Heracles and the Head Hunters

During the course of his twelve labors, Heracles vanquishes a wide variety of monstrous creatures whose eerie hybrid shapes, actions, and contexts have admitted many different interpretations (Stafford 2012, 23-4). Much remains to be said about Heracles' *parerga*, however, especially considering that many of these secondary adventures involve not monsters but human characters exhibiting monstrous behavior, making them potentially more disturbing than mythological monsters as their actions fall within the realm of reality. In particular, four of these *parerga* involve opponents who targeted the skulls of their victims: Antaeus, Termerus, Cycnus, and Lityerses. Heracles' victories over them, like those over the monstrous beasts, represent not only the abstract triumph of civilized values (Stafford 2012, 51), but quite likely reflect specific ritual practices of early Mediterranean societies that were replaced by more humane customs as Hellenic culture developed.

Antaeus, in northern Libya, is best known for challenging passersby to wrestling contests, which he inevitably won as long as he was in contact with the Earth, his mother, from which he drew his strength. But after killing his exhausted victims, he cut off their heads and used their decapitated skulls to roof a temple to his father, Poseidon (Pindar, *Isthmian* 4.3). After killing Antaeus, Heracles crossed paths with Termerus, known mainly as a pirate who plundered coastal cities on the coast of Asia Minor. But Termerus also routinely killed people by smashing their heads. (Plutarch, *Life of Theseus*, 11.1-2). In Thessaly, Heracles encountered Cycnus, who robbed passersby, cut off their heads, used them as trophies for building a temple to his father Ares (Scholiast on Pindar, *Olympian* 2.82 and 10.15). In Lydia, Heracles faced Lityerses, a master harvester who challenged travelers passing by his territory to a harvesting contest. He

always won, and decapitated his victims, displaying their heads on a heap of grain (Grimal 2002, 261).

Although these four stories relate to human sacrifice, which appears in other of Hercules' *parerga* (e.g. Bousiris, Syleus, Cacus), they are more specific. Unlike human sacrifice in ancient Mediterranean society, the archaeological evidence for which remains largely inconclusive (Hughes 1991, 188-9), head-taking and the use of skulls in various rituals has been confirmed by material finds dating from the Mesolithic through the Iron Age. Depending on the culture, head-taking might indicate social and political power, a means to terrify and impress one's enemies; it might serve as a symbol of spiritual efficacy as part of a religious ritual; or it might have a strong association with fertility (Armit 2012, 37-40). The skull shrines created by Antaeus and Cycnus, for example, are more suggestive of the ritual collection of enemy skulls than of actual human sacrifice to Poseidon and Ares. Termerus' targeting of skulls may also reflect this real-life practice. The widespread belief in links between human heads and the fertility of crops, animals, and people most likely informed the story of Lityerses; a range of surviving textual sources makes symbolic links between heads of humans and heads of grain (Armit 2012, 102; Felton, 1998). In all these cases, the conquest of such characters by Heracles suggests the replacement of these earlier, more "primitive" practices with less transgressive ones.

At the same time, these four stories admit of another interpretation. Collection of enemy skulls or of heads to represent fertility generally occurs as a tribal action, not the action of an individual. Antaeus, Cycnus, Termerus, and Lityerses were not acting as part of a group when they killed their victims. Rather, they acted alone, preyed on travelers (not enemy tribes), tortured their victims, and, except for Termerus, took specific trophies—the skulls. Also, the motives behind their actions lack political or social motivation, and Antaeus and Cycnus in

particular apparently acted to impress or emulate their fathers. In short, their behavior closely resembles that of serial killers (Vronsky 2004, *passim*; cf. Lämmle 2013, 147-54). Thus, the existence of these four characters, along with other killers whom Heracles encountered along the road (e.g. Syleus, Cacus), may have reflected not only earlier ritual cultural practices as described by Armit, but also may have expressed an awareness of real-life serial mutilation-murders, a societal fear about the dangers of traveling along desolate, unprotected roads, and a desire for law and order as represented by Heracles' prevailing over these killers.

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