

# Ancient Greece: Myths and legends



Black-figured amphora  
Herakles and the Stymphalian birds  
Athens, Greece around 540 BC

Visit resource for teachers

# **Contents**

## **Before your visit**

Background information

Resources

Gallery information

Preliminary activities

## **During your visit**

Gallery activities: introduction for teachers

Gallery activities: briefings for adult helpers

Gallery activity: Labours of Herakles

Gallery activity: Herakles

Gallery activity: Theseus and his enemy

Gallery activity: Odysseus and the Cyclops

Gallery activity: Create your own monster

## **After your visit**

Follow-up activities

Ancient Greece: myths and legends

## **Before your visit**

## Background information

Modern experts on ancient Greece no longer distinguish between myths and legends as they have so many features in common - they prefer to think in terms of a whole set of mythical stories. These mythical stories cluster around a number of focuses. Some of them involve just gods and goddesses and focus on the creation of the world, the creation of humans and the rule of the gods; some deal with a specific hero such as Theseus or Herakles; some focus on a place, for example Thebes or Athens, or an event, for example the Trojan War.

Myths had an important purpose for the ancient Greeks and formed a part of their belief system. Most myths explain or justify things in some way, whether this is the creation of the world, the cycle of seasons or the origins of a city. We should not assume that all Greeks believed them in a straightforward way or that there was a fixed version for every story. Greek writers felt at liberty to make up their own versions of stories or to poke fun at mythical characters - especially Herakles. There is evidence from Greek pottery painting that there could be several variants of a myth in circulation at any one time. Greek philosophers question the basis of myths and also make up their own myths to represent their own systems of thinking.

The cast of characters in myths includes gods/goddesses (see the visit resource on gods and goddesses in this series) and heroes/heroines: this resource has activities focused on Herakles, the most famous of Greek heroes, who was especially associated with the part of Greece called the Peloponnese, Theseus, the Athenian hero and Odysseus, the cleverest hero. Places associated with heroes such as these often had shrines and held religious rituals in their honour. Another frequent type of character in Greek myths is the monster or fantastic creature. These are often part-human and part-animal. As such they can represent the animal nature of humans as well as being experiments in imagining certain aspects of human nature carried to extremes or freed from the constraints of society.

## Resources

### British Museum websites

#### Teaching history with 100 objects

Free online resources to support teachers working in the new history curriculum through object-based learning. Access information, images, and video as well as teaching ideas for lessons at Key Stages 1-3.

[www.teachinghistory100.org](http://www.teachinghistory100.org)

## Books

### For adults

Burn, Lucilla, *Greek myths*, British Museum Press, 1990 reprint 2006.

### For children

Harris, John and Brown, Calef, *Mythical Beasts of Greece and Rome*, British Museum Press, 2002.

Woff, Richard, *Pocket dictionary of Greek and Roman gods and goddesses*, British Museum Press, 2003.

Woff, Richard, *Pocket dictionary of Heroes and Heroines of ancient Greece*, British Museum Press, 2004.

## Gallery information

Room 69 explores the daily life of both the ancient Greeks and Romans. The cases are displayed in themes covering the major aspects of everyday life. As some of the cases display both Greek and Roman objects encourage your students to read the labels in order to distinguish the Greek objects. The cases are numbered and their theme title is clearly displayed. Cases in the centre of the room concentrate on everyday life. Cases along one wall display crafts and along the other mythology. The mythology cases are located along the wall underneath the section of balcony cases. The case numbers are the same as other cases in the room, ensure the adult group leaders are aware which cases they should be finding.

## What is it like to visit this gallery?

Room 69 is a popular gallery with school groups and can become very crowded. The room has exits from either end. The north exit leads into a suite of galleries exploring the ancient Greek and Roman worlds. The south-eastern exit leads into the Money Gallery. In the west wall there is a small display area off the gallery which contains changing exhibitions from the Coins and Medals Department.

## Case Numbers

Please note that case numbers are usually small, white and high up on the glass.

## **Preliminary activities**

### **General introductory activities**

- Locate the area covered by ancient Greece in an atlas and look at the modern countries which currently exist in this region of the world.
- Discuss ancient Greece in terms of culture, geography and climate.

### **Activities to support gallery activities**

- Look at examples of Greek myths on pots. Explain how the depictions reveal the story they refer to without using words.
- Discuss some ancient Greek myths and their characters. Use examples to illustrate the challenges faced by a hero and the behaviour of the gods.
- Talk about how Greek myths were told and passed from one person to another. Explain that they were not written down but instead repeated from memory.

Ancient Greece: myths and legends

**During your visit**



## Gallery activities: introduction for teachers

The gallery activities are a set of activity sheets which can be used by students working in Room 69. The sheets can be used as stand-alone activities or you may wish to develop work around particular sheets as suggested in the before and after sections of this resource.

- Where case numbers are indicated on a sheet, these are usually to be found marked in white numbers high up on the glass of that particular case.
- You are welcome to select the activities which are most appropriate for the focus of your visit and adapt sheets to meet the needs of your students.
- Each activity is designed to support the students in looking at, and thinking about, objects on display in the gallery.
- Individual activity sheets may be undertaken by single students, in pairs or as a small group.
- Where space is provided for recording this may be undertaken by the student or an adult helper as is most appropriate for the students involved.
- Familiarise the students and accompanying adults with the chosen activity sheets at school before the day of the visit. Make sure students and adults know what they are to do and are familiar with the vocabulary used on the sheets or which they may encounter in the gallery.

## **Gallery activities: briefings for adults**

### **Gallery activity: Labours of Herakles**

- Herakles was forced to complete twelve Labours as punishment for killing his wife and children in a fit of madness.
- This activity uses details of six of the Labours. Students will use their observational skills and prior knowledge to match the details to objects in the case and to name each one

### **Gallery activity: Herakles**

- Herakles is often depicted wearing a cloak made from the coat of a lion. This was the Nemean lion.
- This activity encourages the students to observe objects and examine them in detail.

### **Gallery activity: Theseus and his enemy**

- Theseus was an Athenian hero who became King of Athens. As with other Greek heroes he had to accomplish many feats during his adventures. This activity looks at one of these, his battle against the Minotaur (half man, half bull).
- This activity uses the students' observational skills and prior knowledge.

### **Gallery activity: Odysseus and the Cyclops**

- Odysseus took part in the Trojan War. When it was over he had a long and treacherous journey home. During that journey he encountered the Cyclops, a one-eyed giant.
- This activity focuses on detailed examination of a pot scene.

### **Gallery activity: Create your own monster**

- Greek myths often include animals made up of parts of other animals or part-human, part-animal.
- This activity encourages scanning for details, observation and creativity.

## Labours of Herakles

- Go to wall cases 35 and 36 on the side of the room with the balcony. It contains objects which show Herakles' Labours. There is a list of his twelve Labours in case 35.
- The pictures below show small details from the objects in the case. Look at the pictures and tick the box when you have found the object that they are taken from.
- Each object shows one of Herakles' Labours. Use your own knowledge and the list in case 35 to write which Labour it shows next to each picture.



Found it?

Which Labour is it?











- Now look in the case and see which other Labours you can find.

# Herakles

- Go to case 35 on the side of the room with the balcony.
- Find the pot which shows Herakles fighting the Nemean lion. It is in the left-hand side of the case on the bottom row.
- There are three people on this pot. Below are their names and clues to help you identify them. Once you have found each person tick the right box.

Name	clue	found it?
Herakles	fighting a lion	
Athena	wearing a helmet and a cloak with snakes; holds a spear	
Iolaos	holding Herakles' club	

- Look at the pot in the right of this case on the bottom row which shows Herakles' third Labour. He had to capture the hind (deer) of Keryneia.
- Look closely at the pot in the case and draw lines from the labels to where they are shown in the picture.



Herakles' lion skin coat

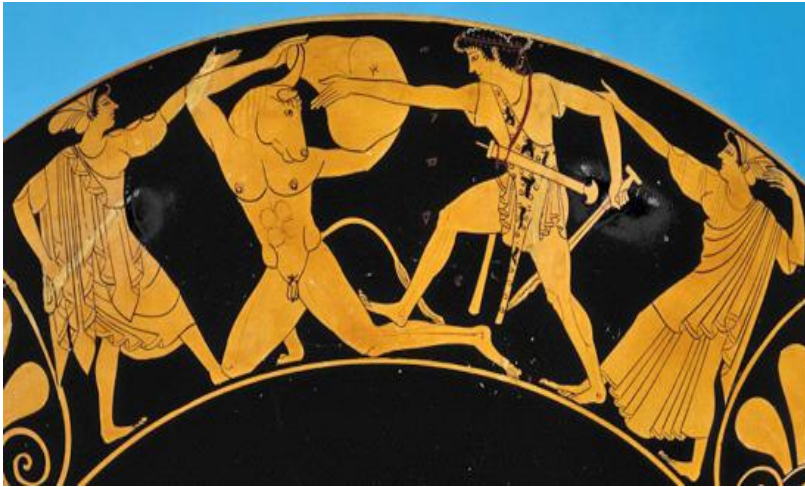
Herakles

the hind

- After killing the lion, Herakles wore its skin to protect himself. How many times can you spot Herakles wearing his lion skin in the other objects in the case?

## Theseus and his enemy

- Go to wall case 38 on the side of the room with the balcony.



- Find the pot on the bottom right which has this scene on it. It shows Theseus, a great Athenian hero.

- The beast Theseus is fighting against has a human body and the head and tail of another animal. What sort of animal?
- Do you know the name of this beast? Complete the sentence below.  
Theseus is fighting against the .....
- Theseus is holding a sword. The beast is holding a rock. Look carefully at the pot and find the rock and the sword. Draw pictures of them in the boxes.

Rock

Sword

## Odysseus and the Cyclops

- Go to wall case 15 on the side of the room with the balcony. Find this pot in the case. It shows Odysseus and the Cyclops.
- Odysseus and his men are preparing to push a wooden stake (a big stick) into the Cyclops' eye. Before this, they gave the Cyclops lots of wine so that he would fall asleep and not realise what they were doing.
- Look closely at the pot in the case and draw lines from the labels below to where they are shown in the picture.



the stake

Odysseus and  
his men  
holding the  
stake

the Cyclops

- Now discuss with your group any other adventures of Odysseus that you know. See if you can find them in the case.

## Create your own monster

- In this room you will see many pots showing people and animals. The ancient Greeks told myths about creatures that were made up of different animals. For example the Minotaur had the head of a bull and the body of a man.
- Look at some pots and choose three animals and / or people to make your own monster. Use one for the head, one for the front half of the body and one for the rear part of your creature. Draw each part in the boxes to make one complete monster.

Head	Front part of body	Rear part

- What is your monster like - friendly, shy, cruel? Does it have any special powers? .....
- Now you need to name your monster.  
My monster is called .....
- Now look at some of the other pots in the gallery and see if there are any other animals or monsters.

## **After your visit**



## Follow-up activities: introduction

These activities aim to encourage pupils to reflect on the work undertaken in the Ancient Greek galleries during their Museum visit.

- Some of the activities draw directly on the information gathered at the Museum while others encourage the pupils to draw on personal experience or undertake additional research in the classroom.
- Each activity includes a suggestion for classroom work and also an outcome which may be in the form of a written piece, drama presentation or artwork.

## Follow-up activity: Labours of Herakles

Curriculum links: history, literacy

Skills: investigation, discussion

- Review the six Labours that were shown in detail on the worksheet. Discuss the objects that these details came from and what the overall scene showed.
- Individually or in groups ask the students to research the 12 Labours and to list them in order with brief descriptions of what happened. When they have finished bring the class together to review the order of the Labours and what they consisted of. Write the list on the whiteboard as a visual reminder.
- The groups can now draw storyboards of the 12 Labours. This can be done with a single Labour by asking students to draw a storyboard of the task from beginning to completion or using all 12 Labours and drawing a panel for each Labour.

## **Follow-up activity: Herakles**

Curriculum links: history, literacy, art & design

Skills: analysis, presentation

- Discuss the pots seen during the visit.
- Compose a list of the Labours on the whiteboard with brief descriptions. Discuss how ancient Greek artists used visual clues to signify immediately which story they were depicting. Use Herakles and his lion coat as an example.
- Ask the students to draw their own visual clues for each Labour. Once complete the students can either report back to the class and explain their choices or write a short explanation next to each drawing.

## **Follow-up activity: Theseus and his enemy**

Curriculum links: history, art and design

Skills: listening, observation

- Discuss the pot seen during the visit. Explain that it was a red figure drinking cup.
- Explain that ancient Greek myths were told rather than written down. They were enjoyed by all ages of people and were not just children's stories. Discuss the reason myths were depicted on pots and introduce the idea of the Greek dinner party (symposium). Show the students a variety of pots decorated with myths.
- Ask the children to design their own ancient Greek vessel with a scene from a Greek myth. Provide them with outlines of different styles of pot and explanations of when and what they were used for to help them.

Ancient Greece: myths and legends

## **Follow-up activity: Odysseus and the Cyclops**

Curriculum links: history, literacy

Skills: analysis, discussion, observation

- Discuss the pot seen during the visit and the myth that it showed.
- Explore the ancient Greek tradition of depicting myths on pots. Explain that visual clues were used to indicate which myths and which activity was being depicted. Use a few of Odysseus' and Herakles' adventures to illustrate this idea.
- Discuss whether visual clues are used in depictions of stories today. Use examples from modern children's stories and characters.

## **Follow-up activity: Create your own monster**

Curriculum links: history, literacy, art & design

Skills: discussion, investigation

- Discuss ancient Greek mythical monsters. Ask the students which monsters they have heard of. Write a list on the board and discuss what animals or people the monsters are made from. Discuss their powers, magical abilities or qualities.
- Distribute the worksheets the students used during the visit. Ask them to review their monsters and remind themselves of what they looked like and to assign their monsters with any special qualities or powers if they wish.
- Ask the students to write a short story involving the monster remembering that not all monsters are evil! Produce storybooks with illustrated pages showing scenes from story.