THE BIRTH OF HERACLES

Once upon a time, Amphitryon and his wife, Alcmene, daughter of the King of Mycenae, were forced to leave their homeland and finally found a safe haven in Thebes, where Alcmene bore two children: Heracles, son of Zeus, and Iphicles.

Hera envied Alcmene and despised Heracles, knowing that he was her husband’s illegitimate son. In one version of the myth, Zeus assigned to Hermes the task of bringing the infant to Olympus mountain. He then laid it into Hera’s breast, while she was asleep, until it suckled a little milk. The extra strength and stamina coming from the divine milk would make the infant invincible. However, as soon as Hera discovered Zeus’ trick, she pushed the infant away, spilling her milk across the night sky and so forming the Milky Way. When both babies were about 8 months old, Hera sent two serpents to kill them in their cradle. As the serpents were approaching the cradle, Zeus covered the room with light and woke the babies up. Iphicles burst into tears out of terror, but Heracles, fearless as he was, strangled the serpents with his bare hands. This first amazing feat was an explicit sign that he was of divine origin. Heracles grew up and married Megara, daughter of the king of Thebes, and became a king himself. He ruled Thebes for a few years and lived a happy life, until Hera induced a madness in him that made him kill his wife and children. He became aware of the harm he had caused only after composing himself, and went to the Oracle of Delphi to atone. He prayed to the god Apollo for guidance, and Pythia, the high priestess, told him to go back to Mycenae and serve the king Eurystheus, his cousin, for 12 years. Thereupon, he would become immortal and ascend Olympus mountain.