace for Vulcan. He also walled in the coasts of Sicily against the encroaching sea and built a temple to the gods there" (Magee, 48). Later he dwelt as a hunter with Diana, with whom he was a favorite, and it is even said she was about to marry him. Her brother, Apollo, was highly displeased. One day, observing Orion wading through the ocean with his head just above the water, Apollo pointed it out to his sister and maintained that she could not hit that black thing on the sea. The archer-goddess discharged a shaft with fatal aim. The waves rolled the body of Orion to the land, and bemoaning her fatal error with many tears, Diana placed him among the stars (Bulfinch's Mythology, 191-192).

Perseus: An Argive hero, the son of Zeus and Danae. When he was returning on his quest for the Gorgon's head, he spied the Ethiopian princess Andromeda chained to the rocks as sacrifice to a sea-monster. Perseus slew the beast and saved the girl. In memorial of the event Athena placed Perseus, Andromeda, Cepheus and Cassiopea (the girl's parents) and Cetus (the Sea Monster) amongst the stars. (Hyginus 2.12 ; Aratus 248)

Ophiuchus: Phorbas was a hero of the island of Rhodes. When the island was plagued by serpents, Phorbas destroyed them all, and as a reward for this service was placed amongst the stars by the god Apollo. (Hyginus 2.14 on Polyzelus the Rhodian)

Sagittarius: The zodiacal constellation Sagittarius represents the centaur Chiron. Chiron was renowned for his gentleness. He was an excellent archer, musician, and physician, and tutored the likes of Achilles, Jason, and Hercules. However, he was accidentally shot and wounded by Hercules. The arrow, which had been dipped in poison inflicted great suffering on Chiron--so great, in fact, that even the talented physician could not cure himself. In agony, but as an immortal unable to find release in death, Chiron instead offered himself as a substitute for Prometheus. The gods had punished Prometheus for giving fire to man by chaining him to a rock. Each day an eagle would devour his liver, and each night it would grow back. Jupiter, however, had at the request of Hercules agreed to release Prometheus if a suitable substitute could be found. Chiron gave up his immortality and went to Tartarus in place of Prometheus; in recognition of his goodness, Jupiter placed him in the stars (Pasachoff, 139).