

## **The Story of Hercules: The Path of Heroes and the Brilliant Star**

In the previous episode about the constellation Perseus, we mentioned that, according to the definition in Greek mythology, the offspring born from the union of a god and a human are called "heroes." Hercules is undoubtedly recognized as the greatest hero in Greek mythology. Physically fit, brave, and intelligent, Hercules was considered the ideal male figure in ancient Greece, and the embodiment of human wisdom and strength. And echoing Perseus in the sky is the constellation Hercules, represented by Hercules.

Hercules, located in the northern sky, ranks fifth in area among the 88 constellations. Similar to Perseus, several constellations throughout the sky are associated with Hercules mythology, including well-known zodiacal constellations such as Leo and Cancer. However, as we mentioned in the previous story about Perseus, even important constellations often appear fragmented and peripherally in mythology. This may be related to the emphasis on practicality in ancient Greek constellation arrangement—most constellations were given a concrete image, while mythology served to aid in remembering their shapes, positions, and relationships. This is clearly evident in the story of Hercules.

### **Babies and the "Milky Way"**

Hercules was the illegitimate son of Zeus and Alcmene, the granddaughter of Perseus. Therefore, Hercules and Perseus, our protagonist from the previous episode, are both brothers and grandsons. This is quite common in ancient Greek mythology, so it's best not to get bogged down in the generational relationships between figures in ancient Greek mythology.

Hercules means "the glory of Hera," but he has no actual blood relation to Hera. Hera was already furious with Zeus's infidelity, and she certainly wouldn't name Zeus's illegitimate son after herself. So, where did the ill-fated relationship between Hera and Hercules originate?

Hercules' original name was Alcides. Shortly after his birth, Alcmene's first husband and father, fearing Hera's wrath, secretly abandoned him. Unfortunately, the child was found by Athena and Hera who happened to be passing by. Athena encouraged Hera to nurse the child, and Hera, unaware of the deception, received the name Hercules as a result.

Even as an infant, Hercules displayed superhuman strength. While nursing, he bit Hera, causing her pain and pushing him away. The spilled milk became the Milky Way. This is the origin of the English term "Milky Way." Most Milky Way photographs we see in print media today possess rich color detail, but this is due to the camera's sensitivity far exceeding that of the human eye, coupled with post-processing color correction. In pure naked-eye observation (under favorable environmental conditions), the Milky Way does indeed appear as a milky, blurry band, like a celestial river flowing with milk.



[Image] A frame from a real-time Milky Way video, recorded by the author in Duolun, Inner Mongolia using a QHY1920 astronomical camera. Thanks to technological advancements, long exposures are no longer necessary for capturing such Milky Way scenes; we can easily obtain real-time images of the Milky Way by recording video.

Hera discovered the truth too late. She harbored murderous intent and released two poisonous snakes into his cradle. But the infant Heracles easily killed them—by this time, with Zeus's blood and Hera's nurturing, his strength was already beyond human capabilities. And Heracles's life—his glory, tragedy, legend, and death—was inextricably linked to Hera's jealousy and rage.

#### **Leo who gives away equipment**

Because of Hera's curse, Hercules accidentally killed his own child. To atone for his sins, he embarked on a long journey of trials, which became Hercules' most famous feat, the "Twelve Trials."

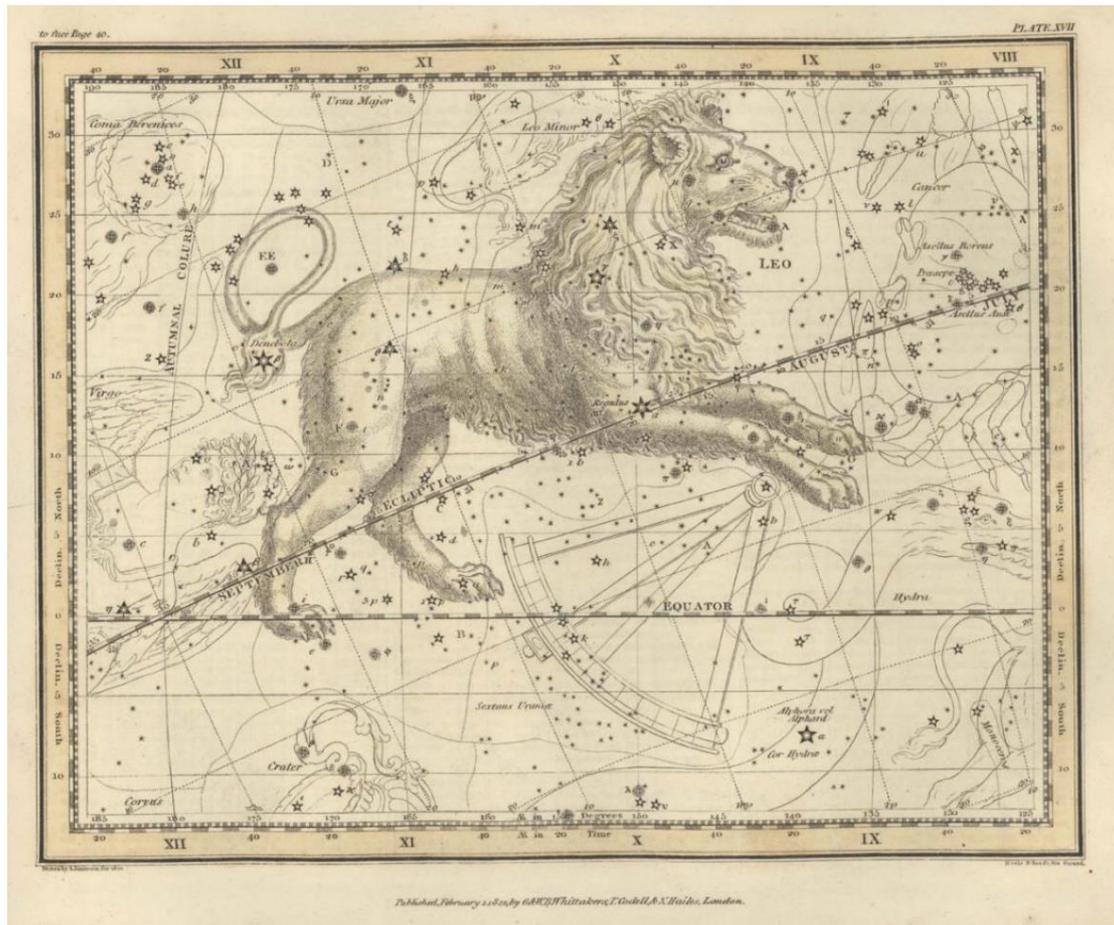
The first of Heracles' twelve trials was to slay the Nemean Lion. The Nemean Lion had incredibly thick skin, said to be impervious to any weapon; its claws were so sharp they could tear anything apart. Heracles fought it repeatedly with sharp weapons, but none could penetrate its skin. Finally, he could only use a blunt instrument and his superhuman strength to stun the lion, then embrace it and suffocate it. After its death, the Nemean Lion rose into the sky, becoming the constellation Leo.



[Image] Peter Paul Rubens's painting "Hercules and the Nemean Lion," one of the most representative artists of the Baroque school, depicts the moment of their final, desperate struggle. Rubens created many works about Hercules throughout his life.

After defeating the Nemean Lion, Hercules wanted to skin it for armor, but found his weapons still couldn't harm the dead lion's fur. Then, a thought struck him: if its claws were indestructible, what would happen if he used them to scratch its skin? Sure enough, the lion's skin was easily torn. This anecdote echoes our own "self-contradictory" anecdote. From then on, the tough lion skin became indispensable equipment for Hercules to complete his remaining trials. The image of Hercules draped in a lion skin also frequently appears in ancient Greek art and artifacts.

In fact, the constellation Leo itself can be traced back to an even more ancient history. It is generally believed that Leo existed in ancient Egyptian star charts as early as 4,000 years ago, and Hipparchus, the astronomer who actually compiled the ancient Greek constellations, referred to the constellation systems of different cultures that already existed at that time when compiling his star catalog.



[Image] Leo from Alexander Jamison's Atlas of the Celestial Bodies. In classical star charts, the image of Leo is basically consistent with that of a lion in real life.



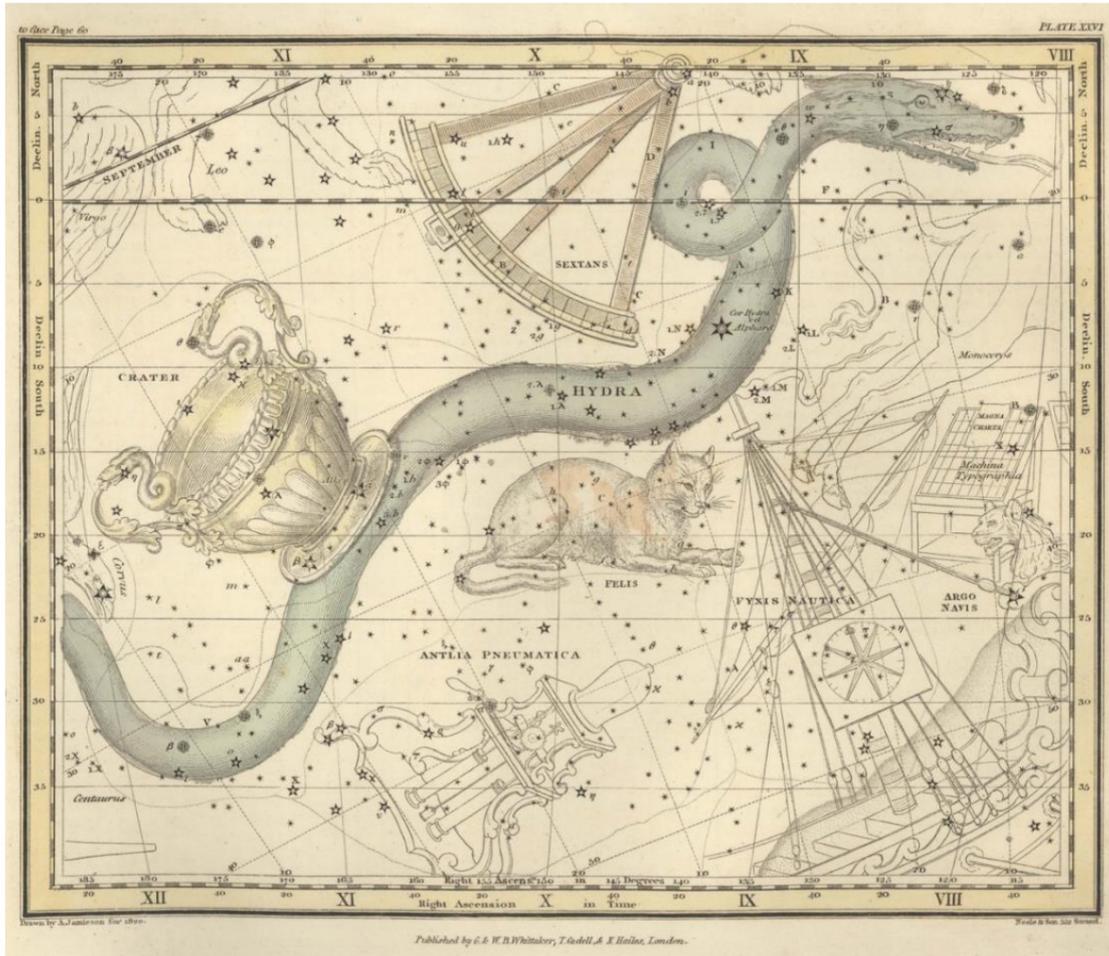
[Image] The famous Leo Triple Galaxy, photographed by Bogdan Jarzyna using the QHY695A astronomical camera. It is a small galaxy group about 35 million light-years from Earth. This galaxy group includes the spiral galaxies M65, M66, and NGC 3628.

### **Cancer was dealt with incidentally**

Hercules' second trial was to slay the legendary creature—the Hydra. Yes, the "Hail Hydra!" we hear in the Marvel movies refers to this Hydra.

During Hercules' battle with the Hydra, a giant crab appeared to help, only to be crushed to death by Hercules' foot. Yes, although Cancer is one of the twelve zodiac constellations, this is all the information we know about Cancer.

The slain Hydra and the nameless crab rose into the sky to become the constellations Hydra and Cancer. Another theory suggests that the prototype of Hydra is related to the myth of the sun god Apollo, while the origin story of Cancer is more consistent.







[Image] In the famous anime series "Saint Seiya", the signature moves of the Cancer Saints throughout the ages—"Sekishiki Meikai Ha," "Sekishiki Oni Souhan," and "Sekishiki Konzouha"—are all named after the Chinese constellation "Sekishiki." Furthermore, the fact that the abilities and experiences of several generations of Cancer Saints are related to the underworld aligns with the imagery of the Oni Star Group, which is associated with death and mourning.

It's also worth mentioning that the three defeated enemies of Hercules—Hydra, Leo, and Cancer—are adjacent in the star chart, a perfect example of "family reunion." This confirms the practical aspect of constellation mythology: by linking adjacent constellations through mythological stories, people can more easily remember their connections.

Tips: The Hydra, or multi-headed serpent, appears in the mythology of many civilizations, but it is the most frequent and famous Hydra in Greek mythology. We can see the phenomenon of many civilizations' mythologies being introduced into other civilizations, which is a result of cultural exchange.

#### The Golden Apple and the Guardian Dragon

Hercules' eleventh trial was to retrieve the golden apples from the Western Paradise. These apples were originally placed on the Tree of Life by Hera, guarded by Ladon, a legendary hundred-headed dragon. (According to the Library...)

According to Bibliotheca, there are two versions of how Hercules obtained the golden apples: one is that Hercules killed Ladon himself to obtain them, and the other is that Hercules held up the sky for a period of time in place of the Titan Atlas (the Titan we mentioned in the previous episode), while Atlas retrieved the apples. In any case, after Ladon's death, he ascended to the sky and became the constellation Draco.

For Chinese audiences, the constellation Draco is likely familiar, as it corresponds to Shiryu in "Saint Seiya". The "Rising Dragon Fist" and Shiryu's distinctly Chinese aesthetic closely link Draco's image to that of an Eastern dragon. However, the prototype of Draco is clearly not an Eastern dragon. While the Latin name for Draco is derived from the English word "dragon," its prototype, Ladon, is depicted as "perpetually perched on a tree guarding the golden apple," making it seem more like a large serpent. Indeed, in both classical star charts and artwork depicting the Golden Apple Paradise, Ladon's image is more akin to a snake.



[Image] The constellation Draco as depicted in the classic star chart "The Mirror of Urania". Draco is a constellation located near the North Celestial Pole, encircling... Around Ursa Minor.

### Passersby on the Argo

The Argonaut is the vehicle used by the main group in another famous ancient Greek myth, Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece. Hercules briefly joined the Argonauts but later left, not completing the entire adventure. The Argonauts are the prototype for the constellation Argo Australe. Argo Australe was once the largest constellation in the sky, but because it was so large, it was later divided into Carina, Puppis, and Vela.

Tips: The prototype of Aries is the legendary ram with the Golden Fleece.

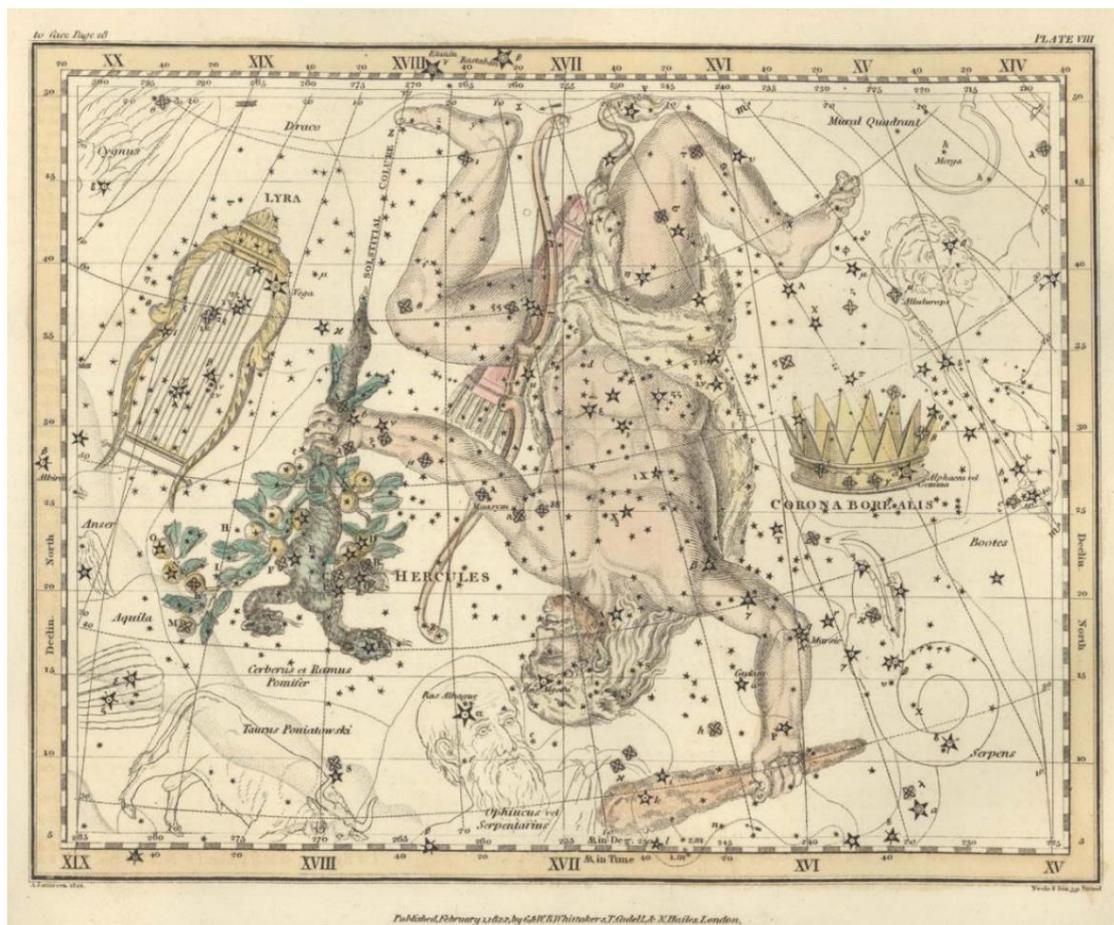
### Constellations that may be associated with Hercules

One theory suggests that Scorpio's prototype was a giant scorpion killed by Hercules. However, a more popular image of Scorpio is that of the scorpion that poisoned Phaethon, son of the sun god, when he recklessly drove the sun chariot. In this version, Scorpio at least played a role in advancing the plot and, to some extent, a savior (Phaethon's reckless driving of the sun chariot caused seasonal imbalances and widespread death), making its mere cannon fodder for Hercules seem rather mediocre. Another theory suggests that Lupus's prototype was a wild boar from Mount Erymantus captured by Hercules during his trials. However, classical star charts mostly depict jackals, so this theory has not become mainstream.

### Hercules constellation star map

Finally, let's talk about Hercules himself. Hercules' posture

is very similar to Orion's, both kneeling on one knee with their right hand raised high like a club, in an attack stance. The difference lies in that Hercules wears a lion skin, while Orion holds a lion skin in its left hand; and the posture of Hercules' left hand varies slightly depending on the star chart version, but it is more often depicted holding a branch of golden apples with three-headed Ladon wrapped around it. Due to the constellation's position, in classical star charts, Hercules is usually depicted head down, with its feet resting on Draco, which is closer to the North Celestial Pole.



[Image] Hercules and Ophiuchus are depicted upright and inverted, their heads adjacent to each other. Based on the story of the golden apple, we can deduce that Hercules... The one he holds should be the hundred-headed dragon Ladon, not the nine-headed hydra Hydra.

### The Hero's Return

Heroes, after all, are not gods, and are ultimately subject to death. The Library of Hercules recounts that Hercules ultimately died from a deadly poison, this poison coming from his old nemesis, the Hydra. The venom seeped into Hercules' flesh, and unable to endure the pain, he chose to set himself ablaze, ending his life as a hero. Afterwards, he was welcomed by the gods to the heavens, becoming a truly immortal god. Hercules eventually married Hebe, the daughter of Hera and the goddess of youth. The legend of one of the greatest heroes of his generation began with a tragic love affair and ended with reconciliation.



[Image] Detail of "The Ascension of Hercules", by François Lemoyne

The ceiling fresco at Versailles Palace. The original painting measures a massive 480 square meters, with Zeus leading his daughter Hebe to greet Hera at its center.

A scene depicting Lacces (lower left, holding a stick). The painter became famous overnight for this work, but committed suicide a few months after its completion, the reason for which remains unknown.

Reference:

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[ugo.bratelli.free.fr/Apollodore/DetailsLivres.htm](http://ugo.bratelli.free.fr/Apollodore/DetailsLivres.htm)

Image source:

*Celestial Atlas*, Alexander Jamieson, 1822

*Urania's Mirror*, Anonymous, 1824

<https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E6%B6%85%E5%A2%A8%E4%BA%9A%E7%8B%AE%E5%AD%90#/media/>

[File:Pieter\\_paul\\_rubens,\\_ercole\\_e\\_i\\_leone\\_nemeo,\\_02.JPG](#) [http://](#)

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