

BOOK REVIEW

The Oxford Handbook of Heracles. Edited by DANIEL OGDEN. Oxford Handbooks, New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. xxxi + 571. Hardback, \$150.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-065098-8.

The *Oxford Handbook of Heracles* (henceforth *Heracles*) is a significant addition to Oxford's invaluable series of handbooks. *Heracles* is the first of the more than forty Oxford handbooks on Classical topics to focus not only on a mythological subject but also on a single mythological figure. Other handbooks have focused on single authors like Hesiod or Thucydides or on topical subjects like warfare and sports. The scale of Heracles' importance in antiquity more than justifies the existence of this handbook, which is the first wide-scale treatment of the hero in English.

The 39 contributors to this volume have undertaken a truly herculean task, namely, to survey the ancient literary and iconographic references to Heracles and to examine the hero's treatment in various ancient genres and media and from a number of thematic perspectives. The result is a handbook which promises to become a standard resource for anyone interested in Heracles, from the novice undergraduate to the advanced scholar.

In his introduction, editor Daniel Ogden explains the need for, and structure of, this handbook, provides an overview of previous scholarship on Heracles and also offers three valuable chronological lists related to the hero's labors: 1) ancient literary and iconographic references in the archaic and classical periods to various sets of labors (not necessarily twelve in number); 2) examples from the Hellenistic and Roman periods illustrating a more canonical list of twelve labors; and 3) a table which outlines the earliest references to each of the twelve labors and their geographic distribution, while emphasizing the Peloponnesian primacy of the labors.

The handbook proper has 38 essays written by an impressive group of international scholars. These essays are grouped in five parts, with each essay accompanied by an extensive bibliography. Part I, entitled "Before the Labors," offers two essays dealing with the hero's birth, childhood and his madness. There are twelve

essays in Part II, one on each of the canonical labors. The hero's *parerga* or side-labors are the subject of Part III, with seven essays on the following topics: brigands and cruel kings like Saurus, Cacus, Antaeus and Busiris; Heracles' role in the Argonautic Expedition; the hero's dealings with Troy (Laomedon, Hesione and the sea-monster); Auge and Telephus; the Gigantomachy; Oechalia, Delphi and Omphale; and Deianira, the hero's death and his apotheosis. In Part IV the hero's appearances in ancient epic, tragedy, comedy, the philosophical tradition and classical art are discussed in individual essays.

More than one-third of *Heracles* is devoted to the twelve essays in Part V, entitled "Themes." Here Heracles is discussed, in succession, as: quest hero; triangulated with Hera and Athena; rationalized and allegorized; master of geographic space; ancestor; connected with Macedonia and Alexander the Great; Greek cult figure; parallel to the Phoenician deity Melqart; Roman cult figure; tied with Caesar and the Roman Emperors; and referenced in early Christian literature and art. All these themes, it should be emphasized, deal with the hero's appearance and interpretation in antiquity. Discussion of Heracles in terms of various modern theories of myth is not within the defined scope of this handbook. The final essay in Part V is a sweeping survey of Heracles' reception from the end of antiquity to the 21st century. The wide range of topics covered in *Heracles* illustrates the many roles played by this hero, the diverse ways his myth was interpreted and used and his prominence across the entire Greco-Roman world throughout antiquity and beyond.

While *Heracles* generally focuses on both the literary and the iconographic representations of the hero, the essays are accompanied by only 46 black-and-white figures. Most of the iconographic material is referenced via the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (Kahil, L. *et al.*, eds. 1981–1999, Zurich and Munich: Artemis; henceforth LIMC). Although the standard scholarly reference for mythological iconography, the print version of the LIMC is not widely available. It would be helpful for many users of this handbook to know that the LIMC is open-source and can be accessed online via a search for "LIMC lexicon" at <https://archive.org/details/books/>, which brings up the entire corpus in a series of pdfs.

Unfortunately, there are some inaccuracies and lacunae in *Heracles*. For example, the essay on the Augean Stables swaps the iconography of two metopes on the Temple of Zeus at Olympia (where Hermes is wrongly associated with the Apples of the Hesperides and Athena with the Capture of Cerberus). The essay on Heracles rationalized and allegorized concludes with mention of several

important secondary works for which no bibliographic information is provided. Although the handbook is generally accessible to a novice scholar, occasional foreign words and phrases, like *kallinke anax* and *heros theos*, are not always translated. In the essay on Heracles and Melqart an entire sentence in French appears with no English translation, when an English paraphrase in the main text and French in the footnote would have been more appropriate.

Despite such minor flaws, *Heracles* will serve, going forward, not only as a basic starting point for any study of the ancient hero but also, perhaps, as an inspiration and model for potential Oxford handbooks on other mythological figures, such as Oedipus, Jason and Theseus.

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