

Topic Page: [Cerberus \(Greek mythology\)](#)

Definition: **Cerberus** from *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

(sûr'bĕrĕs), in Greek mythology, many-headed dog with a mane and a tail of snakes; offspring of Typhon and Echidna. He guarded the entrance of Hades. One of the 12 labors of Hercules was to capture him.



Image from: [A medieval depiction of Hades and Persephone—the... in Gods, Goddesses, and Mythology](#)

Summary Article: **Cerberus**

From *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*

The monstrous, multi-headed dog who guarded the entrance to the Underworld, ensuring that those who entered never left. “With his tail and ears he fawns on those who enter,” says Hesiod (*Theogony* 770–3), “though he will not let them go back out again, but lies in wait and devours anyone he catches going out of the gates.” He was the offspring of TYPHON and ECHIDNA, and thus brother to other famous monsters, the HYDRA OF LERNA, the CHIMAERA, and ORTHUS, the two-headed hound of Geryon. Hesiod describes him as “unmanageable, unspeakable Cerberus who eats raw flesh, the hound of Hades with a voice of bronze, fifty-headed, bold and strong”

(310–12); but he was more usually said to have only three heads, and in art, for practical reasons, he is usually shown with two or three, and occasionally just one. He was also described as having a serpent for a tail and snake-heads sprouting from his body.

The last and most difficult of the twelve LABOURS set for HERACLES by Eurystheus was to bring Cerberus up from the Underworld. HADES (1) gave Heracles permission to take him for a short while, on condition that he mastered him without using weapons; so Heracles overcame the hound by brute strength alone, even though he was bitten by the serpent-tail. Then he dragged him up into the daylight, mad with rage and fighting every inch of the way, and carried him off to show to Eurystheus, before returning his captive to Hades. In ancient art Heracles is shown confronting Cerberus (Fig. 43), or leading him away, sometimes accompanied by Athena and/or Hermes. On two Caeretan hydriai, Eurystheus hides in terror in his great jar (see NEMEAN LION), and here from a truly fearsome Cerberus, three-headed and embellished with snakes (Fig. 69). Cerberus is popular too in medieval art, and in Dante's Hell (*Inferno* 6) he gnaws on the gluttonous in the Third Circle.

Cerberus plays a part in the stories of two other heroes who visited the Underworld: ORPHEUS had to charm him with music when he went to seek Eurydice; and the Sibyl of Cumae, while helping AENEAS to get past him, threw him a honey-cake steeped in soporific drugs – hence the expression “a sop for Cerberus”, meaning to give a bribe, to quieten a troublesome person. Ovid describes the hound's visit to the upper world, and how he struggled madly, turning his eyes away from the daylight and the bright sunshine and filling the air with his furious barking. His spittle, shed in rage from his three huge mouths, spattered the ground and took root, growing into the aconite plant from which is produced deadly poison. With this MEDEA later tried to kill THESEUS.

[Apollodorus 2.5.12; Pausanias 2.31.2, 2.35.10, 3.18.13, 3.25.5–6, 9.34.5; Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.417–25; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 7.408–19.]



Fig. 43. Heracles capturing a two-headed Cerberus.

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