

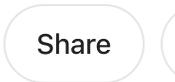
# Vulcan or Hercules?

Guessing game of NYC's Grand Central



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*(It should take about three minutes to read this 771-word essay. There are links at the end to sources. Thank you for spending time with Snack.)*

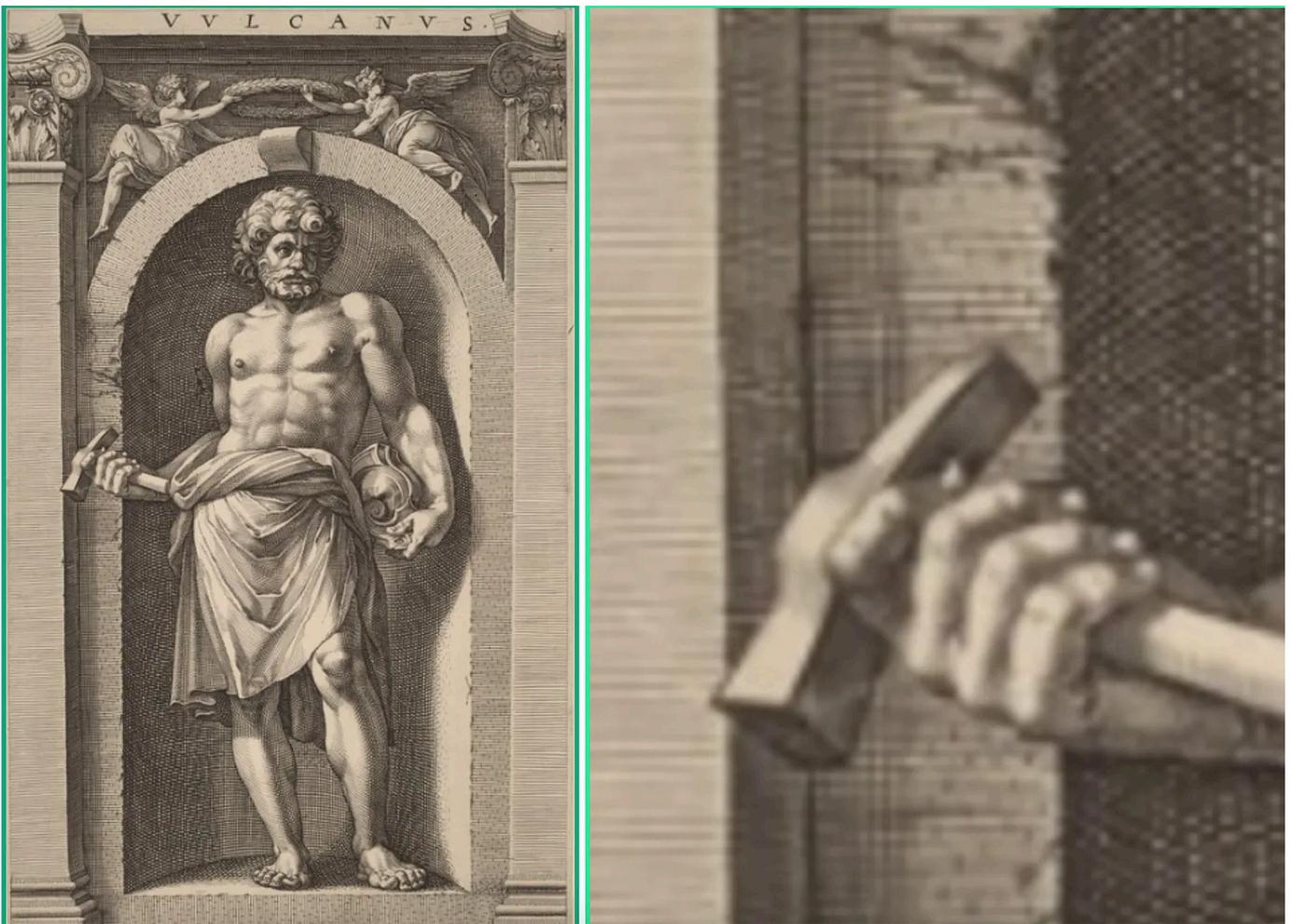


Author photo

A few questions for students of Greco-Roman mythology.

Which god is typically shown with a blacksmith's hammer? And which hero-who-later-became-a-god is often shown with a club?

The hammer is the symbol of Vulcan, the Roman god of fire. The Greek version of the god, Hephaestus, is often shown with the hammer as well as an anvil and tongs. These are tools of his trade as a blacksmith, as the creative and productive metalworker of Olympus.



Goltzius, Hendrick, Vulcan, c 1592. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Who is often shown wielding a club? Hercules.



Detail of Hercules, c. 1589, also by Goltzius. National Gallery of Art, D.C.

Hercules is one of the patron gods of merchants and travelers, but he's best known his immense strength. Sometimes Hercules is shown as a handsome man.



Crane, Walter. "Hercules and the Nymphs," c. 1910. "Hercules & the nymphs" [The New York Public Library Digital Collections](https://www.nypl.org/digital/collections/nypl/hercules-and-the-nymphs).

But in many European depictions of Hercules, he borders on grotesque.



Salmon, Gabriel. Detail of "Hercules and the Giants" c. 1528. Art Institute of Chicago.

Given this information, who would you say we see in the photos below? Who is this but slender fellow holding a blacksmith's hammer?



I'd say Vulcan.

Yet this figure is most often called Hercules. It's part of the group of statues above the main entrance of New York City's Grand Central Terminal.



Carol M. Highsmith [photo of entrance to Grand Central](#), c. 2009. Library of Congress.



Author photo

## Complex Symbol?

Grand Central was largely built between 1903 and 1913 in the Beaux-Arts style, with the grand entrance statues added about a year later.

The New York Times in 1914 reported on its progress of the creation of what it called the world's largest sculpture group. The newspaper reported that the statues were Mercury, the god of commerce, flanked by Hercules and Minerva, the goddess of wisdom and craft.

The statues were carved by workers at the firm of William Bradley & Sons of Long Island City in Queens, wrote Asta von Schröder in her PhD thesis, "Images and

## Messages in the Embellishment of Metropolitan Railway Stations (1850–1950).”

The designer was French sculptor Jules Félix Coutan (1848-1939), who sent to New York a model for the group of statues.

One of the main architects of Grand Central, Whitney Warren, described these statues as “an attempt to offer a tribute to the glory of commerce,” von Schröder reports in thesis.

She quotes Warren as saying:

Mercury is “supported by moral and mental energy – Hercules and Minerva. All to attest that this great enterprise has grown and exists, not merely from the wealth expended, nor by the revenue derived, but by the brain and brawn constantly concentrated upon its development.”

This proved to be a powerful statement, von Schröder concluded.

“Warren’s ‘brain and brawn’ interpretation hit a mark with the American audiences and has never been seriously questioned,” she wrote.

But it does seem open to question.

Look at the figures below and consider whether you would call the center figure brawny if he were not called Hercules.



Details of Highsmith photo, cited above.

Warren's long-ago description overpowers even today how people with some knowledge of mythology view this statue.

We see a slim god with a blacksmith's hammer, but accept that it's Hercules, not Vulcan.

But, at the time of Grand Central's creation, Vulcan was widely seen as a symbol of iron industry, and by extension, industrial capital, according to von Schröder.

“Because the Grand Central Hercules was equipped with so many attributes typical Vulcan —the anchor, cogwheel, anvil and hammer —while lacking the more visible props typical for his own appearance —gnarly club, lions fur with the head still attached—it would have been difficult to correctly identify the demigod if it had no been for Warren's effective marketing of the ‘official’ interpretation’,” von Schröder wrote.

Please let me know in a comment which god you think the statue in question represents.

Sources:

Cited: [2013 TU Berlin thesis of von Schröder](#) : “[Images and Messages in the Embellishment of Metropolitan Railway Stations](#) (1850–1950)  
-[1914 NYT article on station](#)

Consulted: Steve Rosenbach's "[I'm Not Hercules!](#)" - [Vulcan at Grand Central Terminal](#)” post on Cityscape Photo | Instagram post from [Keith York](#)

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