

# Monsters of Greek Mythology

*This handout is an adaptation of two pages from our mythology publication, "Activitates Liberis, Volume I: Mingle with Myth."*

CENTAURS were half-man and half-horse, and often savage creatures - in one story, they started a battle in the middle of a wedding banquet! However, the centaur Chiron was well educated, and he served as the childhood tutor to the Greek hero Achilles (from the *Iliad*), Jason (the leader of the Argonauts), and Aesculapius (the famous healer). Although centaurs were usually immortal, Chiron was forced to give up his immortality. After his death, Zeus made him into the constellation Sagittarius.

CERBERUS was a three-headed dog, who guarded the entrance to the Underworld. He ensured that only spirits could enter the Underworld, and he presented the greatest obstacle to heroes who were sent into the Underworld on missions.

The CHIMAERA was a fire-breathing monster that had the head of a lion, body of a goat, and tail of a serpent. He was the son of two other snaky monsters: Echida, part-snake and part-woman, and Typhon, a man with wings and viper coils on his entire body, who could flash fire from his eyes. The Chimaera terrorized the countryside of Lycia. The king there, Iobates, asked Bellerophon to kill the monster to save his people.

CHRYSOMALLUS, better known as THE GOLDEN FLEECE, was a winged ram with golden fleece. A cloud nymph sent this flying ram to save her two children from being sacrificed. As Chrysomallus flew with the children on his back, the girl Helle fell into the sea, but the boy Phrixus was carried to safety. Phrixus then sacrificed the ram to the gods, and Chrysomallus was placed among the constellations as Aries (the Ram). The fleece was hung on a tree and later was the item sought by Jason and the Argonauts in their quest.

A CYCLOPS was a giant man with one eye in the center of his forehead. According to some ancient authors, the Cyclopes worked in Hephaestus' workshops, and they were said to have built the massive walls of Mycenae. For this reason, such walls are called "cyclopean." The most famous story about a Cyclops is the one Homer tells about a certain Cyclops named Polyphemus. The hero Odysseus, who was trapped in Polyphemus' cave, blinded the giant's large eye and then outsmarted him in order to escape. Polyphemus had blocked the cave's exit with a large stone, and he patted the backs of his sheep as they exited in order to prevent the escape of Odysseus and his men. He couldn't have expected, however, that Odysseus would have his men ride to their freedom by clinging to the bellies of the exiting sheep!

ECHIDNA, who was known as the mother of monsters, had the bottom part of a snake but the torso of a woman. She and the monster Typhon together were the parents of several of the most famous monsters of Greek mythology, including Cerberus, the Chimera, and the Lernaean Hydra.

The HARPIES were two daughters of the Sea and the Earth. They were violent creatures who had the faces of women and the bodies of birds. They were often a nuisance: one time they decided to harass a blind prophet named Phineus. Every time he tried to eat a meal, the harpies would snatch away his food or defile it with poop. They continued to do so until the sons of the North Wind drove them away.

A HIPPOCAMPUS was a sea horse. It had the front parts of a horse but a fish tail in the back. They pulled the chariot of Poseidon, the god of the sea.

The LERNAEAN HYDRA was a huge monster with nine snake heads, and it lived in the Lernaean swamp. Hercules' second Labor was to kill the Hydra. Unfortunately, for each Hydra head which Hercules cut off, two grew back in its place; in addition, one head was immortal. Hercules, with the help of his nephew, burned the necks as he cut off the heads, thus preventing them from regenerating. He placed the immortal head under a huge rock.

MEDUSA was a Gorgon (a winged woman with snakes for hair), who could turn anyone who looked at her into stone. She was mortal, but her two sisters, who were also Gorgons, were immortal. Perseus was given the task of killing her: he used a shield as a mirror to watch what he was doing so that he wouldn't look her in the eye (and thus be turned to stone). He cut her head off so that he could give it to his jealous soon-to-be stepfather, and he turned him to stone in the process! Medusa's head was then mounted to Athena's shield, the *aegeis*.

The MINOTAUR was half-bull and half-man, the son of Minos, king of Crete. Minos had a magical Labyrinth, built by the inventor Daedalus, and he placed the Minotaur in the center of the maze. It was designed so that anyone who was inside of the Labyrinth would hear the sound of the Minotaur grow quieter as he drew closer, and louder as he moved farther away (so as to disorient those who entered the Labyrinth). The Minotaur was killed by Theseus, who made a trail for himself with a spool of thread so that he could find his way back out of the Labyrinth.

PEGASUS was born from the blood of Medusa's head when Perseus slew her. His hoof struck the ground on Mt. Helicon, the home of the nine Muses, and immediately a spring burst up in that very spot. For many generations, Greek poets would praise this spring, called the Hippocrene. Riding Pegasus through the air, Bellerophon killed many adversaries, including the Chimaera. They were great companions until Bellerophon tried to scale Mt. Olympus: Pegasus realized the gods would not appreciate this act, so he threw Bellerophon off his back. Pegasus then became one of Zeus' favorite horses and would always bring Zeus his lightning and thunderbolts.

The SPHINX was a monster with a woman's head and chest, a lion's body, and a bird's wings. The gods sent her to punish the city of Thebes, where she devoured those who could not answer her riddle. Finally, Oedipus successfully answered the riddle, and the Sphinx then threw herself off of her high perch and died.