

CULT OF HERACLES

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Mystery Cults series for the Amazons vs Valkyries adventure setting. The religious cults presented here are just a few of the hundreds that exist in this setting. Some are dedicated to chthonic gods that are almost forgotten, while others worship new deities, such as Alexander the Great. These cults are most common in Greece and the Greek colonies, but also exist in Egypt, Persia, Rome, and Carthage. Even in less civilized lands druids, witch doctors, and other religious leaders join together, keep secrets, pursue common goals, and organize themselves in a hierarchy.

MYSTERY CULTS

Mystery cults are secret societies that exist within religious institutions. Like other secret societies, their existence is well known, but their rituals, lore, and objectives are concealed. Only the initiated are allowed access to these secrets.

Levels of Initiation. Cult membership is divided into a hierarchy of at least twenty degrees or ranks. Some cults have more than sixty ranks. Only the high priestess (or priest) is privy to all the cult's secrets.

Exclusivity. None of these cults require their members to disavow or deny other deities and cults. In fact, many people are simultaneously members of multiple cults.

Cult Secrets. Only the initiated know the true name of the cult's deity, and they are forbidden to speak it to anyone outside the cult. At each level of initiation, a different true name is revealed to the member with only the high priestess knowing the actual true name of the deity. Mystery cults also harbor many other secrets and esoteric lore. Some examples are listed on the table below.



D20	Secret Lore
1	Facts about mythical events
2	Location of an entrance to the Underworld
3	Location of a gate to another dimension
4	Location of a prison holding a demon or deity
5	Formula for creating magical items
6	Rare spells
7	Facts about other planes in the multiverse
8	Facts about a mythical beast
9	Facts about distant lands
10	The true ambitions of a major political figure
11	Archaic or extinct language(s)
12	Secret of navigating the tunnels of Europa
13	Lore of a lost or forgotten civilization
14	Location of a legendary magic item
15	Clues or answer to a puzzle or riddle
16	Location of a sacred site
17	Lore about a humanoid or monstrous race
18	Lore of a lost, magic-like technology
19	Location of a magical island
20	Lore about the Amazons Vs Valkyries conflict

Initiation Fees. Although membership in most cults is open to everyone, initiation rites have fees. These fees offset the cost of the ritual and help support the temple and its ambitions. The amount of the fee increases with each degree and depends on many factors, including how much the applicant can afford and how much the cult leaders desire the new member.





Initiation Times. Most cults conduct initiations once per year. Common dates include the first full Moon after the Winter Solstice, the Spring Equinox, and the Summer Solstice. The initiation process usually involves preliminary ritual purification, eating sacred foods, and confessing of wrong doing. This takes at least three days and sometimes up to two weeks. The actual ceremony begins at sundown and continues until sunrise. During the ritual, the initiates consume psychoactive substances and venture into a deep cavern where they have unnerving encounters with deities and demons.

Membership Advantage. Besides access to secret lore and powerful associates, being a cult member has other perks. Membership can mean that your business wins a lucrative contract from a trade guild or local magistrate. It could mean that your child is educated by an expensive Greek tutor, or your competitor suffers a tragic setback.

Leadership and Members. Cult hierarchies are separate from temple priesthods. While most leadership positions within the cults are occupied by priestesses (or priests), not all temple priestesses are members of the mystery cult. Likewise, most cult members are not priestesses or employed by the temple; they are private citizens, lawyers, merchants, stage actors, lords, scribes, and princesses.

THE CULT OF HERACLES

Domains: Fertility, Tempest, Hunt

Location: Greece

Cult Secrets: Martial training, Herculean adventures

Heracles was an Olympian demigod that ascended to godhood, worshiped as the divine protector of mankind. He is the son of Zeus and Queen Alcmene (Perseus' granddaughter). In spite, or perhaps because of, Heracles' human failings he has become a popular cult figure with many temples and shrines. The center of Heracles' worship is in Thebes, where he was born.

King Amphitryon thought the child was his own and a gift from Hera and so named him Heracles, which literally means 'Hera's Glory.' However, the name was deeply insulting to the goddess and further stoked her ire. She hated all of Zeus' illegitimate children, but this set Heracles apart. So she sent two deadly snakes into his crib shortly after he was born. Zeus saw the snakes and infused Heracles with superhuman strength to kill them. Soon after, Zeus brought the newborn to Mount Olympus and carefully put him to Hera's breast while she slept. Heracles' powerful sucking pained her and brought forth a flow of milk that sprayed across the heavens. The raw power ingested from Hera combined with his enhanced strength and divine heritage made Heracles as strong as Atlas.

Zeus had planned for Heracles to become a great king of Thebes and for twenty years it seemed that he was destined to inherit the throne. Heracles became a famous warrior and hero. He married and had three small sons. But Hera had only been biding her time while he rose to greatness. Just as Zeus' plan for Heracles was reaching fruition, she intervened. Using magic, Hera infected his mind and sent him into a murderous fury that left his wife and sons dead.

Even with his divine heritage, immense strength, and fearlessness, Heracles was a plaything of gods.

Hera's hatred for him grew as he overcame her plots to destroy him. After murdering his family, Heracles endured many long adventures and accomplished his legendary Twelve Labors. He became an icon of heroic worship long before he joined the pantheon of deities. He has since become a symbol of humanity succeeding, even as the cosmos conspires against them.

Through his many heroic deeds he acquired the title "the Triumphant." However, Heracles was no simple brute. Many of his adventures required innovative thinking, such as cleaning the Augean stables that housed over three thousand oxen.

The figure of the ox, a strong, brutish, and beautiful animal that provides succor and is a fierce defender of its territory is emblematic of Heracles' spirit. It represents both his strength and pastoral aspects. Many of Heracles' adventures involve him seeking his lost cattle, as if the animals guide the hero into daring acts of boldness.

Heracles is a hero-god and despite ascending to the Olympian pantheon, he does not rest. His time as a mortal has passed, yet that flame of heroism is one he shares with those who are bold enough to claim to 'be like Heracles'. It is no accident his champions travel far and wide with an Olympian vigor and strength as if Heracles himself blew the wind at their back.



THE TEMPLES

The main temple to Heracles is in Thebes, but every city and town in Magna Graecia has at least a small shrine dedicated to him. One of the largest is in the Valley of the Temples in Sicily. Another large temple and public gymnasium, the Kynosarges, lies in a grove near Athens. The most common feature on these temples is a statue depicting Heracles in one of his many adventures. Each temple tends to have one particular tale they favor over others. Priests act as storytellers, inspiring all those who wish to hear about the deeds of the Triumphant Heracles. Some of these statues are enchanted and it is said in times of need, they move as if animated by mystic force.

THE HERACLIDS

A larger-than-life man, Heracles fathered so many children there is a term to describe their tribe – Heraclids (more information in the [Bloodline Feats](#) supplement). People claiming to be Heraclids can be found in the temples and Halls of Heracles, retelling tales of this ancestor and passing the heroic tales down to a new generation. The hero-god doesn't mind – for if you are as bold as Heracles you may be one of his daughters or sons.

HALLS OF HERACLES

Taverns, boarding houses, gymnasiums, and recruitment centers known as Halls of Heracles are scattered throughout Magna Graecia. The largest is in Corinth. The most prestigious is in Thebes. Others can be found in cities from Tyre to Syracuse. These guildhalls have close ties with the local temples of Heracles, sporting circuits, mercenary companies, and breweries. Adventurers are invited to the Hall to tell their tales and compare their deeds to the legendary hero himself. This keeps the spirit of Heracles roaming the mortal world even after his death and ascension to Mount Olympus. And the best way to connect to Heracles on a divine level is to 'be like Heracles,' which means to go on adventures, do great deeds, and be immortalized in song, story, and stone. Naturally, his worshipers cling to the heroes found in these halls.

INITIATION

New followers of Heracles are always welcome. Priests recruit them after their names come up in a Hall or through a noteworthy deed. Those who wish to join the temple directly and worship Heracles and his memory are accepted into the flock in a ceremony held hours before one of the festivals of Heracles. They are only considered fully initiated once they have memorized and recited in public one of Heracles' adventures.

FESTIVALS

There are few festivals dedicated to Heracles. Besides the Heracleia, a festival held in his honor in Athens, he is also honored at all sporting events.

Heracleia. This exclusive celebration takes place in Athens around the second day of August. This is a celebration of Heracles' death and ascension to the Olympian pantheon. True to the Hero-god's common roots, this is the only religious celebration in Athens that is open to non-citizens. Athletes are handpicked to prepare the celebration rites and twelve young men are selected to be 'Parasites' of Heracles, emulating him and feasting in his name. 'Parasites' in Greece are young men that are not invited to a feast or symposium due to their poverty and low social status, but they arrive anyway. They are allowed to stay and eat, but must endure withering humiliation and mockery from the other guests. Heracles favors the bold; those who step up and endure hardship to partake in the rewards.

OATH OF THE HERO

The concept of 'Hero' is of a person who has transcended mortality and is well remembered by those around the world. Usually, the quickest path for this prestigious title is by 'being like Heracles,' doing bold feats, exploring the world, battling beasts, and being an adventurer. Heracles' Twelve Labors were a pathway to redemption for the crime of killing his own family, yet the true spark of the god is what came from that redemption.

Anyone can be a Hero if they are bold enough, and the temples of Heracles encourage any to step forward to take the Oath of the Hero. The only prerequisite is for the candidate to have ventured abroad at least once and to bring back a tale to tell. Those who prove eager and willing to pursue the path of a Hero are welcome at the temples to train, to learn, and to 'be like Heracles'. The primary training provided by the temples is wrestling, in honor of Heracles' prowess in the sport.

TENETS OF THE HERO

What does it mean to 'be like Heracles'? Heracles was a prolific lover, a figure of Greek manhood, which meant he slept with women and men alike with great vigor and fathered hundreds if not thousands of descendants. Being filled with the fire of life is the first step to be like a Hero. One must also be bold, daring, and fearless.

That is not reckless or suicidal, but courageous. Dare to fight when the easier path is to yield to oppressive monsters and cruel mortals. Make a stand where lesser people would fold and accept misfortune. To be a hero is to live without hesitation and adventure into the vast unknown.

The way of the Hero has the following dogmas:

Be Like Heracles. Be bold. Be strong. Enjoy the mortal pleasures of life.

Nurture Those Around You. Be a beacon of hope for those that see you as friend or family. Tend the fields and the oxen. Life is worth living from every facet.

Fight Like a Hero. Smash the opposition. You belong in battle, defeating all who oppose your might.

To adventure! The labors of a Hero are never over! Go to the halls, listen to the pleas, and off you go to adventures and battles worth engraving in vases and temple walls.

Sire a long line. As mortality bites at your heels, make daughters and sons that will inherit your fire and carry it into the future.

CHANNEL DIVINITY

When you take this oath at 3rd level, you gain the following two Channel Divinity options:

Peerless Wrestler. As a bonus action, you can use your Channel Divinity to augment your athleticism. For the next 10 minutes, you have advantage on Strength checks; you can carry, push, drag, and lift twice as much weight as normal; and the distance of your long and high jumps increases by 10 feet (this extra distance costs movement as normal). You have advantage on any attacks made against a creature you are grappled with.

Mighty Blow. You can use your Channel Divinity to strike with supernatural strength. When you make a damage roll, you can use your Channel Divinity to gain a +8 bonus for the damage. You make this choice after you see the roll, but before the DM says whether the creature stills stands or not. The creature is then shoved a number of feet equal to your Strength modifier.

OATH SPELLS

You gain oath spells at the paladin levels listed.

Strength Domain Spells

Paladin Level	Spells
3 rd	Expeditious retreat , jump
5 th	Enhance ability ¹ , lesser restoration
9 th	Protection From energy , revivify
13 th	Divination , mighty endurance
17 th	Commune , greater restoration

¹Strength, Dexterity, or Constitution only

LOAD BEARING

Beginning at the 7th level your carrying capacity is doubled, and your grappling target must be no more than two sizes larger than you, up from one.

At 18th level, the range, your carrying capacity is tripled and you have no limit on the size of your grappling target.

HEROIC PRESENCE

Starting at 15th level, you and friendly creatures within 30 feet of you can't be frightened while you are conscious.

MIGHTY HERO

At 20th level you have transcended most mortal women and men and have become a mighty hero, just like Heracles. As an action, you can summon the divine spark flung by Heracles himself to become a living legend, gaining the following benefits for 1 minute:

You have resistance to nonmagical slashing, piercing and bludgeoning damage.

When you take the Attack action on your turn, you can make one additional attack as part of that action.

If a damage roll is 12 or more, you cause +12 additional points of damage on that attack.

APPENDIX: NEW SPELL AND MAGIC ITEMS

This appendix covers a new spell, a new magic item, and a new artifact associate with Heracles.

ENCHANTED LION SKIN CLOAK

Wondrous Item, Rare, Requires Attunement

A gift offered to adventurers that have impressed Heracles' priests made out of Lion furs. While wearing the cloak you gain the following benefits:

- Your Armor Class cannot be lower than 12.
- You have resistance to all non-magical damage.
- Keen Smell. You have advantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on smell.
- Running Leap. With a 10-foot running start, you can long jump up to 25 feet.

MIGHTY ENDURANCE

4th level transmutation

Casting Time: 1 action

Range: Self

Components: V, S, M (a figurine of an ox worth 50 gp, which the spell consumes)

Duration: 10 minutes

Bolstering yourself with a surge of positive energy, you gain 8d6 temporary hit points and you have advantage on Constitution saving throws for the duration.

At Higher Levels: When you cast this spell using a spell slot of 5th level or higher, you gain 1d6 additional temporary hit points for each slot level above 5th.

SHIELD OF HERACLES

Armor (shield), Artifact (requires attunement)

A round shield of high quality, in it detailed scenes of battle can be seen. It is believed this once belonged to Heracles when he was still just a demigod.

MINOR BENEFICIAL PROPRIETIES

Vigor of Heracles: While the Shield is on your person you gain +1 on all saving throws.

Veteran of 12 labors: You gain a +2 bonus to AC against ranged attacks while you wield this shield. This bonus is in addition to the shield's normal bonus to AC. In addition, whenever an attacker makes a ranged attack against a target within 5 feet of you, you can use your reaction to become the target of the attack instead.

MAJOR BENEFICIAL PROPRIETIES

Fit for a Hero: If the shield is on your person, you can call on its fabled origins (no action required) to reroll one attack roll, ability check, or saving throw you dislike, including attack rolls that target you. You must use the second roll. This property can't be used again until the next dawn.

Demi-god Aura: The shield has 1d4 charges. While holding it, you can use an action to expend 1 charge and cast the *antimagic field* spell. This property can't be used again until the next dawn. The shield loses this property if it has no charges. You may regain one charge of this feature if the shield is on your person as you are celebrated for one of your heroic deeds in public. You cannot gain more than one charge from the same deed.

Prophecy of the Shield: The shield is carefully painted, showcasing one of Heracles' great battles. If you study the painting for 10 minutes, the painting itself will transform, depicting a future battle involving you, your allies, and some sort of enemy. What you see on the shield is difficult to interpret, but the moment you find yourself in that situation, you suddenly realize what the *Shield* was telling you and you and all your allies gain the advantage for your first round of combat. This property can't be used again until the next dawn.

MINOR DETRIMENTAL PROPRIETIES

Enmity of War. While attuned to this artifact, followers of Ares are automatically hostile towards you.

Destroying the Shield. The only way to destroy the *Shield* is for Hephaestus to strike it with one of his forging hammers and have a highest ranking priest of Hephaestus do a destruction ritual that lasts 12 days and 12 nights.



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