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Heracles and the Ancient East: Between Similarity and Equivalence

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Abstract: The present research aims to investigate the mythological background of Heracles and his association with some of the main eastern characters towards which he seems to converge. Every character will be examined in its historical context and through several ancient sources, iconography or archaeological material. The aims of this article are threefold: a) to present the connections that occur between Heracles and each of the above figures, showing their similarities and differences; b) to try to find points of spatio-temporal intersection of these characters both with Heracles and with each other; and c) to examine whether, which of these eastern figures and to what extent they can shed light on the ancient biography of this particular hero. The result of the research is that the Greek Heracles is largely an eastern figure and that he was possibly composed from features of Ninurta, Nergal and Melqart, who were found in the eastern Mediterranean shortly before his appearance in Greece, having simultaneously evident links with Indra.[1]
Keywords: Errakal; Heracles; Hydra; Indra; Melqart; Nergal; Ninurta.

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Resumen: La presente investigación pretende indagar en los antecedentes mitológicos de Heracles y su asociación con algunos de los principales personajes orientales con los que parece converger. Cada personaje será examinado en su contexto histórico y a través de diversas fuentes antiguas, textuales e iconograficas, y del material arqueológico. Los objetivos de este artículo son tres: a) presentar las conexiones que se producen entre Heracles y cada una de las figuras mencionadas, mostrando sus similitudes y diferencias; b) tratar de encontrar puntos de intersección espacio-temporal de estos personajes tanto con Heracles como entre sí; y c) examinar cuáles de estas figuras orientales y en qué medida pueden arrojar luz sobre la biografía antigua de este héroe en particular. El resultado de la investigación es que el Heracles griego es en gran medida una figura oriental y que posiblemente se compuso a partir de rasgos de Ninurta, Nergal y Melqart, que se encontraban en el Mediterráneo oriental poco antes de su aparición en Grecia, teniendo simultáneamente vínculos evidentes con Indra.
Palabras clave: Errakal; Heracles; Hidra; Indra; Melkart; Nergal; Ninurta.

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1. Introduction

The literature on the figure of Heracles, one of the most popular heroes in antiquity, is vast. One may come across a number of studies that thoroughly investigate the myths and rituals associated with that hero, while there are several papers that explore his connection with various other deities or heroes of the East. The Phoenician Melqart, the Mesopotamian Nergal and Ninurta and the Indian Indra are the most typical examples. However, so far no final answer has been given to many of the questions concerning the relationship of Heracles with those eastern figures.

In studies of this kind, researchers often adopt a comparativist methodology at the outset to guide their investigation. However, in this case, such an approach is deliberately avoided to prevent circular reasoning. The author of the article argues that imposing a methodological framework on a subject in advance might not be particularly helpful. Given the complexity of the Heracles concept, it is deemed more productive to first contextualize and analyze the sources themselves, rather than adopting an a priori methodological stance regarding the nature of comparison. For instance, as will become evident below, the comparison of Heracles with Ninurta differs from comparisons with figures such as Indra or Melqart, because the available evidence and the specific details to be compared vary significantly for each figure. The only methodological principle considered indispensable here is the contextualization of sources. By prioritizing this approach, the sources themselves may guide the research toward more reliable conclusions about the type of comparison, syncretism, or combination at play in each case.

Nevertheless, a clarification is required regarding the criterion that distinguishes a significant similarity between two characters from a typological feature. A glance at the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) index reveals a wealth of typological elements found in scattered myths and folk tales across the globe. How can one differentiate the elements of a myth that indicate transmission from those that are products of universal mythic themes? In such cases, it is, again, more appropriate to apply the methodological principle of contextualization.

For instance, mythological traditions such as the Great Flood or dragon-slaying narratives are often easily understood as universal myths because similar traditions are found among many different cultures. However, the identification of a tradition or myth, even in a very similar form, among distant peoples should not be taken a priori as evidence for the existence of a universal myth. If the Flood myth first appears in Mesopotamia during the second millennium BCE and subsequently in Greece in texts from the first millennium BCE, in China in texts from the third and second centuries BCE, and in India in post-Christian texts, especially during periods when historical connections among these peoples can be verified (for instance, Phoenician expansion, the Silk Road *etc.*), then the universality of this particular myth might simply result from gradual transmission. This might be the case even though it is well known that many ancient traditions can be recorded and preserved in much later periods. Conversely, if the same myth emerged in the aforementioned regions during the same or a different historical period without any apparent signs of contact between them, this would lend greater support to the universality theory. For these reasons, even though it is well known that typologies are also linked to cognitive processes or traits of human psychology that are more or less universal to all people, the

contextualization of ancient sources remains a fundamental methodological principle for distinguishing between typological features and similarities that result from transmission.

In the same vein, it is often the case in research that the association of a hero or god from one culture with counterparts from other cultures is prematurely interpreted as a product of syncretism. Thus, the similarities between Zeus and Baal or between Melqart and Heracles are often understood as the product of a combination of different deities, in which the method of *interpretatio* played an important role. Although the above conclusion may sometimes be the case, there is always another possibility, which has not been sufficiently explored and which has been brought to light mainly by Robert Parker with his new book *Greek Gods Abroad: Names, Natures, and Transformations*. Parker distinguishes between two basic models of interpretatio: (a) the similarity model and (b) the equivalence model[2]. The similarity model holds that we are never dealing with identities but only with similarities that create the need for an interpretation. In this way, Melqart and Heracles are different deities that were simply linked because they exhibited similarities. The equivalence model, on the other hand, espouses that the gods are the same throughout the world and that it is only their names and specific local characteristics that differ. According to this view, Melqart and Heracles are two aspects of the same deity which differ only in their names and in the details that were added or removed based on the representations of the people who worshiped them or were inspired by them.

Parker cites several arguments that show that the equivalence model is not as unlikely or rare as it seems to be[3]. For instance, when one reads that Herodotus refer to the Phoenician Melqart as Heracles[4], his mind goes to an *interpretatio Graeca*, where a foreign deity is presented through a Greek analogy. Things seem more complicated, however, when some centuries after Herodotus, Alexander the Great visits Tyre asking the Tyrians for permission to sacrifice to Heracles, his ancestor[5]. For Alexander, Melqart was not just a foreign deity who resembled Heracles but was Heracles himself, otherwise he would not want to worship a different and unrelated deity[6]. Indeed, even the Tyrians do not seem to have disputed this equivalence between Melqart and Heracles, although they did not allow him entry, seeing him as a foreign power. In the same manner, the work of Philo of Byblos, who was a Phoenician, is full of equations between gods (he conceives them as dead men), such as «Kronos, whom the Phoenicians call El», and he regularly speaks of Phoenician gods by Greek names[7]. As Parker rightly observes, Philos' approach is mostly diffusionist (the Greeks appropriated the Phoenician traditions) and as a result, he implies equivalence[8].

In most of the publications that examine the connection of deities, the similarity model is unilaterally prevalent as a bias and therefore there is much talk of syncretism, combinations or fusions. However, one should also keep the door open to the equivalence model. This does not mean that the connection between two or more characters should be understood through a strict dichotomy of pure similarity or equivalence. Both of these models encompass a wide range of potential correlations and variations. In this article, I will try to shed more light on the connections between Heracles and other eastern figures, by examining the question of whether we are dealing with a single deity/hero who himself or his cult travelled with different names to many different places, or whether we are dealing with separate deities and heroes who were originally products of different cultures and who were linked together in later times due to coincidental similarities. Due to the limited scope of an article, it is not feasible to analyse every aspect of this issue, so I will focus on a few points that I think may lead to new and helpful perspectives.

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2 See Parker (2017: 52-59).
3 *Ibid.*, 62-64.
4 Herodotus, *Histories*, 2.44.1: ἔπλευσα καὶ ἐς Τύρον τῆς Φοινίκης, πυνθανόμενος αὐτόθι εἶναι ἱρὸν Ἡρακλέος ἅγιον.
5 Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander*, 2.16.7: τούτῳ τῷ Ἡρακλεῖ τῷ Τυρίῳ ἔφη ἐθέλειν θῦσαι Ἀλέξανδρος.
6 See Parker (2017: 61).
7 Philo, *Phoenician History*, 10.16: Κρόνος τοίνυν, ὃν οἱ Φοίνικες Ἦλ προσαγορεύουσιν.
8 See Parker (2017: 63-64).

2. The Greek Heracles

2.1. The Name

Heracles is a figure primarily associated with the eastern Mediterranean and Greece, where he is usually presented as the son of Zeus and Alcmene or as a son of Amphitryon and Alcmene. However, traditions vary significantly from region to region, and if one examines the ancient sources, they will find numerous distinct figures bearing the name Heracles. For instance, Diodorus mentions three distinct characters named Heracles who lived in different eras, while Servius, in his commentary on Virgil's Aeneid, quotes Varro: «At that time, as Varro also mentions, all those who had acted bravely were called Heracles, even though he initially enumerated forty-three of them. Hence, we read of Heracles of Tiryns, Argos, Thebes, and Libya»[9]. Were these figures connected by genealogical, political, or mythological ties, or was the name "Heracles", in some cases, simply used as an epithet for the brave, as Varro suggests? Determining the relationship between all these individuals remains a complex task. Despite the diversity of the various namesake figures, one can easily distinguish a more central Heracles, who dominates Greek mythology. Even if he is viewed as a composite of various other heterogeneous figures and actions, this does not diminish his prominence in Greek mythology.

As far as the etymology of his name is concerned, until recently there was a consensus among researchers that it is derived from the conjunction of the name of the goddess Hera and the word *kléos* (= fame, glory), and thus it means 'the glory of Hera'[10]. This particular etymology, however, as several researchers have noted, presents a problem[11]. We know from mythology that Hera was Heracles' enemy and that she was constantly trying to cause him problems by sending several monsters against him. On what ground would Heracles be the glory of Hera, thus possessing a name with a positive connotation for one of his main foes? Moreover, as Paul Kretschmer noticed, the /a/ in the name of Hera is long (Ἥρᾱ) while in the name of Heracles it is short (Ἡρᾰκλῆς)[12] and this poses an additional problem[13].

A very interesting attempt to settle the issue of the relationship between the name of Heracles and the name of Hera, first appeared in 1891 by Karl Tümpel, a German classical philologist who, after a careful study of the sources, concluded that Zeus was probably not the primary husband of Hera. Tümpel observed that in earlier periods the wife of Zeus seems to have been Dione and that there are indications that at an equally primitive stage Hera must have had Heracles as husband[14]. Subsequently, the same author observed that in the case of Zeus and Dione, the latter is a figure named after her husband, Zeus (Dias), while in the case of Hera and Heracles, the latter took the name of his wife[15]. This observation led Tümpel to the belief that we are dealing with two different systems, a patriarchal (Zeus-Dione) and a matriarchal one (Hera-Heracles), which at a later stage were combined and thus Zeus emerged as the husband of Hera[16].

Two years after Tümpel, Jane Harrison, a British classical philologist, utilizing the observations of the former and combining them with the findings of her own research, came to the same

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9 Diodorus, *Bibliotheca*, 3.74.4: τὸν μὲν ἀρχαιότατον Ἡρακλέα μυθολογεῖσθαι γεγονέναι παρ' Αἰγυπτίοις, καὶ πολλὴν τῆς οἰκουμένης τοῖς ὅπλοις καταστρεψάμενον θέσθαι τὴν ἐπὶ τῆς Λιβύης στήλην, τὸν δὲ δεύτερον ἐκ Κρήτης ἕνα τῶν Ἰδαίων ὄντα Δακτύλων καὶ γενόμενον γόητα καὶ στρατηγικὸν συστήσασθαι τὸν Ὀλυμπικὸν ἀγῶνα: τὸν δὲ τελευταῖον μικρὸν πρὸ τῶν Τρωικῶν ἐξ Ἀλκμήνης καὶ Διὸς τεκνωθέντα πολλὴν ἐπελθεῖν τῆς οἰκουμένης, ὑπηρετοῦντα τοῖς Εὐρυσθέως προστάγμασιν. Servius on *Virgil's Aeneid*, 8.564: *tunc enim, sicut et Varro dicit, omnes qui fecerant fortiter, Hercules vocabantur: licet eos primo XLIII. enumeraverit. hinc est quod legimus Herculem Tirynthium, Argivum, Thebanum, Libym*.

10 Farnell (1921: 100); Kirk (1974: 181-182); Philips (1978: 431).

11 Farnell (1921: 100); Schretter (1974: 170).

12 Currie (2024: 53).

13 Kretschmer (1916: 121). George Dunkel tried to solve this problem through an emphatic double vocative with retracted accent, but he admits the problem that this short /a/ poses. See Dunkel (1998: 76, 83).

14 Tümpel (1891: 616-619).

15 *Ibid.*, 618-619.

16 *Ibid.*, 618-619.

conclusion that at a primary stage Hera had Heracles as her husband[17]. Harrison noticed that Zeus and Hera did not have the same altar from the beginning, for at Olympia they had different temples and festivals, while at Dodona, one of the oldest sanctuaries of Zeus, we find the latter married to Dione[18].

The most extensive study in this direction, however, was made in 1906 by the British classical scholar Arthur Cook. Cook added more evidence in favour of the early marriage of Heracles and Hera. According to his opinion, this marriage belonged to a very early matriarchal tradition that was eclipsed by a patriarchal one, thus transforming Hera to a wife of Zeus[19]. Cook also observed that in Greek mythology there are several inadequate understandings of the paternity of some of Hera's children and it seems that some or all of her children may not have been originally fathered by Zeus[20]. Cook lists a lot of evidence in favour of the early conjugal connection between Heracles and Hera, such as coins and archaeological finds[21], and further observes that this connection seems to have been still preserved in Italy (mainly in Etruscan materials) even at times when in Greece Heracles had already been replaced by Zeus. For instance, in an Etruscan mirror published in his article, we see Juno (the Roman equivalent of Hera) marrying Hercules (the Roman equivalent of Heracles)[22]. Another similar example is found in a kylix from the British Museum and in a group of three metopes at the first temple of Hera in Foce del Sele in Campania, dating from around 560 BCE, in which Heracles is shown protecting Hera from some Satyrs[23]. Emma Stafford adds that Heracles surprisingly appears several times in this particular temple of Hera[24].

Cook further notices that both Hera and Heracles were jointly associated with Argos. Pindar presents Argos as «the house of Hera»[25] while Heracles was the main hero of Argos and the ultimate founder of the Argead dynasty, which was part of the Heracleidae (descendants of Heracles)[26]. Moreover, apart from Argos, the other place in the Peloponnese which seems to maintain traditions of positive relations between Heracles and Hera was Sparta[27]. It is no coincidence that the Spartan kings also belonged to the Heracleidae. Finally, in both Argos and Sparta one finds the famous custom of exchanging costumes between men and women, associated with the cult of Hera[28]. Cook points out to a possible connection between this tradition and the custom of which Plutarch informs us that it occurred in Antimachia of Kos island, where the priest of Heracles was dressed in women's clothes during the sacrifice[29].

Tümpel, Harrison and Cook unanimously conclude that Heracles preceded Zeus as husband of Hera, linking him with Pelasgian traditions[30]. In support of this, Cook, after noting the supposed linguistic association of Heracles and Hera with heroes, emphasises that according to Herodotus, the heroes were worshipped by the Pelasgians[31]. Nevertheless, he does not believe that the replacement of Heracles by Zeus as the husband of Hera occurred in a much later period, since Zeus, at least in Dodona, is equally a Pelasgian god. He regards possible that two different Pelasgian traditions coexisted, a patriarchal Pelasgian tradition with Zeus having Dione as his wife

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17 Harrison (1893: 75).
18 *Ibid.*, 74.
19 Cook (1906a: 370-371, 378).
20 *Ibid.*, 366-368.
21 *Ibid.*, 373-375.
22 *Ibid.*, 375-376.
23 *Ibid.*, 373; Stafford (2012: 28).
24 Stafford (2012: 28).
25 Pindar, *Nemean*, 10.2: Ἄργος Ἥρας δῶμα.
26 Cook (1906a: 372).
27 *Ibid.*, 373.
28 *Ibid.*, 376.
29 *Ibid.*, 377. Plutarch, *Quaestiones Graecae*, 58: διὰ τί παρὰ Κῴοις ὁ τοῦ Ἡρακλέους ἱερεὺς ἐν Ἀντιμαχείᾳ γυναικείαν ἐνδεδυμένος ἐσθῆτα καὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν ἀναδούμενος μίτρᾳ κατάρχεται τῆς θυσίας;.
30 Cook (1906b: 416); Harrison (1893, 75); Tümpel (1891, 618-619).
31 Cook (1906b, 417-418); Herodotus, *Histories*, 2.50.3. In fact, Herodotus, comparing the Egyptians and the Pelasgians, observes that the Egyptians do not worship heroes, thus hinting tacitly that hero cults exist among the Pelasgians.

and a matriarchal Pelasgian tradition with Hera having Heracles as her husband. Then, the two traditions became intertwined and the patriarchal one prevailed with Zeus becoming the husband of Hera and with Dione and Heracles being pushed aside or even becoming a separate couple[32].

On the other side, Lewis Farnell, a famous classical scholar from Oxford, although he accepts the etymology of Heracles that connects him with Hera, disagrees with the theory that he was Hera's first husband. The reason for disagreement is that the name of Heracles appears to Farnell as a fairly common name of human Greeks, such as Megacles and Pericles, while on the contrary it is a very unusual name for a Greek god[33]. Moreover, he finds no other examples of husbands being called the "glory" of their wives[34]. For these reasons he concludes that Heracles' name was originally the name of a mortal man and that his career as a hero preceded his career as a god[35].

So far what one should keep from the above analysis is that most classical philologists agree that the name of Heracles is linked to the name of Hera even though they had noticed several problems in this connection. Moreover, there is a possibility that Heracles, before becoming a hero, was a god, an early husband of Hera. All the aforementioned scholars lived and wrote in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a time that is now considerably distant from contemporary research. If one examines their era, with influences such as Frazer's impact on Cook and similar trends, it becomes evident that some of their positions may no longer be accepted today or have been replaced by more recent findings and conclusions. Nevertheless, the fact that they articulated certain ideas in an earlier period, even if motivated by specific factors of their time, does not mean that these ideas lose their value or relevance today, albeit perhaps through necessary updates. As will be demonstrated below, even if the explanation that there was once a patriarchal and a matriarchal Pelasgian tradition explaining the relationship between Hera and Heracles cannot be substantiated, the theory that posits Heracles as an early consort of Hera remains intriguing. It represents an interesting effort to resolve the contradiction between Heracles' name and his antagonistic relationship with Hera.

2.2. Hero or God?

The dual nature of Heracles, sometimes presented as a deity and sometimes as a hero, was observed by various ancient writers[36]. Farnell wonders whether Heracles was just a mortal who was deified or whether he was a dethroned god, who through a series of labours, regained his godhood[37]. Attempts to solve the above riddle are also found in antiquity. For instance, Farnell notes that with the exception of Herodotus, most ancient writers believed that the hero Heracles preceded the god Heracles, that is, that we are dealing with a hero who was deified[38]. Herodotus, however, seemed to believe the opposite. In his second book of *Histories* he states that the god Heracles (corresponding to the Phoenician Melqart) existed five generations before the birth of the mortal Heracles, son of Amphitryon, and thus tries to solve the enigma by separating the god Heracles from the mortal-hero Heracles[39]. A different approach is found in Pausanias, where the hero Heracles precedes the god Heracles, but the transition from hero to god is mediated by a Cretan named Phaistus, who is said to have been the first to convince the people of Sicyon to stop worshipping Heracles as a mere hero and start worshipping him as a god[40].

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32 Cook (1906a: 378); Cook (1906b: 419).

33 Farnell (1921: 100). August Fick in his study of Greek personal names, shows that human names compounded with the word *kléos* are quite common in Greece. See Fick (1894: 13, 162, 395).

34 Farnell (1921: 100).

35 *Ibid.*, 100.

36 Herodotus, *Histories*, 2.44.3-4; Diodorus, *Bibliotheca*, 4.39.4; Pindar, *Nemean*, 3.38. Pindar does not hesitate to describe him as a hero-god (ἥρως θεὸς).

37 Farnell (1921: 97-98).

38 *Ibid.*, 98.

39 Herodotus, *Histories*, 2.44.4: καὶ ταῦτα καὶ πέντε γενεῇσι ἀνδρῶν πρότερα ἐστὶ ἢ τὸν Ἀμφιτρύωνος Ἡρακλέα ἐν τῇ Ἑλλάδι γενέσθαι.

40 Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 2.10.1: Φαῖστον ἐν Σικυωνίᾳ λέγουσιν ἐλθόντα καταλαβεῖν Ἡρακλεῖ σφᾶς ὡς ἥρωι ἐναγίζοντας: οὔκουν ἠξίου δρᾶν οὐδὲν ὁ Φαῖστος τῶν αὐτῶν, ἀλλ᾽ ὡς θεῷ θύειν.

Carter Philips emphasizes that the Heracles of myths is human and that the Olympian god Heracles must refer to a completely different religious movement[41]. Regarding the hero, he believes that the most established form of him arose from a combination of two different heroes, a hero from Boeotia named Alcaeus and a Peloponnesian hero named Heracles, who was considered the grandson of Alcaeus[42]. Geoffrey Kirk trying to date the emergence of Heracles as a god in written sources, concludes that the belief in the divinity of Heracles should not be older than the seventh century BCE[43]. Nevertheless, he considers it quite possible that the myths about Heracles may go back several centuries before Homer and Hesiod, reaching as far back as the Mycenaean era, but he acknowledges that it is very difficult to reconstruct the hero's pre-Homeric past by relying only on classical sources[44].

From all the above, what one must keep in mind for the moment is that the Heracles of the Greek world is sometimes presented as a hero and sometimes as a god, and that the basic ways of interpreting this dual nature are as follows:

a. Heracles was a hero who was deified through his distinctive labors.
b. Heracles was a god who was later reduced to a hero (possibly because Zeus took his place as the husband of Hera).
c. The hero Heracles is distinguished from the god Heracles and they are different figures who for some reason shared the same name.

2.3. The Hydra

If one tries to distinguish in rough lines the basic characteristics of Heracles, one can list the following:

a. his labours and battles with all kinds of monsters,
b. his journeys to the ends of the world and the Netherworld,
c. his weaponry and clothing.

Regarding the clothing and weaponry of Heracles, apart from the very famous lion-skin, Ogden lists the various weapons attributed to Heracles either pictorially or in sources as follows: club, sword, sickle-sword (*harpē*), torch, bow and arrow. He observes that in terms of iconography the most ancient weapon of Heracles seems to be the sword while the rest began to appear in later times[45].

The mention of Heracles' name immediately creates associations with the famous twelve labours assigned to him by Eurystheus, the king of Tiryns: The lion of Nemea, the Lernaean Hydra, the Ceryneian hind, the Erymanthian boar, the Augean stables, the Stymphalian birds, the Cretan bull, the mares of Diomedes, the girdle of Hippolyta, the cattle of Geryon, the golden apples of the Hesperides, and Cerberus. Along them there are minor (not in importance but in fame) feats like battles of Heracles with centaurs or giants.

Emma Stafford observes that Heracles' labours were not a single tradition from the outset and that they seem to have emerged gradually, with the number twelve appearing explicitly only from the third century BCE onwards[46]. Heracles' journeys to various parts of the world and to the Netherworld are largely linked to his labours. As Kirk points out, the first six labours seem to be placed in regions of the Peloponnese, the seventh in the south (Crete), the eighth in the north (Thrace), the ninth in the east (Amazons) and the last three beyond the known world at the western end of the Earth and/or in the Netherworld (Geryon, golden apples and Cerberus)[47].

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41 Philips (1978: 440).
42 *Ibid.*, 431.
43 Kirk (1974: 177).
44 *Ibid.*, 180.
45 Ogden (2013: 26, 31-32).
46 Stafford (2012: 29). See also Boardman (1990: 15).
47 Kirk (1974: 184).

Of all these labours I will focus more on the case of the water-snake Hydra, because the connection of this myth with eastern traditions is more obvious and may constitute a useful historical bridge of the Greek Heracles with eastern figures. Frank Brommer notices that the similarities of the Greek Hydra with depictions on eastern cylinder seals are so striking that coincidence cannot be considered[48]. Moreover, battles of heroes with serpents are depicted in the East both iconographically and textually in a very explicit manner from a very early period (in contrast to the other labours), and similarly, Heracles' battle with the Hydra is one of the oldest attested labours of the hero in Greek art[49]. In fact, the first attestation of Heracles in Greek art seems to be found on a Boeotian bow fibula dating to the late eighth to early seventh century BCE, which simultaneously contains the earliest Greek representation of the hero's battle with Hydra (**Fig. 1**)[50].

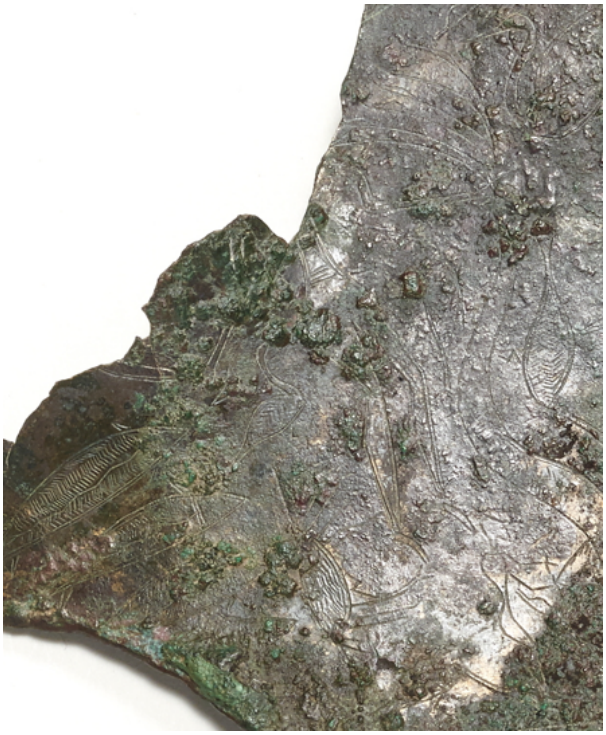

Fig. 1. Two figures fighting a multi-headed snake.
Boeotian bow fibula, 8th-7th century BCE.
© The Trustees of the British Museum
Museum Number: 1898,1118.1.

48 Brommer (1972: 12).

49 Brommer (1972: 12).

50 *Ibid.*, 185; Venit (1989: 100). An equally ancient depiction has been found on an ivory plaque discovered among other ivory plaques at the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia in Sparta. It illustrates Heracles' battle with the Hydra, although there is disagreement regarding its dating. Richard Dawkins (1929: 211, 248) dates it to between 740-710 BCE suggesting that all these ivory plaques derive from Near Eastern inspiration, while Marjorie Venit (1989: 100) places it later, in the seventh century BCE. Venit cites all the relevant findings from the seventh century. One could attempt to push the date back to the eighth or even the tenth century BCE, but unfortunately, there is little certainty. At Kato Phana on the island of Chios, a gem dating to the eighth century BCE has been found, which Winifred Lamb (1934-1935: 151), following James Brock, argued depicts the battle of Heracles and Iolaus against Hera. However, the impression on the gem is too indistinct to allow for certainty. Similarly, Antoine Hermary (1992: 131) mentions a Cypriot plate from Palaepaphos, dating to the tenth century BCE, which shows two hunters attacking a two-headed serpent as potential evidence for early versions of the Heracles myth. However, as he himself notes, this too cannot be supported with certainty, especially since the Hydra is never described in the sources as two-headed.

On the left side of the fibula, two human figures stand out, one taller than the other, fighting a multi-headed snake. The taller figure is unfortunately cut in half, because the upper part of the fibula has not been preserved, but one can clearly distinguish a large crab lying on the side of its right leg. The battle is flanked by various fish-like and bird-like animals, the significance of which is not clear but which may be merely decorative. There is no inscription indicating the names of the protagonists, but that this was the battle of Heracles with Hydra is obvious not only from the many-headed snake but also from the fact that in later depictions of this battle we very often find a crab flanking or snipping Heracles' foot. For instance, in an Attic black-figured lekythos of the fifth century BCE, Heracles appears fighting the Hydra with a crab between his legs (**Fig. 2**). Iolaos is at the other side of the snake assisting Heracles.

Fig. 2. Heracles fights the Hydra, assisted by Iolaos.
Attic lekythos, circa 500-480 BCE.
Photo (C) RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Hervé Lewandowski
Catalogue No. Louvre CA598, Archives Beazley n° 461.

Hydra is a mythical serpent-like monster considered to be the daughter of Typhon and Echidna. The number of heads of Hydra is not constant and changes from tradition to tradition[51]. In the above fibula one counts around six heads. Kokkorou-Alewras identified depictions on Corinthian vases from the sixth century BCE showing the Hydra with ten heads[52]. However, the earliest written source that gives us a number for the heads of Hydra is Alcaeus, a lyric poet from Mytilene who lived at the end of the seventh century BCE. Alcaeus counts nine heads[53].

Marjorie Venit, who has given us an important study on the motif of Heracles' battle with Hydra, points out the political dimension of this myth. Around 561-556 BCE, Peisistratus, who used Heracles as his symbol, created the Hydra pediment which represents Heracles' battle with the nine-headed Hydra, the latter symbolizing the nine rulers who ruled Athens before Peisistratus overthrew them[54]. However, since Alcaeus predates Peisistratus and references the Hydra as having nine heads, this indicates that the tradition of the nine-headed serpent predates Peisistratus, who merely exploited it for political purposes.

The connection between Hydra and the area of Lerna is a mystery. Christina Salowey attempted an interesting connection of this beast with the marshes and wetlands of Argolid and the Lerna region, thus viewing Hydra as a personification of these geological phenomena[55]. Perhaps the fact that it was an area with a lot of water played indeed a role but still this does not explain why Hydra was specifically associated with that area and not with others that also display a lot of water. Burkert hypothesizes that this enigma may be due to some pre-existing Argive traditions that were overlapped by eastern influences. Noticing that the Hydra in some cases is depicted as a seven-headed serpent, he believes that the appearance of number seven, a number which is very sacred in the eastern cultures, may constitute a hint of an eastern influence in the Hydra myth[56]. Indeed, the motif of a god or hero fighting a multi-headed serpent can be traced in many ancient eastern cultures. The cases of India and Iran will be considered first, and then we will move on to Mesopotamia.

3. Heracles in India and Iran

3.1. Indra and Vṛtra

An inherent problem that a researcher faces is that the motif of a god or hero fighting a serpentine monster-demon seems to go way back in history, perhaps to a myth of Indo-European origin, versions of which are found scattered in many different locations of the world. Daniel Ogden calls this phenomenon as «drakōn-slaying narratives» and Calvert Watkins, after examining certain formula-issues in various Indo-European languages that refer to serpent-slaying, notes that the dragon slaying myth may be quasiuniversal[57]. As Watkins admits, it is not easy to talk about an exclusively Indo-European dragon, since there are several different traditions. He was more focusing on finding «the Indo-European touch» in this myth[58]. It is not easy, therefore, to discern whether some of the many myths of heroes and gods fighting multi-headed serpents are offshoots of the same ancient Indo-European tradition, or whether they constitute separate mythological narratives that happen to resemble the Indo-European narrative.

The connection between Heracles and India is not a new observation, nor does it result simply from external comparisons of heroes and gods of the two geographical territories. There are ancient Greek sources that explicitly link Heracles with the region of India. The most basic source is Megasthenes. Megasthenes visited India in 302-288 BCE as an ambassador of Seleucus Nicator.

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51 Ogden (2013: 28-29).
52 Boardman (1990: 35).
53 Alcaeus F443 Voigt; Apollodorus, *Library*, 2.5.2: εἶχε δὲ ἡ ὕδρα ὑπερμέγεθες σῶμα, κεφαλὰς ἔχον ἐννέα, τὰς μὲν ὀκτὼ θνητάς, τὴν δὲ μέσην ἀθάνατον.
54 Venit (1989: 104).
55 Salowey (2021: 46, 51-52, 57-58).
56 Burkert (1987: 18).
57 Ogden (2013: 1); Watkins (1987: 271; 1995: 297).
58 Watkins (1987: 271).

He was hosted for many years at the court of Candragupta Maurya and observations he made during his stay there have been preserved in his work *Indica* from which only fragments survived in works of later writers. Several scholars have stressed the reliability of Megasthenes as a source of information about India, despite the underlying propaganda or occasional inaccuracies in his work[59].

During his tour in India, Megasthenes refers to the cults of certain gods of India, naming them after Greek gods and heroes: Dionysus and Heracles. Dionysus and Heracles are presented by Megasthenes (at least, if we trust the later sources) sometimes as figures who invaded India in remote times and later established their cult there, and sometimes as deities of Indian origin.

> The people of India never sent an expedition abroad nor was [India] ever invaded and conquered with the exception of Heracles and Dionysus, and by the Macedonians in our own times[60].

Specifically, about Heracles he writes:

> They [i.e. the Indians] say that Heracles was born among them. Like the Greeks, they attribute to him the club and the lion's skin. He surpassed other men in strength and defensive abilities to a great extent and cleared the land and sea of many beasts[61].

In a different account he adds:

> They said that the Sibae were descended from those who accompanied Heracles on his expedition, and that they retained the insignia of their origin, because they wore skins like Heracles, carried clubs and branded the mark of a cudgel on their oxen and mules[62].

From the above passages it is evident that Heracles was sometimes seen as a figure who had marched to India and left descendants there and sometimes as a native Indian. An extensive presentation of the sources connecting Heracles with India cannot be made here, but from other references of Megasthenes one may keep the following information about the Indian Heracles:

a. He was honoured by the Sourasenoi, an Indian tribe that had as its centre two great cities, Methora (identified with modern Mathura) and Cleisobora.
b. He had a daughter named Pandaia with whom he committed incest.
c. He is described as a king with many wives and children.
d. He attacked three times without success a strange rock called Aornos, which Alexander the Great is said to have managed to seize[63].

Although it should not be overlooked that some of the above sources mention a journey of the Greek Heracles to India, thus linking him explicitly with gods of the specific geographical location, it is nevertheless considered more likely by researchers that behind the name of Heracles and Dionysus, original Indian deities are hidden. There are three main interpretations of the identity of Heracles, which is of interest to this research: Śiva, Kṛṣṇa and Indra. A detailed description of the three interpretations is beyond the scope of this article, but some brief information on each will be provided.

The interpretation of the Indian Heracles as a reference to Kṛṣṇa seems to precede the other two in time. One detects it in Christian Lassen in 1847, then in August Barth in 1879, and in more detail in Walter Ruben in 1943, while it seems to convince some more contemporary scholars, such as Suvira Jaiswal in 1967 and Ildikó Puskás in a related article of 1990[64]. The main arguments in favour of linking Megasthenian Heracles with Kṛṣṇa are the following:

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59 Brown (1955: 18-33); Schwanbeck (1846: 59-77); Singh (2015: 63-64); Zambrini (1982: 71).
60 Strabo, *Geographica*, 15.1.6. Translations of ancient sources published by other authors will be indicated with a relevant reference. Translations without citation mean that they are mine from the original.
61 Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, 2.39.1.
62 Strabo, *Geographica*, 15.1.8.
63 For all the above information see Strabo, *Geographica*, 15.1.8 and Arrian, *Indica*, 8.4.
64 Barth (1879: 100); Jaiswal (1967: 108-109); Lassen (1847, 796-797); Puskás (1990: 47); Ruben (1943: 278-279. Jaiswal vacillates between the interpretation of the Indian Heracles as Krishna and the interpretation of him as Indra, but does not take a side.

a. Kṛṣṇa is said to carry a club, like Heracles.
b. Mathura, where we find the worship of Heracles according to Megasthenes, at later times was the main centre of Kṛṣṇa's worship.
c. Kṛṣṇa had many wives and children, like Heracles.
d. Kṛṣṇa is associated with battles against various monsters and some resemble certain feats of Heracles.

The connection between Heracles and Kṛṣṇa, as its devotees themselves pointed out, did not always fit with Megasthenes' descriptions and was subject to much criticism. For example, Kṛṣṇa was not the only god of India who carried a weapon like a club and was not the only one who had many wives and children. Additionaly, his connection with Mathura at an early date was questioned by Dahlquist[65].

Those who were not convinced by this theory, tried to link Heracles with other deities of India. The first attempt was made by Sir Alexander Cunningham in 1891 and later by John Kennedy in 1907, who connected Heracles with Śiva[66]. The main reasons for this link were:

a. Śiva sometimes appears with the adjective Lakulīśa (लकुलीश), which means "the lord with the club".
b. The Sibae mentioned by Megasthenes as descendants of Heracles bear a name very close to that of Śiva.
c. Śiva is shown dressed in animal skins, like Heracles (however, mostly tiger or elephant skin, and not lion skin).
d. Śiva's wife, Śakti, sometimes appears as his daughter. This could be an indirect echo of Megasthenes' reference to a daughter of Heracles with whom he committed incest.

The connection between Heracles and Śiva, although interesting, unfortunately fails to explain most of what Megasthenes says about the hero. Śiva is described in Indian literature as a fairly moral god to whom incest would not suit. Unlike Kṛṣṇa or Indra (and the Greek Heracles), Śiva had only one wife to whom he was faithfull and did not have many children as well. Furthermore, Śiva is not described as a warrior or king. Finally, if Heracles' Megasthenes really did correspond to Śiva, one would expect there to be reference to some of the external characteristics of this god that distinguish him from the other deities, such as his third eye[67].

The problems of the above theories led to a third interpretation, which linked Heracles with Indra. This interpretation first appeared by the German Indologist Leopold von Schroeder in 1914 and was expanded in much more detail in 1962 by Alan Dahlquist. Schroeder observed many points of convergence between the figure of Heracles and the figure of Indra, not only on the basis of what Megasthenes writes about Heracles, but also in general. The most crucial similarity between Indra and Heracles is that the former is shown to have fought and killed a snake-like monster, Vṛtra[68]. As Dandekar observes, Indra's battle with Vṛtra is one of the most pivotal points in Indra's biography[69]. Most of the information about this battle is contained in the *Ṛgveda* (RV) and is therefore quite ancient (second half of the second millennium BCE)[70]. RV 1.32 contains the first detailed account of the battle between Indra and Vṛtra:

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65 Dahlquist (1962, 79-80).
66 Cunningham (1891: vii-viii); Kennedy (1907: 967).
67 For the arguments against the Śiva-theory see Dahlquist (1962, 73-77). Dalhquist compiled the various arguments for and against the various gods.
68 Schroeder (1914: 20). The association with a serpent is also observed in the mythology of Kṛṣṇa and Śiva. In particular, Kṛṣṇa is shown fighting with the serpent-king Kāliya while Śiva wears the holy snake Vasuki on his neck. Śiva, unlike the other two gods of India, is shown to have a positive relationship with serpents. However, the above stories appear in much later sources such as the different *Purāṇa* while Indra's relationship with the serpent can be traced as early as the *Ṛgveda*, making him the hallmark of the Indian serpent-slayer god.
69 Dandekar (1950: 2).
70 For the dating of the Ṛgveda see Jamison and Brereton (2014: 5).

> Now I shall proclaim the heroic deeds of Indra, those foremost deeds that the mace-wielder performed: He smashed the serpent. He bored out the waters. He split the bellies of the mountains. He smashed the serpent resting on the mountain—for him Tvaṣṭar had fashioned the resounding mace... Indra smashed Vṛtra, the very great obstacle, whose shoulders were spread apart, with his mace, the great weapon[71].

RV 1.80 adds:

> Go forth! Go to it! Dare! Your mace will not be restrained, for, Indra, manly power and strength are yours. You will smash Vṛtra; You will conquer the waters[72].

In many other passages of the Ṛgveda there are brief or extensive references to this particular battle. If one puts the puzzle together, the following picture emerges: The Vṛtra is presented as a large-sized snake, which has its body coiled around the mountain from which all the rivers spring. In this way he holds back the waters of the rivers and prevents them from flowing. The name 'Vṛtra' is etymologically translated as 'the obstacle' for this very reason[73]. Indra manages to kill Vṛtra with his mace, thus releasing the waters. Additionally, one must observe the following:

a. Vṛtra is described as *ahi* (अहि), which means 'snake'. Though he is not described as a water-snake, he is closely associated with the element of water, like the Greek Hydra[74]. In some passages he is shown holding back the waters of the rivers, while in another passage (RV 2.11.9), he appears to be lying upon a great river: «Indra kicked away wily Vṛtra, lying upon the great river. The two worlds trembled in fear before the mace of him, the bull roaring and roaring again»[75]. Indra's victory over Vṛtra makes him the conqueror of the waters and gives him the epithet *vṛtrahan* (वृत्रहन्), namely «the killer of Vṛtra»[76].

b. Whenever Indra's victory over Vṛtra is described, emphasis is laid on the fact that Indra defeated him with his mace (vajra), a kind of club that creates connotations with the club of Heracles. Nevertheless, the weapon with which Heracles defeated Hydra is not constant in Greek narratives and iconography. Sometimes it is a club, sometimes a sword, sometimes a kind of axe[77]. Indra's mace has been observed by many researchers to be connected to the bolt and Indra in general is strongly associated with the storm-element thus resembling the Greek Zeus, who had the thunderbolt as his main weapon[78].

c. In some instances, it is stated that Indra was not alone in the battle with Vṛtra but was assisted by various other characters like the Maruts, who were minor storm deities[79]. Similarly, in the Greek myth Heracles has the help of Iolaus.

d. Megasthenes, referring to the Indian Heracles, points out that he tried unsuccessfully to take a rock called *áornos*. Dahlquist, observed that Vṛtra at one point takes the adjective *Aurṇavābha*. Considering that the first part of the adjective is related to the word *áornos*, he thus connected Megasthenes' *áornos* with Vṛtra[80]. It is not easy to answer whether the word *áornos* may be connected or hidden behind the Greek word 'Lerna'. The meaning of *Aurṇavābha* is not certain. It is usually understood as 'woolweaver' and

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71 RV 1.32.1, 1.32.2a, 1.32.5a. I used the very accurate translation of Jamison and Brereton (2014, 134-135).
72 RV 1.80.11. Jamison and Brereton (2014: 206-207).
73 Benveniste and Renou (1934: 5); Dandekar (1950: 31).
74 Fagiolo et al. (2024: 18-20) concluded that the word *ahi* stems from the root V(n)g^{wh}i which is the most common Indo-European root for snake and they further observe that this root denoted both the terrestrial and the aquatic snakes.
75 RV. 2.11.9. Jamison and Brereton (2014: 414).
76 RV 8.1.14; 8.24.7-8.
77 According to the *Suidae Lexicon* the first to attribute the club to Heracles was Peisandros, the epic poet of Rhodes. See Farnell (1921: 103).
78 Dandekar (1950: 6); Schroeder (1914: 22).
79 RV 1.80.11: *ime cit tava manyave vepete bhiyasā mahī | yad indra vajrinn ojasā vṛtram marutvāṁ̐ avadhīr arcann anu svarājyam* ||. See also Benveniste and Renou (1934: 150).
80 Dahlquist (1962: 120-129).

hence is conjectured to refer to some creature or animal like the spider[81]. Nevertheless, it would perhaps seem more plausible that the word is related somehow to the root of the word *arṇava* denoting 'stream, flood, sea, ocean'. Vṛtra as a snake associated with the water element would make more sense to take an epithet associating him with water and/or even the ocean than with wool or spiders. There is even a passage that describes Indra splitting the head of *arṇava* although the meaning of the phrase is uncertain[82]. Schroeder, interestingly, differentiates Aurṇavābha from Vṛtra as two separate entities and because of the association of the former with spider-like creatures, he considers that Aurṇavābha corresponds to the crab of the Greek representations, who was the assistant of Hydra[83].The reference to the rock may be another indirect way of referring to Vṛtra as an obstacle. Compellingly, passages are preserved in which Indra is shown breaking up a rock (*adri* or *aśman*)[84]. Heracles of course, unlike Indra, reportedly failed to seize the rock and only Alexander the Great in a much later period succeeded in defeating it. Dahlquist assigns this part to a Macedonian propaganda. Alexander the Great had Heracles as a role model and considered himself his descendant. So perhaps for propaganda purposes they showed Heracles failing in a project carried out by Alexander in order to glorify the latter[85].

e. Indra, like the Megasthenian Heracles, is presented in some passages as a king and we have already seen above that he is described as a model of manhood, like Heracles[86].

f. Indra has many wives and children. Dahlquist observes that his behavior towards women is very close to the Greek Zeus[87]. In some passages which even refer to him, incest is mentioned, but no further information is given[88].

g. The points of convergence between Heracles and Indra do not stop there. Schroeder noticed many references in the Sanskrit texts which seem to correspond to their Greek counterparts. First of all, he observes that one can trace almost all of Heracles exploits in the Indra narratives. For example, in RV 1.121.2, Indra's victory over a boar (*varāhu*) is mentioned and thus recalls the feat with the Erymanthian boar. Similarly, in RV 10.27.22 there is a reference to man-eating birds that were feared by all, which is reminiscent of the Stymphalian birds[89]. Furthermore, he considers Heracles' associations with the Centaurs to be linked to RV 8.1.11, where Indra is mentioned along the Gandharvas, celestial beings associated with music, some of whom appear to have horse upper parts and human lower parts (in reverse of the Greek Centaurs)[90]. One may add here Perry's observation that Indra is shown trying to return cattles (specifically rain-cows) that were stolen by some demonic entities named Paṇis[91]. This attempt may also link him to Heracles' similar feat with the cattle of Geryon[92].

Schroeder's train of thought is worthy of consideration. Even if some of the connections he attempts are not entirely convincing, he presents a very interesting argumentation. One of his most important observation concerns the genealogy of Vṛtra and Hydra. As already mentioned, in Greek mythology, Hydra is presented as the daughter of Typhon and Echidna. Vṛtra in Indian mythology is presented as created by Tvaṣṭā (or Tvaṣṭṛ), the Indian artisan god, who makes Vṛtra to avenge

81 *Ibid.*, 122; Perry (1885: 200).
82 RV 10.67.12: *indro mahnā mahato arṇavasya vi mūrdhānam abhinad arbudasya*.
83 Schroeder (1914: 35).
84 RV 4.16.8; 7.104.19.
85 Dahlquist (1962: 120).
86 RV 1.32.15: *indro yāto 'vasitasya rājā śamasya ca śṛṅgiṇo vajrabāhuḥ*. See also RV 6.30.5 and RV 7.31.12.
87 Dahlquist (1962: 97).
88 RV 3.31.1.
89 Schroeder (1914: 39, 49).
90 *Ibid.*, 47.
91 Perry (1885: 140-141, 203).
92 Schroeder noticed this connection. See Schroeder (1914: 58).

Indra for the murder of his child, Triśiras (named also as Viśvarūpa)[93]. Schroeder seems to have observed that the names Tvaṣṭā and Typhon (who in other sources is spelled Typhos) are very similar[94]. However, Tvaṣṭā is an artisan god while Typhon, in Greek mythology, is a serpent-like monster who is one of the Titans. What might have helped more Schroeder's reasoning would have been to use Hephaestus as a link between Tvaṣṭā and Typhon. Hephaestus is the Greek artisan god, and a glance at the relevant mythologies reveals remarkable similarities between all these figures.

a. First, Hephaestus (along with the Cyclopes) was the one who made Zeus' thunderbolts[95], just as Tvaṣṭā was the one who made Indra's mace, and thus thunderbolt[96].

b. Second, both Hephaestus and Typhon in some versions are presented as children of Hera, conceived without the contribution of a man, because Hera was angry with Zeus[97].

c. Third, Tvaṣṭā is said to be the father of at least three children: Saraṇyū, Triśiras and Vṛtra. The last two appear to be monstrous. Triśiras had three heads while Vṛtra was serpentine. Typhon also had some monstrous children with Echidna: Orthrus (a two headed dog which protected the cattle of the giant Geryon), Cerberus, the Nemean Lion and Hydra. As Schroeder rightly points out, two of Tvaṣṭā's children roughly correspond to two of Typhon's childrens. The three-headed Triśiras seems to correspond to the three-headed Cerberus (but could also correspond to the three-headed Geryon) while Vṛtra corresponds to Hydra[98]. Indeed, both Triśiras and Vṛtra were killed by the god Indra, just as the Greek Heracles killed all the children of Typhon and Echidna.

d. Fourth, both Hephaestus and Typhon are associated with the region of Mount Aetna. Hephaestus, who was married with a nymph called Aetna, had his workshop and temple at Mount Aetna[99], while according to Pindar, after his defeat in the Titanomachy, Typhon has been buried underneath Mount Aetna[100]. The Roman god Vulcan may have played a role in this association, but this is beyond the scope of this article.

e. Fifth, Vṛtra was seen to be often referred to as *ahi* (serpent). Schroeder suspects that the word *ahi* may correspond to the Greek word *ékhis* (ἔχις), denoting the 'serpent', which can also be detected at the beginning of the name of 'Echidna'[101].

f. Finally, the names 'Hephaestus', 'Typhon (and Typhos)' and 'Tvaṣṭā' seem to be not very far, at least phonetically, and it cannot be excluded that they consist different cognates of the same name. Tvaṣṭā and Hephaestus are difficult to be related linguistically, mainly for the loss of the initial /t/ in the second name. However, if one accepts the name of Typhon/Typhos as a link, then this name would preserve the initial /t/ of Tvaṣṭā. Although the characters of Hephaestus and Typhon sometimes are encountered together in Greek sources (and Hephaestus was not of a serpent-like form), as if they were separate entities, there are several similarities that point toward a possible earlier identity of these figures.

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93 van den Bosch (1984: 14).

94 *Ibid.*, 34.

95 Hesiod, *Theogony*, 139-141: Κύκλωπας ὑπέρβιον ἦτορ ἔχοντας, Βρόντην τε Στερόπην τε καὶ Ἄργην ὀβριμόθυμον, οἳ Ζηνὶ βροντήν τε δόσαν τεῦξάν τε κεραυνόν; See also Callimachus, *Hymn III to Artemis*, 48-49.

96 RV 1.32.2: *tvaṣṭāsmai vajraṃ svaryaṃ tatakṣa*. See van den Bosch (1984: 16).

97 For Typhon see *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, 305-307: καὶ ποτε δεξαμένη χρυσοθρόνου ἔτρεφεν Ἥρης δεινόν τ' ἀργαλέον τε Τυφάονα, πῆμα βροτοῖσιν: ὅν ποτ' ἄρ' Ἥρη ἔτικτε χολωσαμένη Διὶ πατρί. For Hephaestus see Hesiod, *Theogony*, 927-928: Ἥρη δ' Ἥφαιστον κλυτὸν οὐ φιλότητι μιγεῖσα γείνατο, καὶ ζαμένησε καὶ ἤρισεν ᾧ παρακοίτῃ, ἐκ πάντων τέχνῃσι κεκασμένον Οὐρανιώνων, and Homer, *Iliad*, 1.571-577: τοῖσιν δ' Ἥφαιστος κλυτοτέχνης ἦρχ' ἀγορεύειν 'μητρὶ φίλῃ ἐπίηρα φέρων λευκωλένῳ Ἥρῃ.

98 Schroeder (1914:33-34, 59-60).

99 Aelian, *On the Nature of Animals*, 11.3: ἐν Αἴτνῃ δὲ ἄρα τῇ Σικελικῇ Ἡφαίστου τιμᾶται νεώς, καὶ ἔστι περίβολος καὶ δένδρα ἱερὰ καὶ πῦρ ἄσβεστόν τε καὶ ἀκοίμητον.

100 Pindar, *Olympian*, 4.6-7: ἀλλ', ὦ Κρόνου παῖ, ὃς Αἴτναν ἔχεις, ἵππον ἀνεμόεσσαν ἑκατογκεφάλα Τυφῶνος ὀβρίμου; See also Pindar, *Pythian*, 1.15-28.

101 Schroeder (1914: 33).

As is evident, from the connection between the genealogies of Hydra and Vṛtra, further similarities between the two monsters -and through them between Indra and Heracles- emerge. Moreover, there is another important similarity between Indra and Heracles, which has been observed by various researchers and is revealing[102]. As has been pointed out, one of the key characteristics of Heracles is his dual character where he is sometimes presented as a god and sometimes as a hero. Exactly the same image is found in the Sanskrit sources about Indra. In many texts, such as RV 1.52.10-14 or RV 4.30.6, Indra is presented as an immortal god and creator of the universe. But in other texts, such as RV 1.10.6 or RV 4.26.7, he is described more in terms of a human hero and warrior.

In their attempt to provide an answer to this apparent contradiction, Benveniste and Renou conclude that Indra was originally a mortal hero who was deified[103]. In the same vein, Dahlquist, tapping into an observation made by Holtzmann, infers that the Indian gods, including Indra, were not always immortal[104]. Contrary to the belief established by monotheistic religions, where the gods are immortal, the gods of ancient India feared death and derived their immortality from the sacred drink *amṛta* (cognate of Greek ambrosia). In Yajur Veda, TS 8.4.2.1, we read the following: «As men are, so were the gods from the beginning»[105]. Therefore, it sounds plausible that the Indra-hero precedes the Indra-god. This seems to be the view of Megasthenes, who writes that the Indian-born Heracles was deified only afterwards[106].

A different view on the topic is presented from the French philologist Michel Bréal as early as 1863, who put forward the theory that in both ancient Greek mythology and Indian mythology, all the gods of heaven have their corresponding human form on earth. Thus Zeus and Heracles are in fact one and the same, with Zeus being on the heavenly plane what Heracles is on the earthly plane. Correspondingly, in Indian mythology Dyauṣpitṛ (who is often presented as the equivalent of the Greek Zeus) is the celestial counterpart of Indra[107]. Bréal seems to have noted both the connection between Heracles and Indra and the proximity between Zeus and Heracles, but without providing further analysis.

In the previous section, having noted the connection between Heracles and Zeus, reference was made to the early theory that wanted Heracles to be the early husband of Hera, who was then replaced by Zeus. Bréal offers a different interpretative model where, instead of assuming a temporal *antecedence* of one of Hera's two husbands, we could see them simultaneously as two different manifestations (celestial and terrestrial) of the same figure. Heracles' later ascent to Olympus, or the fact that he is presented as the son of Zeus in certain accounts, can be attributed to later attempts to bring order to the chaotic traditions about gods and heroes. For the moment the question will be left open because the corresponding traditions of the Near East must first be examined.

Mention should also be made of the very important contribution of Fernando Wulff Alonso, who has attempted to show that the author of the Mahābhārata used the Greek stories of Heracles as a model for the Pāṇḍava, and especially for Arjuna and Bhima[108]. His arguments seem convincing but in any case they concern a fairly late text of Sanskrit literature. In the case of Heracles, it is not impossible that there is an early influence of India on the Greek world, as the connections between Heracles and the Vedic Indra suggest, while in later times we have a reverse course, with the Greek traditions of Heracles providing inspiration for the author of the Mahābhārata. It is not excluded that a possible Indian past of Heracles and therefore a formerly established familiarity of this particular character with the Indian spirit, played a role in the later acceptance of this hero as a model for the Indian epics.

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102 See for instance Dahlquist (1962: 159); Dandekar (1950: 6).
103 Benveniste and Renou (1934: 189-192).
104 Dahlquist (1962: 116); Holtzmann (1878: 300-301).
105 Translation by Dalhquist (1962: 116).
106 Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca*, 2.39.4: καὶ τὸν μὲν Ἡρακλέα τὴν ἐξ ἀνθρώπων μετάστασιν ποιησάμενον ἀθανάτου τυχεῖν τιμῆς.
107 Bréal (1863: 68-69, 101).
108 Wulff Alonso (2008: 73, 87; 2014: 360, 375-389, 406-420).

The above comparison of Indra with Heracles (and later of Heracles with Mesopotamian figures), referring to both as 'heroes', does not imply that the concept of a hero has the exact same meaning in Sanskrit and Greek literature. In the Greek world, heroes are depicted as living during a distinct period, the Time of Heroes, a notion that does not appear to have a direct counterpart in Mesopotamian or Indian literature, where we mainly encounter scattered adventures of divine characters. The term 'hero' is used here in its broadest sense, referring to individuals who achieve heroic deeds (battling enemies, taming wildness, *etc.*). It is possible, moreover, that Hesiod's Time of Heroes in the Greek world represents a later theological or chronological interpretation of events such as the Trojan War, presenting them as part of an Age of Heroes. Since most Greek heroes are associated with the Mycenaean period (*e.g.*, the Trojan War), it seems unlikely that the Mycenaeans/Achaeans themselves perceived a similar Time of Heroes predating their era (and there appears to be no evidence supporting such a view). Thus, it is plausible that Greek gods and heroes, prior to the theological framework established by Hesiod, bore a much closer resemblance to the nature of Mesopotamian or Indian divinities. Angelo Brelich, well aware of the difference between Greece and India in their understanding of the "heroic", observed that in Vedic India, divine figures are encountered that are akin to certain Greek heroes. He specifically highlighted Indra as a notable example of similarity to Heracles, despite their individual differences.[109]

The general conclusion from the above is that Indra seems a much more convincing candidate for Megasthenes' Heracles. The names obviously differ and there is not a complete match between the two traditions, but Indra is the Indian character closest to (Megasthenes') Heracles. One cannot exclude the possibility that the traditions concerning Dionysus and Heracles in India are entirely re-interpretations made by Greek exiles in Persia or by Greeks and indigenous peoples following Alexander's conquest, and in light of the latter. This would suggest that the Indian Heracles was more a result of imitation or a projection of Greek ideas onto India. Nevertheless, the case of Vedic Indra, along with his similarities to Heracles, indicates that such a connection between Heracles and India may have a much older background, predating the Greco-Persian wars or the expansion of the Hellenistic kingdoms. Similarly, Vṛtra is quite close to the concept of Hydra, although their traditions are also not identical. The very names Vṛtra and Hydra although it is very difficult to be linguistically related, it is not excluded that they might have been connected by later speakers (*e.g.* of the Greek area) who saw them similar on a phonetic level and thus Hydra, instead of being connected with the Greek root for water, might have come as a Hellenization of the name of Vṛtra (after a loss of the weak vowel "ṛ"). The main difference between Vṛtra and Hydra is that the former is never described as many-headed, but this difference can perhaps be resolved by looking at the corresponding Iranian tradition.

3.2. Θraētaona, Vṛθragna and Aži Dahāka

A similar serpent-slaying myth is found in Avesta mythology. There, the hero Θraētaona is shown fighting Aži Dahāka, a snake-like being which is described in Yt. 5.34 as having «three mouths, three heads, six eyes...»[110]. That is, we have the story of another mighty hero defeating a many-headed serpent. Unfortunately, the full description of the battle has not survived. We only know that Θraētaona killed Aži[111]. The intrinsic connection of this myth with the myth of Indra has been observed by many researchers[112]. The very name *aži* of the monster is the Avestan counterpart of the Sanskrit word *ahi* which denotes the snake and which, we already saw as a designation of Vṛtra[113]. There are, however, certain problems between the two traditions.

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109 Brelich (1978: 378-379).

110 Yt. 5.34: *θrizafanəm θrikamərðəm xšuuaš ašīm*. It should be noticed that these terms for the body parts are mostly derogatory. The transliteration came from Geldner's edition of the text (1889: 87). I am indebted to Prof. Martin Schwarz for his help with the Avestan texts.

111 Yt. 9.8: *Θraētaonō surō yō janat Ažīm Dahākəm*.

112 Benveniste & Renou (1934: 2); Dahlquist (1962: 122).

113 Dahlquist (1962: 122).

In Sanskrit literature, Indra, by killing Vṛtra, got the epithet *Vṛtrahan*, which means 'the killer of Vṛtra' or, if we translate the latter's name, 'the killer of the obstacle'. There is a consensus among researchers that this epithet is the exact etymological counterpart of the Avestan name Vṛθragna[114]. Vṛθragna is an Indo-Iranian deity personifying victory. His name means: 'one who breaks the obstacle/resistance'[115]. However, while one would expect Vṛθragna to be the Avestan hero who would kill the serpentine monster, instead we find Θraētaona as the serpent-slayer. To the extent of my knowledge, Vṛθragna is never shown duelling with a snake. On the other hand, Θraētaona or Vṛθragna do not seem to correspond easily to Indra, at least in terms of their own mythology.

In the case of the Sanskrit texts, we have seen that Indra, as a character, corresponds to a large extent to the Greek traditions about Heracles. In contrast, Vṛtra, although presents some similarities with Hydra in terms of their names and the water-element, does not resemble much the Greek description of Hydra. In the case of Avesta we find the reverse case. Aži Dahāka is described as a multi-headed (three-headed) snake, which brings him close to Hydra whereas the connection of Θraētaona or even Vṛθragna with Heracles is not evident. The serpent-slayer of the Sanskrit sources matches the serpent-slayer of the Greek sources, but the serpent of the Sanskrit sources does not match the serpent of the Greek sources so closely (except perhaps in terms of their genealogy). In contrast, the serpent of the Avestan sources matches the serpent of the Greek sources but the Avestan serpent-slayer does not seem to have much in common with the Greek serpent-slayer (Heracles).

However, there is no explicit connection of Aži Dahāka with the element of the water. Ioannis Konstantakos, emphasizes the interrelation between myth and geography. While dealing with a different ancient folktale found in the *Alexander Romance* and related to the water element, he observed a similar case of its adaptation to Iranian territory. In particular, he underlines «the ancient populations of Iran were not seafarers but highlanders and mountaineers. The original home of the Avesta in particular lay in ... a region of mountain ranges and plateaus. The native inhabitants had no experience of sea travels and adventures in distant oceans. They adapted the tale to the landscape of their homeland»[116]. Perhaps the same phenomeon is at work in the dragon-slaying narrative.

Aži Dahāka's only indirect association with water is that he is shown in Yt. 5.34 offering a sacrifice to the water deity Arədvī Sūrā Anāhitā, a divinity who represented the heavenly source from which all waters on earth flow. This connection of Anāhitā with the source of all waters brings to mind the corresponding image of Vṛtra being tied around the mountain from which all the rivers spring, preventing the waters from flowing. However, in the same Yasht, there are many other characters offering sacrifice to Anāhitā. Moreover, Yt. 5, because of its connection with Anāhitā, a deity that does not seem to have Indo-Iranian origins, seems to date to the Achaemenid period and thus to a later period than the Greek sources for Heracles[117]. It cannot be excluded that this hymn may contain material much older than its recording, addressed to Āpō the more ancient Indo-Iranian deity of waters, but this is difficult to prove.

As if the enigmas of the Iranian myth and its connection with the Indian myth were not enough, in later times, during the Parthian period, we find Heracles explicitly associated not with Θraētaona but with Vṛθragna. A bronze statue of Heracles was accidentally discovered in Seleucia in 1984. Invernizzi dates the statue between the end of the second century BCE and the middle of the first century BCE[118]. This statue bears a Graeco-Parthian inscription of the Parthian governor Vologesis IV. The Parthian part of the inscription states that this statue depicts Vṛθragna (wrtrgn)[119]. The Greek equivalent of the inscription refers to Heracles. Because of this, it was thought that we have here a syncretism between Heracles and Vṛθragna[120].

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114 Benveniste & Renou (1934: 2).
115 *Ibid.*, 28.
116 Konstantakos (2019: 298).
117 Schwartz (1985, 670-671).
118 Invernizzi (1989: 110).
119 For the edition of the Parthian inscription see Pennacchietti (1987: 173).
120 For the description of the statue and the inscription see Invernizzi (1989: 65, 76-77).

Stated differently, while we know that the two dragon-slaying myths (the Indian and the Iranian) are connected, and while we suspect that Indra is associated with Heracles and therefore logically the latter should be associated with Θraētaona, who killed Aži in the Avestan version, instead we find Heracles associated in later times with Vṛθragna. It is not impossible that this connection may have arisen in a logical way since *vṛtrahan*, as an adjective, is etymologically connected with Vṛθragna.

A very interesting piece of information, which further complicates matters, comes by Yasht 5.29 about Aži Dahāka. According to this text, the sacrifice that he made to Anāhitā took place in the land of *Baβri*, which corresponds to Babylon[121]. Although we are dealing with an Indo-Iranian myth, this particular monster, or at least the sacrifice he made, is for some reason placed in Mesopotamia. How is Mesopotamia connected to all this story? The very flow of research requires investigation into Mesopotamian sources.

4. Heracles in Mesopotamia

4.1. Ningirsu and Ninurta

A search in Mesopotamian sources quickly reveals that there are several instances of myths that seem to be linked to both the adventures of Heracles and dragon-slaying narratives. We encounter such a battle in myths about the god Ningirsu. In King Gudea's *Cylinder A* (xxv.1-xxvii.24), a text dated to the twenty second century BCE, there is a description of the decorations inside the House of Ningirsu, in which we see several creatures that the god fought or encountered. Among them one observes a serpent (muš), a bull, a lion, a holy fruit-bearing tree, a deer (?), a multi-headed dog and of course the Anzu bird[122]. At least seven figures of Heracles' labours may correspond to the 'labours' of the god Ningirsu:

muš (serpent) → Hydra

am (bull) → Cretan bull

urmah (lion) → Nemean lion

meš$_3$ kug abzu-a gurun$_7$ il$_2$-la-am$_3$ (holy fruit-bearing tree of Abzu) → Tree of the golden apples

šeg$_9$ (deer, goat?) → Ceryneian Hind

ur-sag-imin-am$_3$ (seven-headed dog) → Cerberus

^{d}anzud$_2^{mušen}$ (Anzud-bird) → Stymphalian birds

This same account is very interesting since there is an explicit reference that the snake was placed at the waters of a great marsh (ambar mah), reminding thus the Greek tale about Lerna, the place of the Hydra, who was also a marshland. This may be an important piece of information, because of all the available ancient dragon-slaying narratives only the Mesopotamian and Greek ones place the serpent in marsh. Therefore, the Greek myths' reference to a marshland may attest to the origin of the Greek tradition from a Mesopotamian one.

Similarly, in the myth *The Return of Ninurta to Nippur* (an-gin$_7$ dím-ma) one finds the god Ninurta having defeated a seven-headed serpent (muš sag-imin)[123]. Unfortunately, no further details of this battle are provided by this text but some more information are found in *The Exploits of Ninurta* (lugal ud me-lám-bi nir-gál), where the same god appears to have fought a series of opponents (about eleven in number), including a seven-headed serpent[124].

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121 Yt. 5.29. See also Schwartz (2012: 275).
122 Edzard (2016, 84-86).
123 Cooper (1978: 62-63).
124 *The Exploits of Ninurta* 128-134. The reference to the seven-headed serpent is in v. 133. See van Dijk (1983: 68).

Because Ninurta and Ningirsu share similar mythology, they are often considered identical or that Ninurta adopted Ningirsu's traditions[125]. Exploring this issue is beyond the scope of this paper as it will not affect its conclusions. Since we are referring to times in which Ninurta already appears to share Ningirsu's mythology (if they are not different names of the same deity), these two characters will be considered synonymous in terms of the mythology they present.

Although many centuries or even millennia intervene between the Mesopotamian god Ninurta/Ningirsu and the Greek Heracles, the similarities between them have been noted by various researchers. For instance, Burkert observed that Ninurta was the son of Enlil, one of the supreme gods of the Mesopotamian pantheon who was also a storm god, just as Heracles was the son of Zeus, a storm god and the supreme deity of the Greek pantheon. Furthermore, both Ninurta and Heracles seem to have had feats and fights with various monsters, while as for their weaponry, Ninurta was sometimes shown with a club, a bow and dressed in animal's skin as was Heracles[126]. The case of Ninurta is typical because he is a god-hero, a model of bravery, who performs a series of feats, among which is the battle with a seven-headed serpent-like creature. Heracles too, exhibits in several sources a dual character, sometimes as a god and sometimes as a hero. Ninurta, however, in Mesopotamian sources seems to be described only as a god and not as a human.

It is worth noting that in the *Return of Ninurta to Nippur*, Ninurta is frequently mentioned as *ursaĝ*, the Sumerian word for hero: ^{d}ninurta ursaĝ šu-du$_{7}$-a = Ninurta, the perfect hero/warrior[127]. In several other Akkadian texts, like in the *Gula Hymn of Bulluṭsa-rabi* (v. 9), dated between 1400-700 BCE, the same god receives the epithet *qarrādu*, the Akkadian equivalent for "hero": qarrādu ḫā'irī mār ^{d}Enlil gašru = my lover is a hero/warrior, mighty son of Enlil.[128] Just as Heracles is the predominant hero of Greek mythology, so Ninurta seems to be the predominant hero of Mesopotamian mythology. Eugenio Gómez Segura observes that both Heracles and Ninurta (as well as Marduk) are depicted as constructing canals, demonstrating their control over water[129]. He noted that Heracles is portrayed as a protector of freshwater springs (a role that would also connect him to Indra and the slaying of Vṛtra, who was holding back the waters of the rivers)[130].

Although it is well known that similarities between different mythological traditions can arise in an independent way, without prior cross-cultural contact, I find it quite difficult to attribute to a mere coincidence the combination of all the above characteristics. This would mean, of course, that at least the tradition of Heracles' battle with Hydra seems to have passed into Greece from the East. The cylinders of King Gudea are dated during his reign to the twenty second century BCE, while the text *The Return of Ninurta to Nippur* and *The Exploits of Ninurta* belong mainly to the Old Babylonian period. This means that the Mesopotamian traditions, which show some possible links with Heracles, seem to precede the Indian and Iranian ones. It is not impossible that the latter traditions are much more ancient than the texts in which they are written and that they predate them as oral traditions. But since this cannot be proved and the available Indo-Iranian sources follow the Mesopotamian sources in time, the safe conclusion is that if there is a link between these traditions, then their origin, at least on the basis of the written evidence, must be placed in Mesopotamia. Besides, the Iranian tradition, as already mentioned, seems to link Aži Dahāka with Babylon.

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125 See Cooper (1978: 11); Penglase (1994: 59). In a private conversation with JoAnn Scurlock, Professor of Assyriology at The Chicago University, she informed me of her current research from which there is strong evidence that the god Ningirsu is more identically related to the god Nergal than to Ninurta. The god Nergal and his connection to Heracles will be discussed below but in the context of this research the Nergal-Ningirsu connection, while interesting and worthy of a future investigation, does not affect this research in any way and I will not deal with this. It will be argued below that in terms of their relationship with Heracles, Ninurta (through Ningirsu) shows more common ground with Heracles. If indeed Nergal is more closely associated with Ningirsu (rather than Ninurta), as is Prof. Scurlock's position, then it simply increases the similarities that Heracles bears to Ningirsu-Nergal. In both cases, the final conclusion of their connection with Heracles is not altered, only the degree of their connection.

126 Burkert (1987: 15).

127 *The Return of Ninurta to Nippur*, v. 81. See Cooper (1978: 70).

128 Lambert (1967: 109, 117).

129 Gómez Segura (2023: 9-10). See also Burkert (1992b: 121).

130 Gómez Segura (2023: 11).

The Mesopotamian progeny of this tradition seems to be reflected as well in the Mesopotamian art. In the excavations at Tell Asmar in central Mesopotamia, a series of cylinder seals dating to around the Early Dynastic Period came to surface[131]. Two of them depict a battle with a seven-headed serpentine monster. The first cylinder seal (**Fig. 3**) is divided into three levels. The two highest levels show a series of scorpions and scorpion-like creatures, while the lower level is dominated by a seven-headed serpentine monster with a figure in front of it fighting it and holding two of the serpent's severed heads in both hands. Behind the snake a dog-like figure is also spotted, whose function is not apparent.

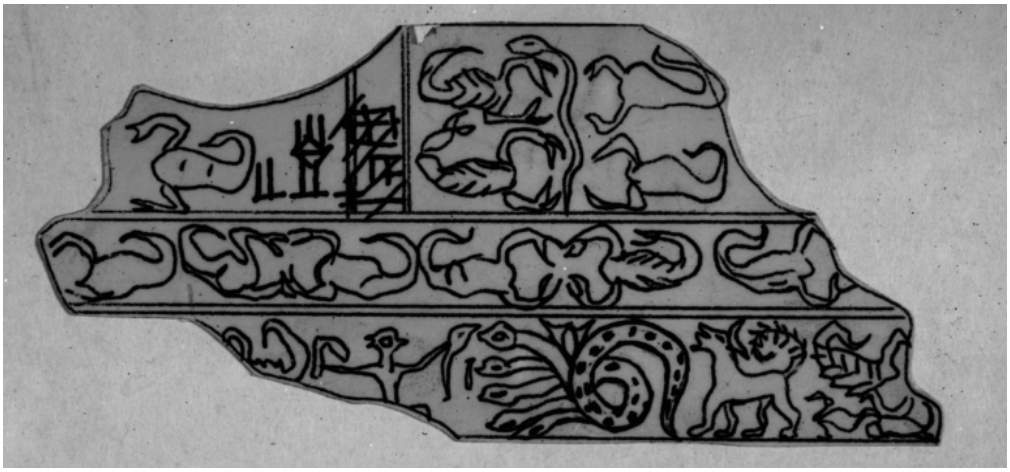

Fig. 3. Battle with a seven-headed serpent among scorpions.
Tell Asmar. Early Dynastic/Akkadian period.
Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.
P. 22601, Asmar FN As.748, OIP 72 (Diyala Cylinder Seals), pl. 45, no. 478.

Fig. 4. Two heroes are fighting with a seven-headed serpent.
Tell Asmar. Early Dynastic/Akkadian period.
Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.
P. 63944/N. 42885, OIP 72 (Diyala Cylinder Seals), pl. 47, no. 497.

131 Levy (1934: 40).

In the middle of the second cylindrical seal (**Fig. 4**), one notices a seven-headed serpentine monster with two figures on either side fighting it. The figures fighting the serpent are not explicitly named. Since the serpent is shown to have seven heads, as in the above sources for Ninurta, one can assume that one of the heroes was Ninurta/Ningirsu or some earlier form of him. What is certain is that these cylinder seals support the hypothesis that this tradition seems to go back quite a way in time to Mesopotamian lands.

The interest of these artistic representations does not stop there. If one accepts hypothetically their evolutionary connection with the figure of the Greek Heracles, then there are two points that should not escape attention:

- First, in **Fig. 3,** the battle with the serpent is combined with scorpion-like figures. It is possible that the origins of the tradition of a crab biting Heracles' leg during the battle with Hydra can be traced here. The scorpion could easily lead to confusion with the crab, especially through clay representations of them, and even the forms of these animals could be hidden behind the "spider-like" Aurṇavābha of Sanskrit tradition. Rachel Levy observes that until Neo-Babylonian times the scorpion sometimes takes the place of the crab among the constellations[132]. The framing of the serpent-battle by a series of animal forms recalls the similar image from the Boeotian bow fibula above, the earliest appearance of Hydra in Greece, although there we have different kinds of animals as a frame.

- Second, in **Fig. 4**, there are two heroes fighting the snake. This could provide an interesting link to the Greek battle of Heracles and Iolaus against Hydra. The Boeotian bow fibula depicts two heroes as well. This combination of Hydra with the scorpion/crab and the other aforementioned details found between Mesopotamian, Indian, Iranian and Greek traditions is difficult to attribute to a mere coincidence. This would mean, of course, that at least the tradition of Heracles' battle with Hydra seems to have passed into Greece from the East. Burkert came to the same conclusion and it does not seem such a far-fetched scenario[133].

4.2. Nergal, Erra and Erragal

Ninurta is not the only Mesopotamian character associated with Heracles. An interesting case can also be found in the god of the Netherworld, Nergal. Nergal was a deity that has its main cult centre at Kutha (gú-du$_8$-a^{ki}), north of Nippur or north-east of Babylon. As to the correct reading and meaning of Nergal's name, there is disagreement among researchers. Scholars like Lambert and Steinkeller have struggled to conclude whether the name Nergal should be read as a logogram or a syllabogram, with Lambert arguing that we are dealing with a logogram corresponding to the translation 'Lord of the Netherworld' and Steinkeller arguing for the syllabic reading 'nā'ir-kala = killer of all'[134].

Very important is Egbert von Weiher's study on Nergal, which informs us that the most ancient form of the name for the god is ^{d}GÌR.UNU.GAL. This form is attested already in the Old Akkadian period and continues until the Old Babylonian period. From the Middle Babylonian period onwards the form ^{d}Ú.GUR begins to be used, while from the eighth century BCE onwards the name of Nergal appears in the consonantal form "nrgl"[135]. The same author observes that the name of Nergal was used as a compound for people's names, such as nergal-mu-ša-lim, nergal-ba-ni *etc.*[136]

The origin of this particular deity is not certain. Although, based on the etymology of his name, he is very often associated with the Sumerians[137], many different theories have been put forward. Henry Lutz, Professor of Egyptology and Assyriology in Berkeley, proposed an Egypto-Libyan origin of Nergal. He etymologizes his name from the Egyptian "nr" (= shepherd, herdsman) and from "gn" (= to be mighty) and thus "nr-gn = the mighty herdsman."[138] To justify the change between the

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132 Levy (1934: 50).
133 Burkert (1992a: 124).
134 Lambert (1990: 46, 51-52); Steinkeller (1987: 161); Steinkeller (1990: 56).
135 von Weiher (1971: 3).
136 *Ibid.*, 28.
137 See for instance, Prince (1907: 169); von Weiher (1971: 4).
138 Lutz (1952: 32).

final /l/ of the name Nergal and the final /n/ of the name "nr-gn", he tries to show that the Egyptian /n/ is often equivalent to the Semitic /l/, citing as an example cases such as the negation particle (n in Egyptian, la/lo in Semitic languages)[139]. Roberts considers Nergal to be an Akkadian deity[140], while Martin Schwartz tries to show that he must have had a Median origin[141].

Regardless of the origin of this particular deity, the only certainty is that its myths and cults were established and spread in Mesopotamia for a very long time. Wiggermann notes that Nergal as a warrior appears in Mesopotamian iconography and textual sources carrying a mace, a bow and arrow, a dagger, a double axe or a double lion scimitar[142]. He further points out that the mace is more common in Sumerian texts while the bow and arrow is more common in Akkadian[143]. Most of the above weapons are associated with both Heracles and Ninurta.

Wiggermann further observes that Nergal as well as Ninurta are sometimes referred to as «strong warrior, son of Enlil»[144]. Henri Frankfort researching on cylinder seals, concluded that both Nergal and Ninurta seem to have been originally aspects of a single many-sided Sumerian deity and that they became distinct gods after the Early Dynastic Period[145]. In the same vein, Lambert believes that Nergal is often another form of Ninurta[146], whereas Stephanie Dalley, Andres Reyes and Charles Penglase observe that Nergal was closely associated with Ninurta and that the former took over some mythological exploits and aspects of the latter[147]. Penglase seems to take it a step further by numbering a series of appropriations. He claims that firstly Ninurta appropriated elements from Ningirsu's traditions. In a second time, Marduk, Nergal and Nabû appropriated elements from Ninurta's mythology. He concludes that Marduk, Nergal and Nabû replace Ninurta in later times[148].

The validity of the above arguments is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is very interesting that several scholars agree that there was a quite evident interrelationship between these two deities. All these details are important because they may provide a link between Ninurta and Nergal, and by extension between the two above and Heracles. Heracles, however, although associated through his labors with the Netherworld, never appears as a Greek deity of the Netherworld. A very interesting observation was made by Lambert, referring to *KAR 6,* a Middle Assyrian tablet (1200-1100 BCE), which seems to present Nergal as a dragon-slayer, something that brings him even closer to Ninurta. In particular, (obv. II.30): «[a-lik ^{d}]IGI.DU ṣēra dūka = [Go Nergal], kill the serpent»[149]. The serpent of this particular tablet is not described as a seven-headed one and here is the only place where Nergal seem to be directly associated with dragon-slaying (even though we do not know if he, indeed, killed the serpent).

With regard to Nergal's association with Heracles, the element that perhaps plays the most decisive role is Nergal's association with another deity, Erra and some of its forms. Erra was a deity primarily associated with pestilence and other diseases. As Kynthia Taylor observes in her important doctoral thesis, the name of Erra appears in the Pre-Sargonic period as ^{d}èr-ra or logographically as ^{d}KIŠ-ra. The form ^{d}èr-ra continues to be attested until the first millennium[150]. Von Weiher detected a very interesting inscription (KAR 142, Rs. III 27) in which one finds a list with groups of

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139 *Ibid.*, 32.
140 Roberts (1971: 11).
141 Schwartz (2005: 149).
142 Wiggermann (1999a: 222); Wiggermann (1999b: 223).
143 Wiggermann (1999a: 222).
144 *Ibid.*, 221.
145 Frankfort (1965: 95-96).
146 Lambert (2013: 385).
147 Dalley & Reyes (1998: 100); Penglase (1994: 50).
148 Penglase (1994: 59). Marduk is a special case of a god, who in Enūma Eliš appears killing a large heavenly serpent, Tiamat, and fighting various enemies. However, this paper will not deal with his case because it tries to focus mainly on the serpentine monsters that have many heads, so that the connection with the Hydra of Heracles is more visible. For more details regarding Marduk's similarities to Heracles see Gómez Segura (2023: 2).
149 I kept Lambert's translation here. See Lambert 2013: 385-386.
150 Taylor (2017: 65).

deities connected to the Netherworld. In this list one observes a kind of an explicit equation of Erra with Nergal (under his name ^{d}U.GUR), although it is not sure if this equation has to do with a real identification of the two figures of with the fact that both of them were related to the Netherworld:

^{d}èr-ra = ^{d}U.GUR ša gú-du$_{8}$-a^{ki}

Translation: Erra = Nergal from Kutha[151].

There seems to be no agreement among researchers as to whether Nergal and Erra were two aspects of the same deity at conception or whether they were two different deities associated at a later time. Lambert considers the name Erra to be the Semitic equivalent of the Sumerian name Nergal and thus leans towards an identification of the two figures, since they appear to be linked as early as the Old Akkadian period[152]. Scurlock distinguishes Nergal from Erra, considering the latter a minion in the service of Marduk[153]. Wiggerman dates the explicit linking of the two deities much later, in the Old Babylonian period, leaning towards the idea that they must originally have been distinct deities[154]. The same conclusion is reached by Roberts, who etymologizes the name Erra by means of the Semitic root ḥ-r-r (= to scorch, to char), as a pirs, pars or paris form of that root. This root is detected in Akkadian in the verb "erērum." Thus Erra = the scorching, or scorched one[155]. Nevertheless, the exact nature of Nergal's relationship to Erra remains enigmatic. As Taylor aptly points out: «Erra and Nergal manifest a complicated relationship to the end: often identified, they are never identical, and both continue to appear in different contexts»[156]. Interestingly, one of the most common epithets of Erra is "qarrādum" or "qardum" (= hero, warrior), an epithet that links this plague deity to the other heroic figures[157].

As if things were not already complicated with Erra and Nergal, another variable needs to be added to the equation that may lead to Heracles. Erra often appears under the name Erragal. Erragal's close association with the name of Erra is reflected in the spelling of the former's name: èr-ra-gal or ^{d}KIŠ-ra-gal[158]. It is exactly the same spelling of Erra's name with the addition of the "gal" syllable. Taylor notices that the name Erragal is not attested before the Isin-Larsa period when it begins to occur as a compound name for mortals, e.g. Puzur-Erragal[159]. She further observes that already from its earliest occurrences, this name is shown to be deeply connected with both Erra and Nergal, and very often these three forms are identified[160].

However, despite their implicit or explicit identification, Erragal does not seem to share any attribute of Erra or Nergal. He is not a figure explicitly connected with the Netherworld, he is not a character connected with diseases and he is not even depicted as a warlike hero. Things get even more complicated when one realizes that Erragal appears in many more hymns and incantations than Erra. In the first millennium BCE, Erragal pops up in many lexical texts, hyms and incantations, but this appearance does not seem to be accompanied by cultic practices, at least not in any visible way[161]. The first evidence for a cult of Erragal appears not earlier than the middle of the first millennium BCE[162].

Trying to settle the above riddles, Taylor observed that Erragal seemed to behave positively towards humanity, unlike the dreaded Erra, who was a more negative character due to his association with deadly diseases. As Taylor underlines: «in certain respects Erragal functions as the benevolent alter-ego to Erra's malevolent personality»[163]. Furthermore, Taylor observed that the

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151 von Weiher (1971: 41).
152 Lambert (1973: 356); Lambert (1990: 47).
153 Scurlock (under publication).
154 Wiggermann (1999a: 217).
155 Roberts (1971: 13-15).
156 Taylor (2017: 128).
157 Roberts (1971: 14, n. 36). In the *Erra Epic* I:5, Erra appears as "qarrād ilānī = hero/warrior of the gods." See Taylor (2017:336).
158 Taylor (2017: 123). Taylor, in pages 564-571 has collected all the sources in which Erragal/Errakal appears.
159 *Ibid.*, 124, and n. 273.
160 *Ibid.*, 124.
161 *Ibid.*, 124.
162 *Ibid.*, 125.
163 *Ibid.*, 125.

name Erra in Sumerian texts appears exclusively in the Emegir dialect while the name Erragal is almost always restricted to the Emesal dialect. It thus seems as if Erragal is the Emesal version of the name Erra[164]. Nevertheless, it is difficult to answer why, despite all these associations of Erragal with Erra and Nergal, the former does not seem to share the mythological content of the latter two. The impression is given that each of these three names, though relating to the same deity, had a separate and specific function.

Erragal may have played a decisive role in the association of the above characters with Heracles. The first scholar who argued that the name of Heracles might have come from the name of Erragal-Nergal is Manfred Schretter, an Austrian orientalist. He mentions in his book that he heard this idea orally from Karl Oberhuber, also an Austrian orientalist[165]. This particular connection between Heracles and Erragal seems to be mainly nominal, as the two names are admittedly very close in form. When Schretter wrote his book he does not seem to have had in mind an extra element which would have further strengthened his position. The name Erragal, mainly in sources of the first millennium BCE (but also in the *Epic of Atrahasis*) appears in Akkadian as Errakal, a form even closer to the name Heracles[166]. The fact that Errakal and Heracles coexisted in time, one in Mesopotamia and the other in Greece of the first millennium BCE should not escape attention either. Nevertheless, L'Allier rightly explains that the proximity of Heracles to Erragal in some features does not mean that the whole packet entitled "Heracles" came from the east[167].

Although this connection is difficult to be established in matters of mythology or cult, it is perhaps an irony of history that the name of Heracles is associated with the name of Hera and the name of Errakal with the name of Erra, and so we have doublets like Erra-Hera and Errakal-Heracles. But as difficult as it is to demonstrate any deeper association of Errakal with Heracles, it would be even more difficult to demonstrate a connection between Erra and Hera. Such a connection would create more problems of an etymological nature, unless we reject the popular etymology of Heracles as 'glory of Hera', which, indeed, has its own problems. Interestingly, the connection between the name of Heracles and the name of Erragal seems to have gradually begun to convince more and more researchers[168].

Although one cannot easily connect Erragal with Heracles beyond the similarity of their names, the connection between Heracles (more concretely Hercules) and Nergal has left archaeological finds but in much later periods. A key-area for this topic seems to be Hatra in Upper Mesopotamia. Hatra was a very important Parthian territory that was located on the border between the Roman and the Parthian empires and thus it exhibits influence from both cultures. It was an important religious center during the first and second centuries CE. In the center of the city there was a Great Temenos, dedicated to three deities: Maren, Marten and Barmaren. Around the Temenos, there were smaller temples dedicated to various lower-ranking deities. So far fourteen temples have come to light, numbered in the order in which they were excavated (from I to XIV).

Several of these temples seem to have been associated with Heracles, or more precisely, with a figure seemingly related to Heracles. Ted Kaizer, an expert on Hatran archaeology, rightly prefers to name this figure as «the Heracles figure», because there is no inscription that clearly names the hero[169]. It is certain, however, that Heracles, as a hero or god, was very popular in the ancient and even medieval East with traces of him being found from Crimea and Syria to India and China, usually combined with other local deities[170]. The Heracles figure was prominent in Hatra and the evidence so far suggests that this figure was associated with the Mesopotamian Nergal[171].

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164 *Ibid.*, 126.
165 Schretter (1974: 170).
166 Taylor (2017: 127).
167 L'Allier (2015: 47).
168 Currie (2024: 53-54); *López-Ruiz (2014: 257).*
169 Kaizer (2000: 219).
170 Hsing & Crowell (2005); Spagnoli (1967); Popova & Kovalenko (2000-2001).
171 Dandrow (2021: 114). For some considerations on the methodological issues that emerge from the association of Nergal with Heracles, see Kaizer (2000) and Kechagias (2024).

The first to put forward the hypothesis of a connection between Heracles and Nergal in Parthian Syria was Henri Seyrig in 1944. Seyrig observed that on some tesserae found in Palmyra a symbol of Heracles, usually the club, sometimes appears on one side with the name of the god Nergal on the other[172]. In 1955, André Caquot took Seyrig's theory and applied it to Hatra to show that a similar connection between Heracles and Nergal was attested there[173]. Temple I and X are the most important for this association, because there are a few figures there that seem to depict the god Nergal in the form of Heracles, usually in association with canines. The famous so-called "Cerberus relief", which seems to depict Nergal, is located in Temple I[174]. This is somewhat problematic, however, because in no Mesopotamian text that refers to the god Nergal, there seems to be a connection with dogs. Nevertheless, as Dirven observes, many statues of the Heracles figure were found in temples dedicated to Nergal or in locations in which Nergal was equally present[175].

Regarding the reason of the connection between Nergal and Heracles, Gawlikowski believes that this was triggered by Heracles' descent into the Netherworld to find Cerberus[176]. Furthermore, he observes that Heracles' identification with Nergal seems to have been based more on iconography than on theological grounds[177]. Burkert emphasizes the similarity between the Greek Hades and the Mesopotamian Netherworld and one perhaps wonders if the link between Nergal and Heracles implies a further link, even an etymological one, between Kutha and Hades, but it is difficult to prove something like this[178]. What must be kept in mind is that the connection between Heracles and the Mesopotamian Nergal is not only theoretical but seems to be confirmed by a number of archaeological finds from the Parthian period. Although this period is much later in time, it is noteworthy that the link between Nergal and Heracles is again observed in a Mesopotamian region, during an Iranian dynasty. This Iran-Mesopotamia combination is reminiscent of Aži Dahāka's association with the land of *Baβri* (Babylonia). Unfortunately, almost nothing is known about Hatra's territory before the Seleucids, by whom it seems to have been founded[179].

Before one can conclude that the Greek Heracles emerged to some extent from Mesopotamian traditions that came close to the Greek area, one last figure, which lies between Greece and Mesopotamia, should be examined. This is the Phoenician god Melqart.

5. Melqart: The Tyrian Heracles

It is well known that Heracles was linked from fairly early times to the Tyrian god Melqart[180]. Although there have been voices during the nineteenth century CE that have disagreed with the connection between these two figures[181], most of the evidence is in favour of it. Burkert underlines that the equation of Heracles with Melqart in antiquity was unquestionable[182]. Herodotus (*Histories* 2.44) referring to Heracles of Tyre, in Phoenicia, had beyond any doubt Melqart in his mind, while the identification of the two figures is also reflected in archaeology with the characteristic example of the so-called *cippi of Melqart*, dating back to the second century BCE. This is a bilingual Greek-Punic inscription found in Malta, in which the name of Melqart in Phoenician (MLQRT) corresponds exactly to the name of Heracles in Greek (Ἡρακλῆς)[183].

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172 Seyrig (1944: 65). For objections see de Buisson (1944: 293).
173 Caquot (1955: 269).
174 Christides (1982: 105, 108-109); Dirven (2009: 54-55).
175 Dirven (2009: 58).
176 Gawlikowski (2000: 158).
177 *Ibid.*, 159.
178 Burkert (1992a: 65).
179 Drijvers (1975: 241).
180 Farnell (1921: 166); Kirk (1974: 179); Levy (1934: 47).
181 See Raoul-Rochette (1848: 11).
182 Burkert (1985: 210).
183 Levy (1934: 47).

Raoul-Rochette collected several suggested etymologies of the name Melqart, such as 'the powerful king' or 'the king of the city'[184]. Lydia Lenaghan following the interpretation of Melqart's name as 'king of the city', she considers him a late addition to the Canaanite pantheon. She observes that he was one of the favourite gods in Tyre who was taken along by the Tyrians in their trips, thus carrying his worship to Cyprus or Spain. It was during these journeys, according to Lenaghan, that Melqart came into contact with the traditions of Heracles and the two deities began to be linked[185]. Maurice Sznycer, noting that the name of Melqart is used as a theophoric name in names such as Hamilqar, considers that the Phoenician form MLQRT should be read *Milqart* rather than *Melqart*. He also follows the etymology as 'king of the city' and further observes that the name of this deity appears for the first time at the beginning of the first millennium BCE and that he was quickly associated with Heracles[186]. The aforementioned etymology of the name of Melqart is widely accepted and it is usually interpreted as an indication that Melqart was the divinized counterpart of the Tyrian king[187]. The date of Melqart's appearance in the eastern Mediterranean is compelling because it is later than the Mesopotamian traditions but right before the appearance of the Greek Heracles in the Greek World. It is the time when the Phoenician alphabet reaches Greece in a more tangible form, so that the first Greek texts and their mythologies (including that of Heracles) appear.

Regarding the causes of Melqart's connection with Heracles, Kirk observes that although in antiquity this connection was considered certain, it does not seem to be based on firm foundations as there are several major differences between the two figures[188]. As Farnell pointed out, in the cult of Melqart or even Sandan (a different Anatolian deity sometimes related to Heracles), the emphasis is on the motif of the death and resurrection of the god and his death on a pyre. However, in the early traditions of the Greek Heracles these aspects are missing. Neither Homer nor Hesiod mention Heracles' death on the pyre, which is found only in later traditions[189]. Farnell concludes that the tradition of Heracles' death on a pyre must have originated in the east after the completion of Hesiod's work[190]. Furthermore, Pausanias (*Description of Greece* 10.4.6) informs us that Melqart was a sea deity, whereas the Greek Heracles does not seem to have been a patron of the sea. Nevertheless, despite the differences between the two characters, the similarities seem to be numerous. Megan Daniels sums them up as follows:

a. Both figures had dual status as gods and mortals/heroes.
b. They are both connected with death and apotheosis and specifically with a death on pyre. Heracles' death on pyre may appear in inconography from the beginning of the sixth century BCE onwards but this does not indicate necessarily that this tradition was born at such a late time.
c. Both are colonizer figures symbolizing travel and settling to new geographical places[191].
d. Both have the role of divine royal ancestors.
e. Both have leonine iconography and are warlike characters who are sometimes shown holding similar weapons such as bows and quivers.

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184 Raoul-Rochette (1848: 12). In the same vein, Wilhelm Kroll providing a good summary of the few things we know about Melqart's cult, explains the name of that god as a contracted form of "Melek qart (= king of the city)". See Kroll (1935: 293).
185 Lenaghan (1964: 145).
186 Sznycer (1975: 197).
187 Bonnet (1992: 175); Celestino & López-Ruiz (2016: 216); Daniels (2021: 464); Xella (2019: 276).
188 Kirk (1974: 179).
189 Farnell (1921: 167).
190 *Ibid.*, 172-173.
191 It would be worth investigating whether the names Sparta (the Greek city) and Sfard (the ancient capital of Lydia) have any deep relation to the name Sepharad (for Spain), as the first two are associated with areas where one finds the Heracleids, the descendants of Heracles (see Herodotus, *Histories*, 1.7 and 6.52-53). Since Heracles, via Melqart, reached territories in what is now Spain, perhaps the name Sepharad (used mainly by Semitic populations) is linked to this story.

f. Even though Heracles does not seem to have been a sea deity, from seventh century BCE onwards he appears fighting with several sea deities lke Nereus and Triton (latter's name is interestingly a cognate to the Avestan Θraētaona)[192].

Silius Italicus (*Punica* 3.21) refers in detail to the sanctuary of Heracles in the Phoenician colony at Gades (present-day Cadiz in southern Spain). Gades was located next to Gibraltar, exactly where the famous "Pillars of Heracles" were placed. Given that the Phoenicians travelled all along the Mediterranean and that the Greek Heracles have visited the same places, it seems quite reasonable to conclude that the exploits associated with Heracles' travels to or beyond Gibraltar, where one finds mostly Phoenicians, were originally related to traditions about Melqart and not the Greek Heracles. The problem, however, is that no such mythological tradition about Melqart's travels is attested by any ancient source. Melqart is not shown to have travelled like Heracles. Unless instead of syncretism between two different deities, we assume that they were more connected than it seems and that in some way, the one form was an extension of the other. The only indirect reference linking Melqart with a journey is found in a later myth (based on coins and written sources dating from the second to fifth century CE) concerning the wandering ambrosial rocks (ΑΜΒΡΟCΙΕ ΠΕΤΡΑΙ) associated with the foundation of Tyre, where Melqart's temple was located.[193] In this myth, Melqart is depicted as following two wandering rocks traveling across the sea, but no specific geographical details about this maritime journey are provided.

As an irony of history, it is known that around the sixth century BCE, there was a voyage out of Gibraltar by a Carthaginian navigator, Himilco, whose name included the name of Melqart. Could this Phoenician navigator's adventures have provided the impetus for Heracles' corresponding adventures beyond Gibraltar, which appear mostly in sources of the sixth century BCE onwards (like in Stesichorus, where Geryon makes his debut)? The answer to this question requires separate research.

Daniels, trying to understand what kind of connection there is between Heracles and Melqart, concluded that we are not dealing with two different names of the same deity nor with two separate figures that underwent syncretism but with «heroic and divine personas that intermixed over centuries of expansion and interaction»[194]. She further emphasizes: «by exploring Heracles' relationship to Melqart we uncover more than just processes of religious syncretism», thus attributing many of the similarities to processes of intercultural interaction that extended from Mesopotamia to the Atlantic[195].

Daniels' view seems to be true and even seems to be applicable to Heracles' relationship with other deities or heroes of the East. It is not a simple mixture of different deities. Many of the eastern deities discussed above show a deep enough connection with Heracles that it would be rather hasty to attribute it to mere coincidence or typology based on unrelated traditions stemming from a shared Indo-European or other past. Nevertheless, for several of the Greek writers, Melqart and Heracles were one and the same. Although they recognized the existence of different Heracles and although they were familiar with many mythological traditions of this particular hero, they did not hesitate to attribute his name to Melqart and identify him explicitly with the latter in inscriptions and iconography. In the case of Heracles and Melqart we do not seem to have a mere *interpretatio graeca* but rather a statement of some deeper historical connection between the two characters which we are not now in a position to see clearly.

Apart from his chronological position between Mesopotamian and Greek traditions, Melqart has also been associated with the god Nergal, thus forming an interesting bridge between the Mediterranean and the East. Cochrane, citing Seyrig, observes that Assyrian

192 Daniels (2021: 464, 470-471, 476-477, 479). See also Bonnet (1992: 175, 180-181).
193 Bijovsky (2005: 829).
194 *Ibid.*, 468.
195 *Ibid.*, 481.

scribes used the same ideogram to designate both gods[196]. Stephanie Dalley believes that Melqart's name is a Phoenician translation of the Sumerian name Nergal[197]. With the exception of the last /t/ of the first name which does not correspond to the name Nergal, all the other consonants of the two names present no real linguistic problem in their transformations (m → n, l → r, k→g, l=l). It is possible then that we have two aspects of the same name and there is no need to view them in a translational way. Moreover, if one considers the later depiction of Nergal at Hatra as being associated with a three-headed dog (which may be based on earlier traditions), it is intriguing that Melqart himself is also depicted as having a dog, although the number of its heads is not mentioned[198].

Nevertheless, a kind of an additional link between Nergal, Heracles and perhaps even Melqart is detected in ancient astrology. In many Mesopotamian texts, Nergal is associated with planet Mars[199]. Although there is no explicit reference in ancient sources or archaeology linking Melqart to the planet Mars, such an unusual connection appears in a much later Arabic source. In his book on the *History of Beirut* (تاريخ بيروت), Sālih ibn Yahyā, a 15th-century Arab chronicler, refers to an earlier work titled *Manāhij al-Fikr* (*The Methods of Thought*), where he presents the sanctuary of Melqart in Tyre as being consecrated to the planet Mars (للمريخ)[200]. It is unclear which specific book Sālih ibn Yahyā is referencing, as several works bear this title. However, it is intriguing that one can trace a tradition connecting this particular sanctuary to Mars.

As for Heracles, although his connection with the same planet in early periods is far from certain, we find him associated with Ares (Mars) in the Hellenistic period onwards. In the *Scholia on Apollonius Rhodius* (3.1777-1779), we read the following: «Concerning which Epigenes, in his [work] *On Chaldean Mathematics*, after discussing the planets, [says] that one of them is Pyroeis, called by the Greeks Ares and by the Chaldeans Heracles»[201]. In this passage, the planet Mars (referred to as Πυρόεις) is identified as "Heracles" and it is notable that Epigenes attributes this designation to the Chaldeans, thus connecting this identification with the territory of Mesopotamia. Similarly, in the bas-reliefs of King Antiochus I of Commagene (first century BCE), he is depicted performing a gesture known as dexiosis (a ritual handshake) with three different deities, each identified by multiple names considered synonymous. One of these deities is Artagnes-Herakles-Ares, demonstrating once again the association of Heracles with Ares (Mars) as synonymous figures[202]. Finally, in a similar vein to Epigenes, Macrobius in his *Saturnalia* (5th century CE) narrates the following:

> As for the Salii, Vettius continued, in assigning them to Hercules Vergil shows the wealth and depth of his learning, for the pontiffs too identify Hercules with Mars. And indeed this identification is supported by Varro's Menippean satire *This Other Hercules*, in which the author, speaking of Hercules One of Many has shown that this god and Mars are one and the same. The star, too, which is known to all other peoples as the star of Mars is called by the Chaldeans the star of Hercules (*Chaldaei quoque stellam Herculis vocant quam reliqui omnes Martis appellant*)[203].

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196 Cochrane (1978: 61); Seyrig (1944: 70). Xella (2021: 357-362) discusses the intriguing case of a bilingual Greek-Phoenician inscription discovered in Piraeus, near Athens, dating to the late fourth or early third century BCE. This inscription refers to a high priest of Nergal, who belonged to a community of Sidonians settled in Greece. Given that Nergal was not a Phoenician deity, a possible connection to Melqart cannot be ruled out. However, such a hypothesis is difficult to substantiate, especially considering the relatively late date of the inscription.

197 Dalley (1989: 164).

198 Bonnet (1988: 74-77).

199 von Weiher (1971: 34, 73).

200 Ibn Yahyā (1898: 19). The book of Sālih ibn Yahyā was written in the fifteenth century but it has been published by Louis Cheikho in 1898. The translation of the passage from Arabic says: «In Sidon, there was a temple dedicated to Mercury, and in Tyre, a temple dedicated to Mars, both of which were highly revered by the Sabaeans» (كان في صيداء هيكل لعطارد وفي صور هيكل للمريخ وكانت الصائبة تعظّمها).

201 Scholia to Apollonius 3.1777-1779: περὶ οὗ Ἐπιγένης ἐν τῶι Περὶ τῶν Χαλδαϊκῶν μαθηματικῶν προειπὼν περὶ τῶν πλανήτων, [λέγων] ὧν φησιν ἕνα εἶναι τὸν Πυρόεντα, προσαγορευόμενον [δὲ] ὑπὸ μὲν Ἑλλήνων Ἄρεως, ὑπὸ δὲ Χαλδαίων Ἡρακλέους. See also Roscher (1902-1909: 2527).

202 Kaizer (2013: 113).

203 Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 3.12.5-6. I used the translation by Davies (1969: 226).

This association of the above deities with Mars seems to have been strong enough that it was maintained for several centuries, especially in environments related to Iran. In the Mandaic language, Mars was known by the name Nirgil (נירגיל), a counterpart of the name Nergal[204].

It seems that from the Hellenistic period onward, as the Greeks came into much closer contact with Persian and Mesopotamian beliefs, the connection between Heracles and Nergal was quickly recognized, leading to the association of the former with the planet Mars. Indeed, it appears to be a connection made by the Chaldeans themselves rather than by the Greeks. If this connection predated the Hellenistic era, it has not been preserved in any earlier sources. This does not mean that Heracles could not have had an earlier connection with Nergal. If one assumes that one or more figures from the East gradually made their way to the Mediterranean and eventually contributed to the formation of the Greek Heracles (perhaps merging with an earlier Greek figure), there is no reason to believe that these foreign figures were fully understood by the Greeks in their entirety from the outset. Many of their characteristics and traditions from the East may not have reached the Mediterranean until later periods, thereby creating the illusion that they were only associated with Heracles at that time.

As Seyrig points out, since Melqart was closer to the Middle East than Heracles himself, it seems reasonable that the latter's connection with Nergal was established through an earlier association of Nergal with Melqart[205]. However, if one accepts a connection between Nergal and Melqart, this supposed connection does not seem to have been on a mythological level, as Nergal never appears as a sea deity nor does he appear to die on pyre. Furthermore, Nergal is never depicted as a colonizer. The only element of Nergal's mythology that, if taken too far, could somehow link him to deities who die and rise again is his descent to the Netherworld and his staying there alongside Ereshkigal until he ascends back to the upper world.

6. Assessing the data

The main problems facing all researchers on Heracles have been summarized very accurately by Walter Burkert when he says that: «the real problem is not a lack but rather a surplus of interrelations ... there is not a single clear line that ties one element to another and to nothing else»[206]. In the same vein, Corinne Bonnet very rightly describes the Heracles phenomen as «a process dominated by the 'as if' and the 'almost' (un processus sur lequel règne le 'comme si' et l' à peu près)»[207].

On the one hand, it would certainly not be scientifically and methodologically correct to claim that Indra, Θraētaona, Ninurta, Nergal, Melqart and Heracles are the same deity who changed forms and names over time and from region to region. Although some links between the various forms mentioned above have been identified, they do not consist sufficient evidence and strong foundations for such an exaggerated conclusion. On the other hand, it would also not be scientifically correct to say that all of the above deities and heroes were linked together only by chance without being governed, at least some of them, by some deeper historical connection. There are aspects of their connection that cannot be merely typological. On the basis of the evidence presented in the article it seems that four such groups of deeper associations can be identified that are difficult to interpret as products of chance or as purely independent compositions.

6.1. Heracles - Melqart

The first group concerns the Heracles-Melqart duo. Melqart shares with Heracles the element of death and apotheosis, the colonizing element, the dual character as god and hero and the association with lion-skin and similar weaponry. The similarities between the two figures and their historical proximity are hardly coincidental and indeed several ancient writers of antiquity identified

[204] Drower & Macuch (1963: 299-300).
[205] Seyrig (1944: 70-71).
[206] Burkert (1987: 17).
[207] Bonnet (1992: 197).

them without hesitation. With a whole host of interpretive tools and technologies available today that were not available in antiquity, modern researchers often fall into the trap of thinking that they can see the past more clearly than the ancients themselves. In some aspects this may indeed be true, but it should not be overlooked that the ancients were eyewitnesses to many issues that we today necessarily approach only theoretically or on the basis of the available archaeological finds.

Regarding the emergence of Melqart in the Levant, as already mentioned, this deity appears for the first time in history at the beginning of the first millennium BCE. Paolo Xella offers a very important observation. By locating a third-second century BCE inscription from Mount Carmel, which attests to the existence of a cult of Melqart in the area (under the name of Baal) and combining it with the reference in 1 Kings 18:19 to a Baal-Melqart cult in the same area in the ninth century BCE, he shows that Melqart was worshipped in very early period in the Carmel area of northern Israel[208]. If we remember that the first appearance of Heracles in Greece is at the beginning of the seventh century BCE, on the one hand in the Boeotian bow fibula dating to the end of the eighth to the beginning of the seventh century BCE, which is the earliest representation of his battle with Hydra, and on the other hand, almost simultaneously, in the Homeric Epics, this means that Melqart's figure precedes Heracles' figure in terms of evidence by two centuries.

6.2. Heracles - Nergal - Erra - Erragal

The second group includes the Heracles-Nergal-Erra-Erragal quartet. This quartet shares more of an association with the Netherworld and perhaps even planet Mars. Furthermore, there is a remarkable similarity between the name Heracles and Erragal/Errakal. If one places there the origin of Heracles' name this would perhaps solve the problems with the traditional etymology of his name, which wants him as the glory of one of his main opponents, Hera. This would mean that the similarity of Heracles' name to other Greek names of similar form, such as Pericles or Megacles, as well as the similarity of his name to Hera's is merely coincidental. We know that both Heracles and Erragal coincided in time.

The close association of the Netherworld with myths about heroes and gods should not be surprising. Ekroth has shown convincingly that, at least in ancient Greek religion, the heroes were initially between the gods and the dead and that they were only later detached from the latter[209]. Perhaps the partial origin of Heracles from his association with Nergal was an echo of this earlier association of the hero with the realm of the dead before he was cut off from it. It is difficult to say more about this particular group, unless one resorts to possible name associations such as that one of Nergal's names, ^{d}GÌR.UNU, could have been used as a model for the name Geryon which is of non-Greek etymology. Geryon's cattle is one of the oldest labors of Heracles to appear in Greek hexameter poetry, and Bruno Currie has provided a detailed analysis of the connection between the Geryon narrative and the Netherworld[210]. However, name connections are most often risky and unprovable.

Even if one accepts in good faith that several of the above similarities between Heracles and the different forms of Nergal are not accidental, it should be clarified whether these Mesopotamian traditions could have reached the Mediterranean at an early date, in order to contribute to the form that the Greek Heracles eventually took. On this point, an affirmative answer is given by the Bible. According to 2 Kings 17:30, among the people who came to Israel from Mesopotamia through the population exchange carried out by the Assyrians in the late eighth century BCE were people from Kuth. The name Kuth corresponds to Kutha, the main centre of worship of Nergal, and there is an explicit reference in the same biblical verse that these people from Kutha brought with them to Israel the cult of Nergal[211]. In this way, it is clear that the worship of this Mesopotamian deity reached at least as far as the eastern Mediterranean as early as the eighth century BCE[212].

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208 Xella (2019: 282).
209 Ekroth (2007: 113-114).
210 Currie (2024: 15, 17); Davies (1988: 278-279).
211 2 Kings 17:30: «The men of Kuth made Nergal (וְאַנְשֵׁי־כוּת עָשׂוּ אֶת־נֵרְגַל)».
212 See also Rasztawicki (2019: 84-85).

It is worth noting that the date on which Nergal "arrives" in the eastern Mediterranean is only few decades earlier than the date on which the first appearance of Heracles in Greece is attested. We are a few centuries after the point at which, at least textually, Nergal is presented to be associated with dragon-slaying, as shown by the Middle-Assyrian tablet. It should not be overlooked that the first centuries of the first millennium BCE coincide with the age of the Neo-Assyrian expansion to the west and therefore it was the right time for all these Mesopotamian ideas and figures to reach the eastern Mediterranean. Given that the dragon-slayer figure of Nergal appears only in Middle Assyrian tablet, it is theoretically much more reasonable that the Neo-Assyrians, in whose time Nergal arrives in the Levant, should have preserved this tradition. In this way we know that a century before the cult of Nergal was brought to the same area by the Assyrians, there was a cult of Melqart and therefore this would be a very good historical opportunity for these two characters to meet on the same ground. Since the cult of Melqart at Carmel was maintained up to the last centuries of the first millennium BCE, there is no reason to deny that it has been active in the eighth century, when the cult of Nergal came more visibly to the same area.

6.3. Heracles - Ninurta - Ningirsu

The third group concerns the Heracles-Ninurta-Ningirsu triad, a connection both in terms of their weaponry and martial character and the fact that all these figures performed a series of similar labors, including a battle with a seven-headed serpent, which in the iconography of both Mesopotamia and Greece is accompanied by marine arthropods (scorpions and crabs). This group is very important because the battle with the seven-headed serpent is not found in the mythology of Nergal and Erragal or in the mythology of Melqart. If, therefore, this motif passed into Greek territory from the East, which seems very likely, then given the similar iconography, the association with Ninurta is the best candidate (unless one looks back to Hittite mythology and Illuyanka, who is not shown, however, as a seven-headed creature nor does he seem to be associated with arthropods).

It is not easy to pinpoint the time at which this contact took place. Unlike Nergal, the cult of Ninurta never seems to have reached this far west, although we possibly meet some traces of him in the Bible. The name of Ninurta is not explicitly attested in the biblical texts. However, this deity seems to be present under two different names that probably constitute corrupted versions of him. The first is the name Nisroch which is mentioned in 2 Kings 19:37 and again in Isaiah 37:38[213]. It is within the temple of Nisroch at Kalah that the murder of Sennacherib seems to have occurred. The second name is Nimrod. Nimrod is described in the tenth chapter of Genesis as a mighty warrior and hunter who built several cities in Mesopotamia. Although the literature on Nimrod's interpretive approaches is vast, his connection to the god Ninurta, which is the concensus of the majority of the scholars, seems to be the most convincing theory[214]. Van der Toorn and van der Horst are the ones who did the most thorough analysis on the subject. They concluded that biblical Nimrod was probably a case of a foreign deity, which the biblical author reduced to a human[215]. In their search for a god who would match Nimrod, they ended up with Ninurta, who was also a supreme god of war and hunting, and there are several texts on his achievements[216]. The proximity of their names, where one just needs to change a nun to a mem (נמרד → ננרד), provide an additional argument[217].

If one digs a little into the possible connection/identification of Nimrod and Ninurta and the connection of both of them with Heracles, some interesting conclusions emerge. First of all, in Nimrod's narrative this character is explicitly called *gibbor ṣayid*, namely 'hero-hunter'. Gen. 10:8 presents Nimrod as the first gibbor/hero after the flood, and so Nimrod was a hero per se, like Heracles and Ninurta. The Hebrew word *gibbor* (גִּבּוֹר) corresponds to the adjectives *ursaĝ*, *qarrādum* and ἥρως which we have seen are attributed to Ninurta/Ningirsu and Heracles. All these characters are often presented as hunters.

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213 See the analysis of Uehlinger (1999: 630-632).
214 See for example Collon (1995: 23-35); Day (2017: 99-101, 106); Deimel (1927:76-78).
215 van der Toorn & van der Horst (1990: 8).
216 *Ibid.*, 10-11.
217 *Ibid.*, 14.

Secondly, Ninurta, Nimrod and Heracles are all sometimes described in a negative light, like arrogant figures. Van der Veen and Zerbst, who wrote a very important study on Nimrod's relation to Ninurta, after pointing out the connection of both characters with hunting and heroic deeds, they made a very interesting observation. They focused on a myth about Ninurta, called *Ninurta's Pride and Punishment* or alternatively *Ninurta and the Turtle*. In this myth, Ninurta is being described on the one hand as a great hunter and warrior and on the other hand as an arrogant figure who is being punished by god Enki[218]. The myth begins with the god Ninurta managing to defeat the monster-bird Anzu, thus earning the praise of the god Enki and other deities. Enki promises him a reward and blesses him with a lot of wishes but Ninurta arrogantly refuses Enki's gifts claiming that he deserves something more and then starts to intrigue. This behavior angers Enki, who finally throws Ninurta into a deep hole as his punishment. The same name of Nimrod seems to be a pun of the biblical author who instead of calling the foreign god by its name, as Ninurta, he calls him Nimrod, meaning 'rebel' (from the root m-r-d = to rebel) and Gen. 10:9 seems to further describe him as a rebel against the god[219]. The negative character of Heracles is evident in several traditions about Heracles as well. For instance, in *Odyssey* 21.14-30, Heracles kills Iphitus, thus violating the sacred rule of *xeníā* (hospitality) while in *The Madness of Heracles* by Euripides, the hero finally kills his own family[220].

Several additional attempts have been made to link Ninurta to other biblical narratives or to late antiquity in order to show that he was a well-known character in the wider Mediterranean. For example, Peter Machinist noticed that there are striking parallels between the United Monarchy of Israel and the epic of one of the most important Assyrian rulers bearing the name of Ninurta, Tukulti Ninurta I, which may indicate that this epic was known in the wider region of Israel in the early first millennium BCE[221]. The figure of Nimrod has been associated by Ephraim Speiser with Tukulti Ninurta, to whom the biblical description of Nimrod as king and mortal may be attributed[222].

Consequently, the biblical figure of Nimrod seems to be a fairly good bridge between Mesopotamian and Greek literary traditions. Although we do not know whether there was a cult of Ninurta in the Levant region, this god was known there, and indeed the biblical texts in which his name occurs date between the eighth to sixth centuries BCE, which is about the same period of time when Heracles appears and thrives as a figure in the Greek area. Ninurta in Mesopotamian literature is presented only as a god and never as a mortal. Heracles, on the other hand, is presented mainly as a mortal but in some sources also as a god. Therefore, there seems to be a divergence between the two characters at this point. As already mentioned, it has been observed that the biblical author, perhaps not wanting to portray Ninurta as a deity, reduced him to a mortal and therefore the biblical Nimrod is described as a mortal hero-hunter. If indeed the presence of Ninurta in the Bible is the bridge across which the Mesopotamian tradition passed into the Mediterranean, then it is precisely this demotion of Ninurta from god to mortal that may explain why the Greek Heracles is primarily a mortal hero. The degradation of Ninurta by the biblical author may have been precisely the process that led to the mortal Heracles. It is a common ground in biblical studies that some biblical authors mortalized foreign gods, but this process of mortalization is rarely utilized to show its possible contribution to the mythology of the Eastern Mediterranean. Ancient Israel and the Bible seem to have been a station in the eastern Mediterranean through which deities were mortalized.

If one accepts this model, many aspects fall into place. If the Greek Heracles originally derived from an Eastern god or gods, who were demoted to mortal status somewhere along the

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218 van der Veen & Zerbst (2004: 36).

219 Simonis & Gesenius (1844: 86). This interpretation has very ancient roots since Nimrod's name is translated by Philo of Alexandria as 'rebellion' (αὐτομόλησις) in his work *De Gigantibus*. See Colson and Whitaker (1994, 478-479): ἑρμηνεύεται δὲ Νεβρὼδ αὐτομόλησις.

220 Sophie Mills' article although focusing more on the positive aspects of Heracles, includes an interesting discussion about his vices. See Mills (2024: 87-88).

221 Machinist (1976: 479).

222 Speiser (1958: 34).

way, then this suppressed divine past of Heracles, reasonably presumed not to have vanished overnight and likely recognized in part by the Greeks making them disagree whether he was a hero or a god, was eventually re-awakened, gradually leading to the re-deification of Heracles in the Greek world.

If Ninurta indeed entered the biblical world as Nimrod, and considering that the biblical texts referencing him date to the first half of the first millennium BCE, this suggests that Ninurta reached the eastern Mediterranean during the same period when Heracles emerged in the Greek world. Therefore, Melqart, Nergal and Ninurta seem to have met in the eastern Mediterranean at about the same time. It is worth noting that in ancient Greek literature, one of the first individuals said to have composed an epic about Heracles and to attribute the lion-skin to him was Peisandros, a poet from the island of Rhodes in the Eastern Mediterranean, who lived in the early seventh century BCE[223]. The location of Rhodes is very interesting, because this particular island is located right between the Levant and the mainland of Greece, indicating that it might have been a station in the passing of these Mesopotamian-Levantine traditions to Greece.

Pausanias further informs us that that Peisandros was the first to present the Hydra in Greece with many heads[224]. If this particular poet indeed played a role in the spread of Heracles in Greece, he can be credited with introducing both the multi-headed Hydra and the lion-skin, features that had existed in Mesopotamian tradition many centuries earlier. This aligns with the broader notion that Heracles, at least to a significant extent, originated from the East, particularly Mesopotamia. It must not escape notice that Peisandros lived in the first half of the seventh century BCE, that is, almost simultaneously with the first appearance of Heracles in Greece through the Boeotian bow fibula (which shows a multi-headed Hydra) and almost simultaneously with the meeting of Melqart, Nergal and Ninurta in the Levant.

6.4. Heracles - Indra

The fourth group contains Heracles and Indra, perhaps including Θraētaona. Here too one finds a convergence in the dual nature of Heracles and Indra, as both gods and heroes who performed a series of feats. Indra also reportedly fought a serpent-like monster and appears to have performed feats similar to those of Heracles and Ninurta, while his vajra could be associated with the clubs of the others. However, it is not easy to establish a Heracles-Ninurta-Indra triad, as there is no clear historical trace explaining how or why this particular Indian figure became connected with a Mesopotamian and a Greek one. The only known presence of Indra outside India can be observed in a treaty between the Hittite king Suppiluliuma and the Mitanni king Šattiwaza, dated to the fourteenth century BCE. In this treaty, among the gods of Mitanni invoked, one finds «Mitrashil, Arunashil, Intara, and Nashatiyana», which clearly correspond to the Indian deities Mitra, Varuna, Indra, and the Nasatya twins, respectively[225]. This indicates that Indra was known in Anatolia as early as the mid-second millennium BCE. However, it remains uncertain whether anything beyond his name -such as attributes or myths associated with him- was also known in this context.

Compellingly, Paul Thieme noticed that we find almost the same sequence of gods in the exact same order in RV 10.125.1bc: «I support both Mitra and Varuna, both Indra and Agni, and Ashvina»[226]. The only difference is that in the Mittani-Hittite inscription we find the Násatyá twins instead of Ashvina.

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223 Strabo, *Geographica*, 15.1.9: Ἡρακλέους δὲ στολὴ ἡ τοιαύτη πολὺ νεωτέρα τῆς Τρωικῆς μνήμης ἐστί, πλάσμα τῶν τὴν Ἡράκλειαν ποιησάντων, εἴτε Πείσανδρος ἦν εἴτ᾽ ἄλλος τις.

224 Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 2.37.4: Πείσανδρος δὲ ὁ Καμιρεύς, ἵνα τὸ θηρίον τε δοκοίη φοβερώτερον καὶ αὐτῷ γίνηται ἡ ποίησις ἀξιόχρεως μᾶλλον, ἀντὶ τούτων τὰς κεφαλὰς ἐποίησε τῇ ὕδρᾳ τὰς πολλάς. Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata* 6.2.25.2), claims that Peisander plagiarized Peisinus the Lindian: καὶ Πείσανδρος ὁ Καμιρεὺς Πεισίνου τοῦ Λινδίου τὴν Ἡράκλειαν. Even if that was the case, Peisinus lived in Rhodes as well and so we are still at the same island.

225 KBo I 3:24: $^{D.MEŠ}$Mitrassil $^{D.MEŠ}$Arunassil ^{D}Indara $^{D.MEŠ}$Nasattiyanna. KBo I 1:55-56: $^{D.MEŠ}$Mitrassil $^{D.MEŠ}$Uruwanassil ^{D}Indar $^{D.MEŠ}$Nasattiyanna. See Thieme (1960: 303).

226 RV 10.125.1bc: *aham mitrāvaruṇobhā bibharmi aham indrāgnī aham aśvinobhā*. See Thieme (1960: 303).

An indirect association of India with Mesopotamia is found also in the Iranian myth of Aži Dahāka and his sacrifice in Babylon/Babylonia. Compellingly, it is a common knowledge that Θraētaona's name is etymologically related to the name of the Greek sea deity Triton, with whom Heracles appears fighting in some myths. This detail could elucidate more Heracles' (or even Melqart's) relation to the sea and the marine element. It is not clear, however, how one should use this information for a fruitful outcome.

Another important element associated with Indra is his role as a storm deity. This feature does not correspond to either Nergal or Melqart, although Xella points out that before Melqart appeared in Iron Age Tyre, cuneiform texts indicate that there was already a cult of a storm god with his spouse in the same area, dating back to the Late Bronze Age[227]. Could this superimposition of Melqart on the earlier storm god have influenced the identity of Heracles as the son of Zeus? This question is condemned to stay open. As for Nergal, he is also presented as the son of Enlil, who, like Indra, possessed storm-related attributes.

Heracles is not explicitly presented as a storm deity but as the son of a storm deity. However, at the beginning of this chapter there was talk of the theory that wanted Heracles, or more precisely an early form of him, as the first husband of Hera. It is not impossible that there was at that period some connection with the storm element, which was later dropped because of Zeus, with Heracles being reduced to a son of the latter. Indra shows a similar ambiguity sometimes resembling Zeus and sometimes Heracles, so it would be fitting that he should be the deity behind this Greek Zeus-Heracles ambiguity, but it is very difficult to show such an early route that connects India to Greece. In fact, among all the figures that resemble Heracles, only Indra appears to match him to such an extent in terms of this particular ambiguity. Such theories that place Heracles in a wider earlier Indo-European past, alongside figures such as Indra and Thor, have been put forward in the past but it is not at all easy to prove them[228]. Several scholars have rightly noted that the possibility of a character belonging to a common Indo-European tradition does not exclude the identification of Near Eastern influences on that character within another culture[229]. After all, based on the available archaeological material, Mesopotamian traditions seem to precede the Sanskrit ones in terms of their written form. Of course, there is always Michel Bréal's interpretation that all the gods of heaven have their corresponding human form on earth, but to examine whether this would indeed serve as a model for Greek mythology requires separate research.

An additional model that would be worth exploring is that of the avatar, which we usually limit to India, but which could better explain many of the intricacies of Greek mythology. In 1853, Albrecht Weber theorized that the avatar came to India as an imitation of the Christian doctrine of Incarnation[230], but more recent studies have concluded that the concept is much older. According to Dahlquist, avatar is very old in India[231] while Jones observes germs of this concept even in Ṛgveda in association with Indra, despite the fact that the term appears for the first time explicitly in written sources during the fourth century BCE[232]. If such a model is found tacitly in extra-Indian context, either as a result of a common Indo-European heritage or due to more tangible cross-cultural influences, this could explain the existence of a number of deities of the Near East and the Greek world with different names and with only some of their functions converging. Indian mythology is rife with figures that differ greatly from their avatars. Such a case, however, needs to be examined in a separate investigation.

It seems that both Indra and Θraētaona (through Aži Dahāka) had reached territories west of India from early periods, and it is possible that their existence and associated mythological traditions became known around the same time. It is hard to imagine that the arrival of news about a foreign deity in a region did not prompt local populations to inquire about them. However,

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227 Xella (2019: 279-280).
228 Schweitzer (1922: 238).
229 Currie (2024: 42-43); Kelly (2021: 279); López-Ruiz (2015: 378).
230 Weber (1853: 169).
231 Dahlquist (1977: 166).
232 Jones (2015: 2, 4).

the evidence is insufficient. Even if one accepts that Heracles is a figure primarily shaped by Mesopotamian traditions, the question remains as to how the similarities between Indra and Heracles should be explained, as they cannot all be dismissed as purely typological. Did the Indo-Iranian deities first interact with Mesopotamia, and then their characteristics were transferred to the Mediterranean through Mesopotamian intermediaries? Or did these deities travel westward directly from India, bypassing Mesopotamia and encountering Mediterranean traditions via a separate route? The answer is not straightforward, but all indications suggest that beyond Mesopotamia, there are pieces of the puzzle pointing to both India and Iran playing roles in shaping the traditions surrounding Heracles. This implies that the similarities are not merely coincidental or the result of shared beliefs but reflect deeper interactions across these cultural spheres. Otherwise, it would be akin to claiming that the similarities between Ninurta or Nergal and Heracles are based on the westward transfer of traditions, while the almost identical -and almost certainly not merely typological- similarities between Indra and Heracles are the result of typology. The acceptance of this position -that Indra and his mythology played a significant role in the "construction" of the Greek Heracles- leads to the conclusion that there must have been some form of early contacts between India and the Aegean, predating the Achaemenid period.

6.5. Some conclusions regarding the four groups

In conclusion, of the four groups mentioned above, it is possible that not all of them played a role in the creation of the Greek Heracles. Some of his characteristics could be a Greek invention or even products of multiple spontaneous generations, which, for reasons of chance, resemble traditions of the East. But it can be argued with certainty that Heracles is for his most part an eastern figure or a figure that came to the Mediterranean from the East. In support of Heracles' foreign origins, Burkert rightly observes that the fighting model of this hero contrasts sharply with the form of the typical Greek warrior of the seventh century BCE, highlighting that Heracles was, in essence, an anti-hoplite in character[233]. This further supports the idea that he originated elsewhere. Heracles' martial nature shares more in common with figures from the East. This perspective does not overlook the fact that, beyond the traits Heracles may have inherited or collected from other characters (as well as from earlier Greek heroes or even various iterations of Greek Heracles), his role within Hellenic culture and narratives might be distinctly different. The historical origins of a figure are independent of the role it is assigned in its new cultural context.

Although the above characters that make up the four different groups cannot always be easily connected with each other, it should not be overlooked that we are able to trace an indicative movement of them in time and place. The most ancient sources are found in Mesopotamia, followed by those of India and Iran. It is not impossible that the latter precede the former in time as oral traditions, but this cannot be easily proved. The Iranian tradition also shows an explicit connection with Mesopotamia. Then from Mesopotamia we have Nergal and Ninurta arriving in the regions of northern Israel at the same time that the cult of Melqart was already there, while a few decades later the first appearance of the Greek Heracles emerges in sources and iconography, with Rhodes as a very possible station in this travel from East to West. Given that the Greek Heracles does not correspond exactly to either Melqart or Nergal, one must assume that there was another early deity or hero in the Greek area, who gradually received various characteristics from many different eastern deities, eventually taking on a primarily eastern form but with its own Greek peculiarities. It seems likely, however, that the 'purely' Greek element of the hero is very small, with the result that the Greek Heracles seems in fact a Western adaptation of a combination of Melqart, Nergal, Ninurta and one may add here, Gilgamesh.

6.6. Heracles and Gilgamesh

There is another Mesopotamian character with whom the Greek Heracles shows a deep connection and who has not been studied separately in this paper: The Mesopotamian hero Gilgamesh.

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[233] Burkert (1992b: 125).

The examination of Gilgamesh's connection with Heracles was part of the original plan for this paper, but in the meantime Bruno Currie's fresh article has been published precisely on this issue, presenting a holistic study on the connection between these characters and thus covering the relevant issue in a very satisfactory way. Currie has identified a completely striking connection between three of Heracles' main labors (Geryon's cattles, Apple of Hesperides and Cerberus) and the Epic of Gilgamesh (as well as between the latter and Homer's works). These three labours share the common feature of being Jenseitsreisen, which bear many similarities to Gilgamesh's Jenseitsreise in his quest to find immortality[234]. Currie identified several points of convergence between the two characters which are impossible to be typologically parallel. For instance, in both Gilgamesh's Epic and Heracles' journey to Geryon, the two heroes are shown wearing lion-skin from which at one point they tear a piece and use it as a sail[235]. Currie's conclusion is that there was a kind of Gilgamization of the early Heracles' tradition that seems to have been completed by the late eighth to early seventh century BCE[236].

It is compelling that Currie was led by a completely different route (the study of the relationship between Heracles and Gilgamesh) to roughly the same chronology argued for in this article through the study of Heracles' relationship with other eastern figures. Given the appearance of Heracles in scattered references in Homer and Hesiod (eighth century BCE) and then through art in the early seventh century BCE already as a figure with a rudimentary mythology, it seems that this hypothesis goes back at least to the ninth and eighth centuries BCE, which coincide with the appearance of Melqart and the movements of Nergal (and probably Ninurta) to the Levant.

From the available sources it is possible to identify evidence linking Gilgamesh to the other Mesopotamian figures discussed in this paper, showing that this particular hero also contributed to the construction of the Greek Heracles. Brelich, in his study of Heracles, concludes that the central theme of his entire journey (including his labors and overall narrative) is the quest for immortality, which brings him closer to Gilgamesh[237]. The connection between Gilgamesh and Ninurta is quite obvious, since both appear in Mesopotamian literature as heroes who perform a series of feats, fighting various monsters[238]. However, as Andrew George noticed, so far we do not have any kind of an explicit textual reference to the connection of these two characters[239]. One could argue that Gilgamesh is the mortal (or more accurately demigod) counterpart of Ninurta. Given that Ninurta never seems to be described as a mortal figure, it is possible that the duality of Heracles, who is sometimes presented as a mortal and sometimes as a god, is due to this tacit connection between Ninurta and Gilgamesh, *i.e.* a god and a mortal (or at least demigod) king.

The connection between Gilgamesh and Nergal -and thus Gilgamesh and the Underworld- is not at first sight obvious. However, there are several sources that attest to it and date it at a fairly early period. Mark Cohen has published a Sumerian hymn to the god Utu, dating from the Old Babylonian period, in which Gilgamesh is presented as governor of the Netherworld: «^{d}Bìl-ga-meš ensí-kur-ra-ke$_4$ = Gilgamesh, governor of the Netherworld»[240]. In the same vein, George observes that in the so-called *Poem of the Mattock*, dated in the late third millennium BCE, Gilgamesh is presented as Nergal's younger brother (šeš.bàn.da ^{d}nè.eri$_{11}$.gal.ka)[241]. The reason for this paradoxical connection is traced by George to the text *Death of Bilgames*, dated to the Ur III period, where it becomes clear that after Gilgamesh's failure to gain immortality, the gods turned him into a judge of the Netherworld as a kind of a compensation. Specifically, we read:

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234 Currie (2024: 34ff). See also Burkert (1992b: 124).
235 *Ibid.*, 18-20.
236 *Ibid.*, 37-38.
237 Brelich (1978: 309).
238 Nurullin (2020: 546, 550-551) emphasizes the role that Ninurta played in the creation of Enkidu in the Epic of Gilgamesh. Enkidu is presented as a kind of a descendant of Ninurta.
239 George (2003: 108). George observes only a tacit connection through Lugalbanda, the father of Gilgamesh.
240 *Sumerian Utu Hymn*, v. 77. See Cohen (1977: 14).
241 *Poem of the Mattock*, v. 76. See George (2003: 107).

^{d}bìl.ga.mes gidim.bi.ta ki.ta ug_5.ga

GÌR.NÍTA kur.ra ḫé-ak e igi.du gidim bi ḫé.nam

Bilgames, in the form of his ghost, dead in the underworld,

shall act as governor of the Netherworld, shall be indeed chief of its shades[242].

Gilgamesh's association with Nergal occurred at a fairly early period, and therefore, at the time Nergal travelled westward, it is not impossible that some of those traditions which associated him with Gilgamesh travelled with him.

Sironi & Viano, focusing on Gilgamesh and his relation to the Homeric epics, observed that the author of at least the Iliad must have known some version of the Epic of Gilgamesh similar to the Old Babylonian version[243]. At this point, an interesting observation is noted: With regard to Gilgamesh, the influence of the Gilgamesh epic on the Greek world seems to have been more mediated by Babylonian texts (Old Babylonian Gilgamesh, Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh). In the case of Ninurta and Nergal, on the other hand, the Assyrian element seems to predominate more as a mediator. Nergal is shown to be a serpent-slayer in a Middle Assyrian tablet and his cult arrives in the Levant during the Neo-Assyrian period. Ninurta, through his biblical connection with Nisroch, is associated with the place where Sennacherib was murdered and it seems that he too as a figure arrived in the Levant also during the Neo-Assyrian period. Similarly, the entry of the Ninurta/Ningirsu and Nergal traditions into the Mediterranean seems to have been mainly, if not exclusively, through Israel (which could explain the mortalization of Ninurta). In contrast, the entry of the Epic of Gilgamesh into the Mediterranean seems to have been through several different and rather independent channels[244].

In parallel, at the level of iconography, the early iconography of Heracles bears elements found in much earlier Sumerian texts. After all, Ninurta, Ningirsu, Nergal and Gilgamesh all come primarily from the Sumerian literature, but as can be seen from the Greek myths, the Greek writers did not have the Sumerian myths in front of them. Even though Ningirsu/Ninurta and Heracles present some common feats, the Greek author did not seem to be familiar with Gudea's cylinders nor with *The Return of Ninurta to Nippur*. This means that the Sumerian literature somehow survived into the first millennium BCE (perhaps in a purely oral way through Assyrian and Babylonian renderings), ending up cut off from its Sumerian origins. By the first millennium BCE the old distinctions from Sumerian mythologies were no longer valid, and a blending of gods is evident. From all the above one may conclude that even during the first millennium BCE there was a very vivid connection between Mesopotamian literature (Sumerian, Babylonian and Assyrian) and the Greek area, the exact communication routes of which require further research[245].

6.7. Ugarit, Heracles and the Stamp Seal from Hazor

In July 2022, excavations at Hazor in what is now northern Israel unearthed a stamp seal dating to the first half of the eighth century BCE. This stamp seal was published recently by Christoph Uehlinger, who informed us that it depicts a serpent-slaying battle[246]. Specifically, a rather male figure in Egyptian-like attire attempts with a pointed-spear to pierce a seven-headed, twice-coiled serpent, while the stamp is flanked with monkeys, griffins, a flying uraeus and a flying beetle[247].

This stamp seal is a find of immense importance because it is the only one depicting a seven-headed snake in the Levant[248]. Before its discovery there was a very large gap between the earliest artistic representation of a seven-headed serpentine monster that we have seen at Tell Asmar in the Early Dynastic/Akkadian Period (middle third millennium BCE) and the Greek

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242 *Death of Bilgames*, vs. 80-81. I kept George's transcription and translation. See George (2003: 128).
243 Sironi & Viano (2022: 209-210). West (2018: 266) came to the same conclusion for both Homeric Epics.
244 Sironi &Viano (2022: 209-210).
245 For some of the obstacles see Haubold (2013: 1-2).
246 Uehlinger (2024: 1-2).
247 *Ibid.*, 2-3.
248 *Ibid.*, 7.

depictions of the seven-headed Hydra in the first millennium BCE. As Uehlinger notes, written references to a seven-headed serpent, in addition to those of Mesopotamia, are also found in ancient Ugarit, dating to the mid-second millennium BCE[249].

In particular, in KTU 1.3 III 34-42 and in KTU 1.5 I 1-3, there are explicit references to a seven-headed serpent (šlyt dšbt ʿt rašm) which are sometimes confronted by the god Baal and sometimes by the goddess Anat (this is the only instance of an ancient female figure being a dragon-slayer). Uehlinger observes that in the above Ugaritic texts there are references to this snake as a 'twisty serpent' (bṯn *ʿqltn*) and thus it may be related to the twice-coiled serpent of the Hazor stamp seal[250]. Therefore, this article adds the ancient Ugaritic evidence to the equation as a very possible bridge of the traditions concerning the seven-headed serpent.

Indeed, the connections between ancient Ugarit and Mesopotamia, the Mediterranean, or the broader Levant are well-documented as early as the second millennium BCE. If one views the Phoenicians as a cultural evolution of Ugaritic society and considers their widespread expansion throughout the Mediterranean, this Phoenician expansion serves as a highly plausible avenue for the diffusion of Mesopotamian ideas and the cult of Melqart across the Mediterranean. One might argue that it represents a more readily demonstrable path of transmission compared to the diffusion of Mesopotamian ideas through ancient Israel[251]. However, this article places greater emphasis on the role of ancient Israel as a bridge between Mesopotamia and Greece because, among the various Levantine cultures, it is in ancient Israel that we clearly observe the mortalization of divinities, which could explain the transformation of a Mesopotamian deity into a mortal Greek hero and it is in the Bible that we find the most explicit references to the names of the gods Nergal and Ninurta, demonstrating that they were well-known figures in the Levant. It is evident that the diffusion of Mesopotamian traditions into the Mediterranean did not follow a single route. Alongside ancient Israel, Ugarit and the Phoenicians undoubtedly played significant roles. In the next section, the possible contribution of the pre-Islamic Arab world will also be incorporated into this broader picture.

Although a linear course is always risky, the path followed by the motif seems to have gone as follows: from Mesopotamia, where it is found in the third millennium BCE, it passed westward to the northern Levant and Syria around the middle of the second millennium BCE (with perhaps an intermediate stop at Ebla)[252]. The pattern then disappears and reappears in the early eighth century BCE in more southerly regions with the stamp seal of Hazor and with perhaps some biblical references to suggest it[253]. From there, it passes into Greece around the eighth to seventh centuries BCE and continues in multiple forms in ancient Greek and Roman art. It is very important to note that the Hazor stamp seal appears in northern Israel in the early eighth century BCE, which is the same time that we have the movement of Nergal and Ninurta to Israel and it is just before the first appearance of Heracles in Greek art. All the evidence seems to agree that something very interesting must have happened in Mesopotamian-Levantine-Greek relations between the ninth and eighth centuries BCE (a period usually corresponding to a part of what is called the "Greek Dark Age").

6.8. The pre-islamic Arabia

If one examines the map and the preceding discussion on Heracles, it becomes evident that the focus has primarily been on India, Iran, Mesopotamia, the Levant, and the Mediterranean, with brief mentions of Anatolia and Egypt. However, there is an intermediate region that could just as easily serve as a connector between India, Mesopotamia, and the West, which has been largely overlooked: the Arabian Peninsula. The reason for this oversight is the lack of extensive studies linking Heracles to this geographical area, as well as the fact that much of the relevant material dates to significantly later periods. Nevertheless, a highly informative article by Juan de Lara was

249 *Ibid.*, 4-5.
250 *Ibid.*, 4-5.
251 Burkert (1992b: 122) believes that Ugarit was the main bridge between Mesopotamia and Greece.
252 Fronzaroli (1997).
253 Perhaps Psalm 74:13-14 and Isaiah 27:1 belong to this tradition.

published last year, compiling and organizing what is currently known, and it is worth incorporating into the discussion.

Towards the end of the first millennium BCE, various inscriptions and coins feature a deity named Kahl, who was the patron god of the city of Qaryat al-Fāw, located in present-day Yemen[254]. This city was founded in the fourth century BCE, but written references to Kahl date back at least to the fifth century BCE, as evidenced by an inscription on an inscribed eye-agate bead of unknown provenance[255]. Kahl is depicted in a stance and style reminiscent of Melqart and Heracles and there is much evidence suggesting this association[256]. Interestingly, although the name Kahl first appears in the fifth century BCE, the influence of Heracles -or figures like Heracles- in Arabia can be traced back to the early first millennium BCE, as suggested by a bronze statue discovered at the Awwām Temple in Ma'rib[257].

Alongside the depiction of Kahl, it is noteworthy that the name of this deity appears in Sabaic inscriptions[258], denoting either a lineage name or a tribal affiliation, reminiscent of Heracles and the Heracleidae. While the name Kahl is etymologically Semitic, derived from the root k-h-l, which signifies either strength or ability[259], one might wonder whether it could also be connected to the second element of the names Heracles or Nergal/Errakal. Both the Sumerian 'GAL' and the Greek 'kléos' share associations with grandeur and power. Moreover, de Lara identified several elements suggesting that Kahl had an early connection with Arabian storm or weather gods, bringing him closer to both Heracles and Indra, who were also clearly associated with this element[260]. Given the proximity of India to Arabia, could the connection between Indra and Heracles (however one imagines it) have been mediated through Arabia? In any case, the presence of a similar figure in Yemen that bridges India-Mesopotamia with more western regions is particularly intriguing, even if the timelines for Heracles' arrival in Arabia appear to be later for now. From numerous discoveries coming to light in recent times, the contribution of Arabia to the puzzle of ancient civilizations is gradually becoming increasingly evident, both as a bridge between India and the Levant or India and East Africa. The future in this field appears highly promising.

7. Epilogue

From all the above discussion, the close connection of Heracles with figures of the East that precede the explicit appearance of the Greek hero becomes obvious. Heracles, unlike other Greek mythological figures, has a very high percentage of eastern elements, which seems to come from many different deities and is certainly not the result of a simple syncretism. More visible chronologically is his contact with the Near East and Mesopotamia, where figures like Melqart or Nergal appear in the eastern Mediterranean, shortly before the appearance of Heracles. It is not impossible that some of the hero's features reach as far as India or ancient Iran, but it is not possible to give an accurate account of their chronological route to the Mediterranean. In particular, the connection of Heracles with Nergal and Melqart (and perhaps also with Ninurta in a less visible course) makes Heracles the most suitable candidate for the partly confirmation of Parker's equivalence model. It is a partial confirmation because, on the one hand, it demonstrates that the equivalence model does seem to work in certain cases, as many of the aforementioned characters show something deeper than simple syncretism. On the other hand, it does not appear to function purely or in an entirely independent form, as equivalence often seems intrinsically linked with similarity.

Even if we hypothesize a "pure" entity at an early stage that changed form when transitioning to a new culture, it is hard to imagine that this transition occurred as a 'pure' transmission. Any character moving into a different geographical region (especially as they are rarely free of external influences) simultaneously adopts new identities, adapted to pre-existing mythological representations and social or religious roles.

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254 de Lara (2024: 2)
255 de Lara (2024: 2)
256 de Lara (2024: 11)
257 de Lara (2024: 11)
258 de Lara (2024: 2)
259 de Lara (2024: 2)
260 de Lara (2024: 15)

It is most likely that there was indeed an early figure in the Greek area, with its own characteristic elements (and perhaps a different name), on which many elements of eastern deities were then pasted, to the point that eventually the 'original' figure lost its former identity and a more eastern character came into being. How far back the original figure goes, that is difficult to ascertain. Greek mythology places Heracles in the generation immediately before the Trojan War. If this information is reliable, then in our terms, the "original" figure goes back to the second millennium BCE[261]. In any case, its basic eastern features began to come from the east between the ninth and seventh centuries BCE, gradually leading to a more developed mythology of Heracles.

One should not fall into the trap, however, of viewing Heracles as if there was necessarily something "pure" Greek before its association with "pure" Eastern characters. In a world with centuries of intercultural contacts, syncretism and various historical fluctuations, there are no pure religious substances. As López-Ruiz rightly points out: «to try to surgically extract what is foreign in Greek Orientalizing art and literature is to tear apart the creative fabric that holds Greek culture itself together»[262]. At the same time, however, it seems equally correct to state that «Archaic Greek cosmogony and myth can no longer be understood in isolation from their Near Eastern counterparts»[263]. In ancient mythology, similarity and equivalence go hand in hand.

It is worth noting that the relationship of the Greek Heracles with the East is not one-sided. Although there seems to have been a first early movement of ideas mainly from the East to the West, constructing several aspects of this particular hero, in later times we have a reverse course, from the Greco-Roman world to the East, leaving his imprint in many religious events of both the Hellenistic world and the Roman-Parthian East, finally reaching as far as the depths of Asia. In this later journey from west to east, as Bonnet aptly observes, Alexander's campaign in the east played a key role[264]. Alexander saw himself as an alter ego of Heracles and he came into direct contact with Melqart of Tyre and many other Mesopotamian and Indian figures of his time. This later course from west to east is also consistent with Wulff's conclusion, presented above, regarding the use of the myths of Heracles by the author of the Mahābhārata. At the same time, Heracles' "return" to the East played a major role in the difficulty of modern researchers to be able to create an accurate biography of the hero, for it is not always clear which of the characteristics of the figures that resemble Heracles are chronologically prior to him and which ones emerged after contact with him.

The key date for the meeting of eastern characters with the former Heracles or for the creation of the Greek Heracles as we know him today, seems to be the period from the ninth to the eighth century BCE. As Sarah Morris aptly points out, the early first millennium BCE coincides both with the Neo-Assyrian expansion to the west (which brings the Mesopotamian figures closer to the geographical area of interest) and with the great migrations of the Phoenicians and their alphabet westwards (which also brings Melqart closer to the area of interest)[265]. It was the right moment for a historical connection to be made between Melqart, Nergal-Erragal, perhaps even Ninurta, and Heracles (either the latter is an evolution of the above or existed as an early form invested with new elements from the east). Ancient India (and perhaps Iran as well) must have played a role in the construction of Heracles, even though it is not easy to trace this route. This immediately shifts the timeline of India-Mediterranean connections to before the Persian period, and studies are already emerging to support this view, pushing the date of contact back to the second millennium BCE[266].

The case certainly does not end here. There are still many gaps that need to be filled in order for someone to convincingly explain the nature of the connection between Heracles and the eastern entities. It is not impossible that a closer investigation into other deities and figures with which Heracles or other eastern figures have been associated at times, such as Sandan, Meslamtaea,

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261 West (2018: 267).
262 López-Ruiz (2010: 5).
263 *Ibid.*, 1.
264 Bonnet (1992: 169). See also L'Allier (2015: 46).
265 Morris (1997: 608).
266 See the studies in Pareja & Arnott (2024).

Reseph, Eshmun or even the Hittite myths about Tarḫunz and Illuyanka, might shed more light on this whole story. Until then, one thing is certain, Heracles is a figure who is very fond of the eastern world to such an extent that although in a sense he came from the East to the Mediterranean, it was not long before he travelled back to the depths of the east, leaving his mark on the religious sphere of many different cultures.

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