

## factsheet - carving of “Cerberus”

**C**erberus, in Greek mythology, a three-headed, dragon-tailed dog that guarded the entrance to the lower world, otherwise known as Hades. According to Horace, Cerberus possessed one hundred heads. Hesiod is content to give him fifty, but most sources agree that he had only three. The centre one was that of a lion, while on one side was that of a dog, and on the other was that of a wolf. His shape was that of the dogs who haunted the battlefields in the dark of the night, feasting on the bodies of the fallen warriors.

Medieval authors report that Cerberus openly stalks the surface of the earth, mingling with mankind. He is described as possessing a violent and hurtful nature, and is known to plot and endeavour brutal and sudden mischief. As one commentator says: ‘When he makes incursions sometimes he lies hidden and sometimes he offers open violence; he is much delighted in all things done wickedly and mischievously.’

### **About cerebus**

According to Horace, Cerberus possessed one hundred heads. Hesiod

wrote that he had fifty, while most sources agree to only three. The centre head was in the shape of a lion, while the other two were in the shape of a dog and a wolf, respectively. He also had a dragon’s tail and a thick mane of writhing snakes.

### **Origin**

It is generally thought that Cerberus was born to Echidne, a half-woman, half-serpent, and Typhon, the most fierce of all creatures.

Cerberus has a brother, Orphus, which is also a monstrous dog with two heads. Cerberus’ Egyptian correspondent is Anubis, the dog who guarded the tombs and conducted the souls to the underworld.

A similar dog, Garm, is guarding the house of deaths in the Norse mythology. These monsters were probably inspired from the dogs that haunted the battlefields in the dark of the night, feasting on the bodies of the fallen warriors.

### **Symbol**

The three heads relate to the threefold symbol of the baser forces of life. They represent the past, the present and

the time yet to come. Dante described Cerberus as “il gran vermo inferno” thus linking the monsters with the legendary worms and orbs.

### **Role**

Cerberus is the watchdog of Hell. He is often pictured with Hades, his master. He can be found on the banks of the river Styx, where he had the task of eating any mortals who attempted to enter, and any spirits who attempted to escape.

### **Magic**

As Cerberus vehemently resisted Heracles, barking furiously, his saliva dripped on the ground, giving birth to a poisonous plant called aconite; thus named because it flourishes on bare rocks. It is also known as ‘hecateis,’ because Hecate was the first to use it. Medea tried to poison Theseus with it, and the Thessalian witches used it in preparing the ointment that enabled them to fly. The modern name for aconite is wolfsbane.

Ancient Greeks and Romans placed a coin and a small cake in the hands of their deceased. The coin was meant as payment for Charon who ferried the

*Virgil described him by saying:  
‘No sooner landed, in his den they  
found the triple porter of the Stygian  
sound, grim Cerberus, who soon began  
to rear his crested snakes, and armed  
his bristling hair.’  
‘Orcus’ warder, blood-besmeared,  
growling o’er gory bones half-cleared,  
down in his gloomy den.’*



**BARKING** Stone carving is situated in the lawn of the late Michael Campbell’s house at the junction of the Clogher-Newton crossroads close to the GAA grounds.

souls across the river Styx, while the cake helped to pacify Cerberus. This custom gave rise to the expression 'to give a sop to Cerberus,' meaning to give a bribe or to quiet a troublesome customer.

### **Story**

Cerberus is best known for playing a part in Hercules' final labor. Hercules had to go to the Underworld and bring Cerberus back to the surface of the earth without using his arrows or his club.

Hercules grabbed Cerberus by the throat and dragged him to Mycenae through a crack in the surface of the earth. Having accomplished this, Hercules dispatched Cerberus to guard one of the secret groves of Demeter but the dog eventually made his way back to Hades where he still guards the entrance.

In another legend, Orpheus makes the same journey to the underworld to bring back his lover, Eurydice. He manages to soothe Cerberus with his lyre.

In the Aeneid, the Trojan hero, Aeneas descends to Tartarus to visit his father Anchises. He is escorted by the Bybil of Cumae, and upon encountering 'huge Cerberus barking from his triple jaws, stretched at his enormous

length in a den that fronts the gate,' she throws him a cake seasoned with honey and poppy seeds. Now Cerberus, "his neck bristling with horrid snakes, opening his three mouths in the mad rage of hunger, snatches the offered morsel, and spreads on the ground, relaxes his enormous limbs, lies now extended at the vast length over all the cave. Aeneas, now that hell's keeper is buried in sleep, seizes the passage and swiftly over-passes the bank of that flood whence there is no return."

In Dante's Inferno, Cerberus was the tormenting genius of the third circle. There the gluttonous and incontinent souls could be found immersed in turbid water. Hail and snow poured down through the dark air upon their grimacing faces. Cerberus took care to see that each soul received its due share of torment:

'Cerberus, a monster fierce and strange, with three throats, barks dog-like over those that are immersed in it. His eyes are red, his beard greasy and black, his belly wide, and clawed his hands; he clutches the spirits, flays and piecemeal renders them. When Cerberus, the great Worm, perceived us, he opened his mouth and showed his tusks: no limb of him kept still. My guide, spreading his palms, took up earth; and, with full fists, cast it into



**CARVING** Another view of the stone carving depicting the mythical monster, Cerberus, in the lawn of the late Michael Campbell's house at the junction of the Clogher-Newton crossroads. The carving came from Thomastown House.

his ravening gullets. As the dog, that barking craves, and grows quiet when he bites his food, for he strains and battles only to devour it: so did those squalid visages of Cerberus the Demon, who thunders on the spirits so, that they would fain be deaf.'