



HERACLES

HERACLES (Gk. Hēraklēs, Lat. Hercules; [Figure 1](#)), one of the most popular Greek gods in the Hellenistic East and by far the best-attested Greek god in the Iranian world. In the Greek pantheon, he occupied a special position, being the most prominent of the *hērōes* (and one of the few whose cult was not centered on a grave) as well as an important god. The son of Zeus and the mortal woman Alcmene, Heracles was the subject of extensive narrative cycles, which have left many traces in ancient art. These stories focus on his great physical strength and cunning, from earliest childhood onwards, and culminate in the tragic episode in which Heracles—driven mad by Hera—killed his own children. In order to be purified, he had to perform the Twelve Labors, starting with the killing of the Nemean lion. Upon his death on a self-chosen pyre, he was transformed into a god by Zeus. In Hellenistic times, Heracles was a symbol of strength and courage and the favorite deity of many rulers, including Alexander. Together with Hermes, he patronized the *gymnasium*. In the worship of Heracles, large banquets occupied a prominent place.

Heracles entered many other religions of the ancient world. He was adopted into the Roman pantheon in an early stage of its development and was identified—both as a “translation” and in the development of cultic practices—with the Phoenician god Melqart and the Babylonian god Nergal, as well as with Zoroastrian Verethraghna (see below).

The evidence for Heracles in the Iranian world is very extensive and consists of inscriptions, reliefs, sculptures, figurines, and coins. Greek inscriptions mentioning the god have been found in Karaftō in Kurdistan (Bernard, 1980),



Behistun [Bisotun] (H. Luschey in Kleiss and Calmeyer, 1996, pp. 59-60) and Ai Khanum [Āy Kānom] (P. Bernard in Veuve, 1987, pp. 111-12). Reliefs showing the god are known from Behistun and Tang-e Sarvak (Bivar and Shaked, 1964). Large sculptures of Heracles have been found in Masjed-e Soleymān (although Ghirshman's theory of a Heracles temple there cannot be confirmed: Kawami, 1987), and representation of the god's club on metopes in Nisa. Smaller-sized reliefs and statuettes in a variety of materials (metal, terracotta, bone, and ivory) are known from Iran and, in some quantity, from Central Asia and the Indo-Iranian borderlands (Bernard and Jullien, 1982). A large amount of relevant material is also known from Parthian Syria and Mesopotamia (Downey, 1969). Heracles and his symbols are found regularly on Iranian and Central Asian coins from the Seleucid, Parthian, and Sasanian periods.

The question whether we are always dealing with the Greek god or, possibly, with a local god who was identified with and represented as Heracles is difficult to answer. In most cases, it is likely that the Greek god is intended, but there is some evidence to suggest that Iranians could interpret the representations of the god as images of the god Verethraghna. The evidence from Commagene, where Heracles is represented several times together with the king and is one of the three divine persons making up the composite god Artagnes-Heracles-Ares, certainly suggests this. A bronze statue of Heracles from Mesene bearing a bilingual Greek and Parthian inscription (Bernard, 1990) identifies the Greek god Heracles with the Iranian Verethraghna. On Bactrian coins, on the other hand, the two gods are kept separate (as *Erakilo* and *Orlagno*, respectively). It is certainly not the case that an image of Heracles is *always* an image of Verethraghna, but several instances where this does seem to be the case underline the fact that this particular Greek god could more easily be experienced as an incarnation of local beliefs and values than any other Greek deity.

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