



The Open Public Health Journal

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PERSPECTIVE

The COVID-19 Saga: Myths, Allegories and the Aftermath for Contemporary and Future Practice

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Abstract:

The mythical fight of Heracles against the Hydra presents an allegory to the fight of humanity against the COVID-19 pandemic. The rational interpretation of the myth can help people understand the intricacies of the management of healthcare crises. Combined with this, the myth can also create respect for healthcare workers and inspire individuals to take positive action in the fight against COVID-19. Although myths have been regarded as a threat to public health, mythological elements and allegories can become potent tools of health promotion.

Keywords: Hydra, Hercules, COVID-19, Pandemic, Greek mythology, Humanity.

Article History

Received: July 11, 2021

Revised: September 13, 2021

Accepted: September 13, 2021

1. INTRODUCTION

It is common knowledge that Greek mythology has provided humanity and even the medical community with a rich heritage of oral and literary traditions concerning the origin and nature of the world, the practices of the ancient Greeks, as well as the lives of both realistic and mythological creatures [1, 2]. Names of Gods, Titans, Giants and Monsters, such as Zeus, Athena, Atlas, Prometheus, Cerberus, or Medusa, have been readily used today within a vast array of human activities, each time to describe a different attribute and give a special meaning – power, wisdom, sturdiness, vigilance or dread [3]. Nevertheless, the age at which most people, including those in the medical sector, are fascinated is the heroic one; it is the mortality of the human heroes that makes them familiar to everyone and an example to follow. The heroic age dawn is dominated by the most recognizable and popular hero of all: Heracles, a prolific figure who performed twelve unparalleled labours [4, 5]. The authors discuss the management of the COVID-19 pandemic as an allegory to the killing of the Hydra, one of the most impressive labours of Heracles. This allegory can help explain the complexity of the pandemic in a plain manner to those who are familiar with its context. Although myths have been negatively regarded in

public health as multipliers of misinformation [6, 7], their use may also yield benefits [8]. Well-known components of myth can make the efforts and challenges of public health issues, including the COVID-19 pandemic, more iconic [9]. Ultimately, such an approach can serve health promotion by means of spreading awareness, increasing respect to healthcare workers, and inspire individuals to take positive action in the fight against COVID-19 [10].

2. GREEK MYTHOLOGY IN A SCIENTIFIC CONTEXT

The borders between fiction and reality are vague, and Heracles story would not be an exception to that. Some scholars suggest that his story is an allegory for the sun's yearly passage through the twelve constellations of the zodiac. Some others maintain that behind Heracles' complicated mythology, there was probably a real man, perhaps a chieftain-vassal of the kingdom of Argos. Others consider the story of Heracles as a local adaptation of hero myths already well established [11].

Perhaps the most intriguing of all is the explanation of the name Heracles as a conjunction of Hera and Cleos, the latter word meaning in Greek: the glory. Looking beyond the paradox of Heracles' name referring to the glory of his greatest adversary, the goddess Hera, one can easily find the common root of "hera" and "hero". Before being deified to the eponymous goddess, her, with a lowercase "h", was the

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summation of all the virtues of a hero. According to this interpretation, Heracles is the glory of heroes, the ultimate hero [12].

Hence, this is more to constitute possibly an honorary title, attributed to great warriors of those ages, and not just a mythological name. But if this is the case, then the whole fascination about Heracles is obvious: the idea that a single person could tackle the hardest tasks in the world and overcome them. Literally, everybody can become a Heracles, or at least be bestowed with the title. And this is why Heracles is tasked with the 12 labours, each one completed with a different pattern and each one representing a different aspect of human foundation [12].

The Hydra was a giant fire-breathing water snake with multiple (possibly 9) serpent heads, born of Echidna and Typhon. The Hydra lived in a swamp near Lerna, in Argos, and terrorized the residents of the surrounding country. The goddess Hera had sent this monster, thinking that it was invincible, in the hope it would destroy Heracles' home city. When Heracles finally confronted the Hydra, he began the fight by shooting flaming arrows to tease her out. When it came to melee, despite the ferocity of the blows to the monster, the struggle seemed to be hopeless. Each time Heracles was chopping one head off, two new heads would grow instead. The turning point was the moment when Heracles employed the assistance of his nephew Iolaos, who would cauterize every chopped neck at their root to avoid for it to grow again. But, the central head was immortal – Heracles would have to bury under a massive boulder to neutralize it forever. And, as the last ritual, he would later dip his arrows in the poisoned blood of the monster, envenoming them for further use [13, 14].

From a psychoanalytical perspective, some scholars interpret this myth as the spiritual purification emerging from burning the myriad psychological problems and the desires of the flesh occurring at the roots of human evolution. In order to defeat the Hydra, Heracles calls Iolaos for help, who symbolically demonstrates “the voice or vision of consciousness” [15]. From another allegorical perspective, Heracles' courageous victories over monsters and other dangerous enemies could also be interpreted as Christ-like mastery of earthly evils, while beating the Hydra could account for the defeat of the death [16].

3. THE HYDRA AS A REFLECTION OF COVID-19

According to geomorphological concerns, Hydra might just represent a hydrogeological feature of this land. The monster could be very much the Lerna spring having a lot of branches, which frequently overflowed, leading to standing swamp waters that yielded poisonous gases and caused major infectious diseases. Heracles' labour would be nothing more than a colossal project to burn and drain the swamps and protect the Argive folk from the overflowing waters and the subsequent challenges of poor hygiene [17]. Thus, the fact is that Hydra is definitely a problem that is bigger than life, a problem with multiple challenges to address and extraordinarily difficult to be eradicated. One would find it difficult not to notice the striking similarities between another multidimensional problem of today: the COVID-19 pandemic

Since the very beginning, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a multidimensional crisis in space that has produced many challenging aspects: medical, economic, sociological, technological, organizational, psychological and environmental [18]. All of these did not become evident at once. It was the effort to deal with one that raised the existence of the others, pretty much like the heads of the Hydra. At first, like Heracles, the problem was attempted to be solved with a brute force approach: the implementation of strict restrictive measures, financial penalties, and other stringent policies of unconfirmed effectiveness, such as social distancing, lockdown, isolation, and quarantine of the exposed individuals. In the early days of the pandemic, COVID-19 treatment was also not based on solid scientific evidence and guidelines, which were not available at the time [19]. In fact, a lack of a multidisciplinary approach, resulting in fierce combat that seemed hopeless, has been observed in many places, including China, Italy, and the United States of America [20].

However, Heracles would finally accomplish to kill the monster with the Iolean assistance. Iolaos could represent the cape-less heroes, the humble citizens, the contribution of whom was of paramount importance to cauterize the beheaded necks of the snake through their willingness for COVID-19 vaccination and social protective behavior. Nevertheless, one of the Hydra's heads is immortal and was buried underground by Heracles, a grim reminder of the potential of this pandemic to pose further challenges that will inevitably have to be addressed in the future.

The final act was for Heracles to envenomize his arrows with the monster's blood. This allowed him to obtain powerful tools in his arsenal, which were later used to kill the Stymphalian birds in another Labour [21]. These tools may well resemble the lessons learned through the pandemic that could be utilized to kill the Stymphalian outbreaks of the post-COVID era. The great achievement of modern medicine and molecular biology to guarantee safe and effective mRNA vaccination in a short amount of time, combined with the multidisciplinary experience gained in several fields of public health (such as telemedicine), promise to successfully address new Hydras emerging in the future.

CONCLUSION

The myth of Heracles and Hydra may not be a strict indicative allegory of our dealings with the COVID-19 pandemic. But it may well be regarded as a reminder to penetrate to the root of a multidimensional problem apart from applying brute scientific force. Similar to Heracles, we seem to face an endless array of tasks in life that cannot be easily accomplished. It takes intense will-power and determination, to take on our fears and discern the root of the problem. Perhaps, the slaying of the Hydra can be regarded not merely as an epic battle against a particularly vicious monster, but as one man triumphing over adversity through courage and resilience. The main research question is how to build up the resilience of individuals, teams, and organizations to face the unprecedented situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, it calls for a need to divert mainstream leadership from ego-centered, heroic figures to a post-heroic leadership process of co-creation

and co-operation.

Maybe the fact that Heracles dips his arrows in the poisonous blood of the Hydra suggests that we can always take something and learn from every experience in life. Of course, the Hydra's immortal head will always be there, a threatening menace to keep us alert. But, for the record, the Hydra itself never appeared again in the Argive plains.

CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION

Not applicable.

FUNDING

None.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Declared none.

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