

# Heracleitos, *On Unbelievable Tales*

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translated from the text of Festa (1902)

The refutation or curing of myths that have been handed down and that are against the laws of nature.

## 1. Medousa

They say that Medousa turned to stone those who gazed at her, and that when Perseus cut off her head a horse with wings came out. But it actually happened like this. She was a beautiful courtesan and any man who caught sight of her was transfixed as if he had been turned to stone. It's just like we say, 'upon catching sight of her, he was turned to stone.'

When Perseus encountered her, *she* fell in love with *him*. She squandered her own wealth and utterly wasted the prime years of her life. When she had lost her youth and her wealth, she was left a lecherous old woman, the kind we call a 'horse'. For the head is the bloom of youth, and that is what Perseus took from her.

## 2. Scylla

It is said that Scylla devoured those who sailed by. Actually, she was a beautiful courtesan living on an island and around her she had gluttonous hangers-on who followed her like dogs. With their help she ruined her guests, among whom were the companions of Odysseus. But she was not able to get him because he always had his wits about him.

## 3. Caineus

It is said that Caineus was originally a woman but was later turned by Poseidon into a man who could not be wounded by bronze and iron. Actually, as a young *boy* Caineus was loved by Poseidon, and later on when he reached manhood became strong-willed and indomitable. He could not be bought off by gifts of bronze and iron. (Gold and silver were not yet in use.)

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#### 4. Atlas

The story handed down about Atlas is that he bore the sky on his shoulders. This is impossible, since he too is beneath the sky. But rather, Atlas was a wise man and the first to observe astronomical phenomena. He predicted storms and the shifting of the winds and the rising and setting of stars.<sup>1</sup> Because of this, a myth was fabricated that he bore the world upon himself.

#### 5. The Centaurs

It is said that around Mt Pelion and Mt Pholoe there existed double-formed creatures, who were human down to the hips and the rest of them had the form of a horse. This is not true: it is impossible for a single being in which are merged different creatures to be born and nourished.

Rather, back when the usefulness of horses was still unknown, the men who first rode horses made raids on the plains and plundered them. To those who first saw them from far off, they gave the illusion that they were created from two creatures.

#### 6. Teiresias

It is said that Teiresias had the experience of being both male and female. This is the same mistaken idea that I wrote about in the case of Caineus.

#### 7. Pasiphae

They say that Pasiphae was in love with a bull. It was not, as many people believe, an animal from the herd (for it is laughable for the queen to desire a creature impossible to mate with). But rather, she fell in love with one of the locals, a man called Tauros ['Bull']. She enlisted Daidalos' help in her amorous scheme and, having given herself over to Tauros, gave birth to a son who bore an extraordinary resemblance to him. People accepted him as Minos' son, but they noted that he looked like Tauros. So he was called by the portmanteau 'Minotauros'.

#### 8. The Harpies

The myth is handed down that the Harpies ['the Snatchers'] were women with wings who kept snatching Phineas' food. Actually, one would assume that these women were courtesans who ravaged Phineas' household and abandoned him, leaving him without even the food he needed. And whenever he recovered just enough the Harpies would turn up again, lay waste to everything, and depart, as courtesans do.

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<sup>1</sup> We translate Festa's emendation to fill the lacuna in the text: μεταβολὰς <ἀνέμων καὶ ἐπιτολὰς> ἄστρων.  
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#### 9. Perseus

The account given about Perseus is that Hermes gave him winged sandals. Actually, Hermes created a training program for running, in which Perseus gained a reputation for excellence. Spectators were amazed at his speed and said that he had wings attached to his feet. It's just like how we're in the habit of saying about fast runners, 'he took wing.'

#### 10. Glaucos of the Sea

It is reported that Glaucos was a prophet who lived in the sea. Actually, he lived on an island and to those sailing by he would always signal where they should set their course, thus predicting future events.

#### 11. The Cyclops

One should assume that since the Cyclops lived in isolation he was ignorant of laws, was reliant solely on force, and that he had only one means of perception -- his eyesight -- and could not foresee anything by way of reason. Clever Odysseus defeated him.

#### 12. Atalanta, daughter of Schoineus, and Hippomenes

They say that Atalanta and Hippomenes were turned into lions on the mountain. But this is a kind of mistaken assumption about them. One day at noon they entered a cave because they wanted to spend time together. By chance there were lions inside the cave, which devoured them. Later, since Atalanta and Hippomenes did not appear after the beasts had left, their companions assumed that the pair had been transformed.

#### 13. The Daughters of Phorcys

The daughters of Phorcys are imagined as all making use of a single eye, which they were continually passing around amongst themselves to whomever needed it next. But rather, it is likely that three women who had gone blind made use of a single guide for getting around. [Their names were Pephredo, Enyo and Perso. They kept guard over the golden apples.]<sup>2</sup>

#### 14. The Sirens

They tell the myth that the Sirens were double-formed creatures who had the legs of birds and the bodies of women. They killed those who sailed past. Actually, they were courtesans, renowned for their skill with musical instruments and their sweet voices, and exceptionally

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<sup>2</sup> These sentences are likely an interpolation.

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beautiful. Their accomplishments were such that any men who encountered them ended up having their wealth entirely consumed. They were said to have the legs of birds because they quickly abandoned men once they had squandered their wealth.

#### 15. Chimaira

Homer describes the Chimaira's appearance as,

*a lion at the front, a serpent at the back, and a she-goat in the middle' (Iliad 6.181)*

But rather, the truth would be this. A woman who ruled the region had two brothers who served her called Leon ['Lion'] and Dracon ['Serpent']. Because she broke treaties and murdered guests she was killed by Bellerophon.

#### 16. Circe

The myth has been handed down that Circe used a potion to transform men. Actually, she was a courtesan and used to enchant her guests. At first she would ply them with every kind of fawning act to gain their favour. After they had become entranced, she used their desires to keep them leashed to her, acting foolishly like animals in pursuit of pleasure. Odysseus defeated her too.

#### 17. The Fire-breathing Bulls

Who would assume that a mortal being could breathe fire from its own body, given that fire destroys everything? But rather, the fire-breathing bulls were wild and untamed creatures who were quick to destroy whatever they looked on. And so the quick destructiveness that accompanied them was portrayed as fire.

#### 18. The Hydra

The account given about the Hydra is that she was a many-headed beast – but there's no truth in this. Rather, it is likely that she had many offspring who hung around her and assisted her since she had given birth to them.<sup>3</sup> Together they killed anyone who came near.

#### 19. The Spartoi

Who could believe that, after Cadmos sowed the serpent's teeth, armed warriors sprung up? Rather, Cadmos came to rule the region after slaying the beast who had laid waste to

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<sup>3</sup> We translate Festa's suggested insertion of ἄτε ('as if')

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the land. Cadmos gathered the scattered inhabitants together in one place. They, being warlike and bestial, immediately turned on each other. All but a few were killed.

#### 20. The Golden Apples

They say that a serpent used to keep guard over the golden apples of the Hesperides. Actually, there was a man, Dracon ['Serpent'], who accumulated a lot of gold as an orchardist. He was sought out by some distinguished ladies who bound his spirit with erotic desires. For the rest of his life they kept him as a helper and a guard for their pleasure garden.

#### 21. Those in Hades

It is said that Heracles went down to Hades and returned with Cerberos, and that Orpheus did the same with his wife Eurydice. But the truth is that when someone had returned safely after enduring a long and dangerous trip, people would declare that he had been delivered from Hades. It is just like we declare even now that those who survive great suffering, perilous journeys or deadly diseases have returned safely from Hades.

#### 22. Phaethon

Phaethon, the son of Helios, longed to climb into his father's chariot and drive it. He drove it incompetently and people were killed by the heat, so Zeus struck him down with his thunderbolt...<sup>4</sup>

#### 23. Orpheus

It is said that Orpheus caused rocks, trees, beasts, and birds to move. Rather, one might say truthfully that he took people who lived like beasts and knew nothing of either customs or laws and filled them with a fear of the gods, and that he took people who were hard and stubborn like rocks and trees and induced in them piety. Because he charmed those people with his words he earned this reputation.

#### 24. Helle and Phrixos

When Helle and Phrixos escaped the scheme of their stepmother Ino their guardian, Crios ['Ram'], escaped with them in a small boat during a storm. It came to pass that Helle fell out into the sea. (As a result, the sea received the name 'Hellespont' ['sea of Helle']). Phrixos, however, reached safety. Aietes lusted after Phrixos, and when Crios intervened and tried to

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<sup>4</sup> The rest of this passage has been lost.

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preserve Phrixos' purity, he was flayed completely and his skin hung upon a nail. His hide received the name 'golden' because Crios had shown the utmost loyalty.

#### 25. Pans and Satyrs

...<sup>5</sup> because they lived in the mountains far away from women, whenever a woman did turn up, the Pans and Satyrs would all share her for sex. [They were thought to have the hair and the legs of goats because they neglected to wash and a stench hung around them. And here is the reason they were thought to be companions of Dionysos: they did the work of grape cultivation.]<sup>6</sup> It's just like now, when it comes to women who are available to all, we say that we all do them like Pans.

#### 26. Asclepios

They say that Asclepios was struck down by a thunderbolt. Actually, the following would be more plausible. Asclepios established and advanced the field of medicine, but he died from a burning fever. Because of the burning heat, they say he was struck by a thunderbolt.

#### 27. The Cap of Hades

It is said about the cap of Hades that if someone put it on, like Perseus did, they became invisible. Actually, the cap of Hades is the fated destination into which the dead depart and become invisible.

#### 28. Boreas and Oreithyia

It is said that Boreas ['the north wind'] carried off Oreithyia. Rather, he was king of the region to the north. The same assumption and approach can also be used for the story of Zeus and Ganymede. He was a king who carried off Ganymede, and he was said to have transformed into an eagle because it too is a formidable creature. The same can be said for Eos and Tithonos, and for Aphrodite and Anchises.

#### 29. Proteus

It is said that Proteus transformed himself into water, and in the next moment to fire. It is obvious that to good people he was like water but to bad people he handed out punishments, as they deserved. His reputation spread as a result of these actions.

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<sup>5</sup> The beginning of this passage has been lost.

<sup>6</sup> These sentences are likely an interpolation.

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### 30. The Hound and the Fox

They say that Cephalos' hound was granted the ability to catch any beast it saw and that nothing could catch the Teumessian fox. When the hound chased the fox – lest fate be contradicted – Zeus turned them both to stone. Such a fiction could not occur, as it violates the ceaseless action of both when they hunt.<sup>7</sup>

### 31. The Horses of Diomedes

They say that Diomedes' horses were man-eaters. But they were actually a wild-grazing herd. No one had been able to harness them to a chariot – but Heracles managed it.

### 32. Calypso and Odysseus

It does not make sense that Calypso offered to make mortal Odysseus immortal. What she actually offered were magnificent, plentiful things for his nourishment and enjoyment during his life. Because of this, whenever we recline at a feast, enjoying ourselves magnificently, we too say we are 'among the gods'.

### 33. Cerberos

Cerberos should be interpreted in the way I have interpreted the Hydra, i.e. that he had two pups who always walked beside their father, such that it seemed that he had three heads.

### 34. Lamia

They give the account that, after Zeus had sex with Lamia, Hera transformed her into a beast, and that whenever Lamia becomes mad, she takes out her eyes and places them into a cup, and that she eats flesh, even that of humans.

This is what actually happened: Zeus, who was a king, had sex with her because she was beautiful. Hera kidnapped her, gouged out her eyes and cast her out into the mountains. From then on, she lived there in misery and had no one to look after her. Since she lived in the wilds, unwashed and neglected, she appeared to be a beast.

### 35. Procne, Philomela and Tereus

The account they give is that Procne, Philomela and Tereus were transformed into birds: a swallow, a nightingale and a hoopoe respectively. This is what actually happened. Procne and Philomela killed Itys and looted his house. They boarded a small boat and made a swift escape. Tereus chased after them and when he failed to capture them, he killed himself. As

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<sup>7</sup> We translate Festa's suggested emendation of ἄταυστον ('unceasing') for αὐτῶν ('their').

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a result of their disappearance, people said that they had turned into birds because they vanished so suddenly.

### 36. The Daughters of Helios

They say that the daughters of Helios were transformed from humans into black poplars. That wasn't what happened. Rather, because of what happened to their brother, they threw themselves into the river Eridanos. When people searched beside the river and did not find them, but *did* find the trunks of three black poplars, they assumed that the daughters had been turned into trees. [Their names were Phoibe, Lampeto and Aigle.]<sup>8</sup>

### 37. Panoptes

People invented the idea that Panoptes, because he was eager to see and listen in on everything, had eyes covering his whole body. As a result, we still even now call people who are inquisitive in this way 'panoptic.'

### 38. Endymion and Selene

It is said that Selene fell in love with Endymion while he was sleeping, and that she came down and had sex with him. But rather, Endymion, as a shepherd, would have been inexperienced with women and so, if a woman lusted after him ...<sup>9</sup> and, asked by someone who it was, would have said 'the Moon' ['Selene'].

### 39. The Cattle of Helios

Regarding the cattle of Helios, I discovered an allegory in the *Iliad*. Among the ancients it was not acceptable to sacrifice working oxen to the gods. This is attested in Aratos, and is also clear from the poem itself. For Hecabe says to Athena:

*To you I will sacrifice a broad-browed year-old heifer  
not broken in, whom no man has yet harnessed to a yoke. (Iliad 10.292-3)*

Not only this: there is also the fact that they were called 'cattle of Helios ['the sun']' because they work the land and are our source of sustenance. The companions of Odysseus made a feast of working oxen, not the cattle of Helios, and

*because of their own insolence they incurred suffering beyond their allotment.  
(Odyssey 1.34)*

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<sup>8</sup> This sentence is likely an interpolation.

<sup>9</sup> This part of the sentence has been lost, but the sense is clear.

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