

# Hermes

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**Hermes** (pronounced /ˈhɜrmiːz/; Greek Ἑρμῆς) is the great messenger of the gods in Greek mythology and additionally as a guide to the Underworld. An Olympian god, he is also the patron of boundaries and of the travelers who travel across them, of shepherds and cowherds, of the cunning of thieves and liars,<sup>[1]</sup> of orators and wit, of literature and poets, of athletics and sports, of weights and measures, of invention, and of commerce in general.<sup>[2]</sup> His symbols include the tortoise, the rooster, the winged sandals, the winged hat, and the caduceus (given to him by Apollo in exchange for the lyre). In the Roman adaptation of the Greek religion (see *interpretatio romana*), Hermes was identified with the Roman god Mercury, who, though inherited from the Etruscans, developed many similar characteristics, such as being the patron of commerce.

The Homeric hymn to Hermes invokes him as the one "of many shifts (*polytropos*), blandly cunning, a robber, a cattle driver, a bringer of dreams, a watcher by night, a thief at the gates, one who was soon to show forth wonderful deeds among the deathless gods."<sup>[3]</sup>

He protects and takes care of all the travelers, miscreants, harlots, old crones and thieves that pray to him or cross his path. He is athletic and is always looking out for runners, or any athletes with injuries who need his help. Hermes is a messenger from the gods to humans, sharing this role with Iris. An interpreter who bridges the boundaries with strangers is a *hermeneus*. Hermes gives us our word "hermeneutics" for the art of interpreting hidden meaning. In Greek a lucky find was a *hermaion*. Hermes delivered messages from Olympus to the mortal world. He wears shoes with wings on them and uses them to fly freely between the mortal and immortal world. Hermes was the second youngest of the Olympian gods, being born before Dionysus.

Hermes, as an inventor of fire,<sup>[4]</sup> is a parallel of the Titan, Prometheus. In addition to the lyre, Hermes was believed to have invented many types of racing and the sports of wrestling and boxing, and therefore was a patron of athletes.<sup>[5]</sup>

According to prominent folklorist Yeleazar Meletinsky, Hermes is a deified trickster.<sup>[6]</sup> Hermes also served as a psychopomp, or an escort for the dead to help them find their way to the afterlife (the Underworld in the Greek myths). In many Greek myths, Hermes was depicted as the only god besides Hades, Persephone, Hecate, and Thanatos who could enter and leave the Underworld without

**Hermes**



**Messenger of the gods, god of commerce, thieves, travelers, sports, and border crossings**

<b>Abode</b>	Mount Olympus
<b>Symbol</b>	Caduceus, winged sandals, tortoise
<b>Consort</b>	Aphrodite, Dryope
<b>Parents</b>	Zeus and Maia
<b>Children</b>	Pan, Hermaphroditus, Tyche, Abderus, Autolykus
<b>Roman equivalent</b>	Mercury

hindrance.

Hermes often helped travelers have a safe and easy journey. Many Greeks would sacrifice to Hermes before any trip.

In the fully-developed Olympian pantheon, Hermes was the son of Zeus and the Pleiade Maia, a daughter of the Titan Atlas. Hermes' symbols were the cock and the tortoise, and he can be recognized by his purse or pouch, winged sandals, winged cap, and the herald's staff, the *kerykeion*. The night he was born he slipped away from Maia and stole his elder brother Apollo's cattle.

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## Epithets of Hermes

### Kriophoros

*Main article: Kriophoros*

*Hermes Kriophoros*, Hermes, lamb-bearer appears early and later. His ram connection appears in the earliest Mycenaean Linear B inscription bearing his name. And Pausanias reports the lamb-carrying rites still being performed at the Boeotian city of Tanagra in the late second century of the Common Era.

## Argeiphontes

Hermes' epithet *Argeiphontes* (Latin *Argicida*), or Argus-slayer, recalls his slaying of the hundred eyed giant Argus Panoptes, who was watching over the heifer-nymph Io in the sanctuary of Queen Hera herself in Argos. Putting Argus to sleep, Hermes used a spell to close all of Argus' eyes and then slew the giant. Argus' eyes were then put into the tail of the peacock, symbol of the goddess Hera.

## Logios

His epithet of *Logios* is the representation of the god in the act of speaking, as orator, or as the god of eloquence. Indeed, together with Athena, he was the standard divine representation of eloquence in classical Greece. The Homeric *Hymn to Hermes* (probably 6th century BCE) describes Hermes making a successful speech from the cradle to defend himself from the (true) charge of cattle theft. Somewhat later, Proclus' commentary on Plato's *Republic* describes Hermes as the god of persuasion. Yet later, Neoplatonists viewed Hermes Logios more mystically as origin of a "Hermaic chain" of light and radiance emanating from the divine intellect (*nous*). This epithet also produced a sculptural type.

## Other

Other epithets included:

- *Agoraeus*, of the agora<sup>[7]</sup>
- *Acacesius*, of Acacus
- *Charidotes*, giver of charm
- *Cyllenius*, born on Mount Cyllene
  
- *Diaktoros*, the messenger
- *Dolios*, the schemer
- *Enagonios*, lord of contests
- *Enodios*, on the road
- *Epimelius*, keeper of flocks
- *Eriounios*, luck bringer
- *Polygius*
- *Psychopompos*, conveyor of souls
- *Trismegistus* later in Hermeticism



The cap badge of the British Royal Signal Corps bears a representation of Giambologna's *Mercury*

## Cult

*General article: Cult (religion).*

Though temples to Hermes existed throughout Greece, a major center of his cult was at Pheneos in Arcadia, where festivals in his honor were called *Hermoea*.

As a crosser of boundaries, *Hermes Psychopompos*' ("conductor of the soul") was a psychopomp, meaning he brought newly-dead souls to the Underworld and Hades. In the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, Hermes conducted Persephone the Kore (young girl or virgin), safely back to Demeter. He also brought dreams to living mortals.

Among the Hellenes, as the related word *herma* ("a boundary stone, crossing point") would suggest, Hermes embodied the spirit of crossing-over: He was seen to be manifest in any kind of interchange, transfer, transgressions, transcendence, transition, transit or traversal, all of which involve some form



*Mercury* by Hendrick Goltzius, 1611 (Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem)

of crossing in some sense. This explains his connection with transitions in one's fortune—with the interchanges of goods, words and information involved in trade, interpretation, oration, writing—with the way in which the wind may transfer objects from one place to another, and with the transition to the afterlife.

Many graffito dedications to Hermes have been found in the Athenian Agora, in keeping with his epithet of *Agoraios* and his role as patron of commerce.<sup>[7]</sup>

Originally, Hermes was depicted as an older, bearded, phallic god, but in the late 4th century BCE, the traditional Hermes was reimagined as an athletic youth (*illustration, top right*). Statues of the new type of Hermes stood at stadia and gymnasia throughout Greece.

## Hermai/Herms

*Main article: Herma*

In Ancient Greece, Hermes was a phallic god of boundaries. His name, in the form *herma*, was applied to a wayside marker pile of stones; each traveller added a stone to the pile. In the 6th century BCE, Hipparchos, the son of Pisistratus, replaced the cairns that marked the midway point between each village *deme* at the central *agora* of Athens with a square or rectangular pillar of stone or bronze topped by a bust of Hermes with a beard. An erect phallus rose from the base. In the more primitive Mount Kyllini or Cyllenian herms, the standing stone or wooden pillar was simply a carved phallus. In Athens, herms were placed outside houses for good luck. "That a monument of this kind could be transformed into an Olympian god is astounding," Walter Burkert remarked (Burkert 1985).

In 415 BCE, when the Athenian fleet was about to set sail for Syracuse during the Peloponnesian War, all of the Athenian hermai were vandalized one night. The Athenians at the time believed it was the work of saboteurs, either from Syracuse or from the anti-war faction within Athens itself. Socrates' pupil Alcibiades was suspected of involvement, and Socrates indirectly paid for the impiety with his life.

From these origins, hermai moved into the repertory of Classical architecture.

## Hermes' iconography

slahon

## Birth

Hermes was born on Mount Kellina|Mount Cyllene in Arcadia. According to the Homeric Hymn to Hermes, Zeus in the dead of night secretly begot Hermes upon Maia, a nymph. The Greeks generally applied the name *Maia* to a midwife or a wise and gentle old woman; so the nymph appears to have been an ancient one, or more probably a goddess. At any rate, she was one of the Pleiades, daughters of Atlas, taking refuge in a cave of Mount Cyllene in Arcadia. They were discovered by the local king Abacus, who raised Hermes as his foster son.



Lee Lawrie, *Hermes* (1939). Library of Congress John Adams Building, Washington, D.C.

The infant Hermes was precocious. His first day he invented the lyre. By nightfall, he had rustled the immortal cattle of Apollo. For the first sacrifice, the taboos surrounding the sacred kine of Apollo had to be transgressed, and the trickster god of boundaries was the one to do it.

Hermes drove the cattle back to Greece and hid them, and covered their tracks. When Apollo accused Hermes, Maia said that it could not be him because he was with her the whole night. However, Zeus entered the argument and said that Hermes did steal the cattle and they should be returned. While arguing with Apollo, Hermes began to play his lyre. The instrument enchanted Apollo and he agreed to let Hermes keep the cattle in exchange for the lyre.

## **Hermes' offspring**

### **Pan**

The satyr-like Greek god of nature, shepherds and flocks, Pan was often said to be the son of Hermes through the nymph Dryope.<sup>[8]</sup> In the Homeric Hymn to Pan, Pan's mother ran away from the newborn god in fright from his goat-like appearance.

### **Hermaphroditus**

Hermaphroditus was an immortal son of Hermes through Aphrodite. He was changed into an androgynous being when the gods literally granted the nymph Salmacis' wish that she and Hermaphroditus might never separate.

### **Priapus**

Depending on the sources consulted, the god Priapus could be understood as a son of Hermes.<sup>[9]</sup> In Priapus, Hermes' phallic origins survived.

### **Eros**

According to some sources, the mischievous winged god of love Eros, son of Aphrodite, was sired by Hermes, though the gods Ares and Hephaestus were also among those said to be the sire, whereas in the Theogeny, Hesiod claims that Eros was born of nothing before the Gods. Eros' Roman name was Cupid. Eros also has magical arrows, with them, he can cause any mortal to fall in love with the next being they see, human or otherwise.

### **Tyche**

The goddess of prosperity, Tyche (Greek *Τύχη*), or Fortuna, was sometimes said to be the daughter of Hermes and Aphrodite

### **Abderus**

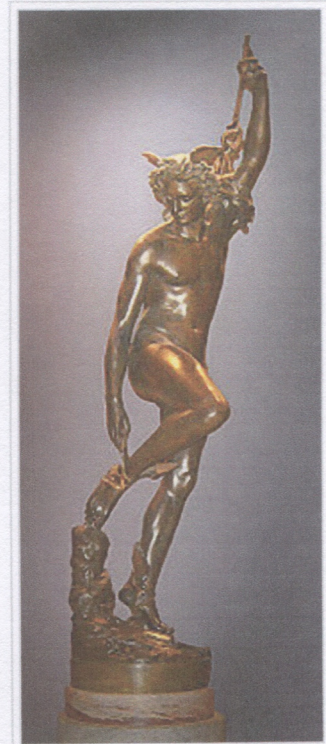
Abderus was devoured by the Mares of Diomedes. He had gone to the Mares with his friend Heracles.

### **Autolycus**

Autolycus, the Prince of Thieves, was a son of Hermes and grandfather of Odysseus.

## List of Hermes' consorts and children

1. Aglaurus Athenian priestess
  1. Eumolpus warlord
2. Artemis Goddess of the Hunt (according to some legends)
3. Amphion King of Thebes in Boiotia
4. Antheus
5. Antianeira Malian princess
  1. Echion Argonaut
6. Apemosyne Cretan princess
7. Aphrodite
  1. Epoties King of Troy and died in Athena arms when the war was over.
  2. Hermaphroditus
  3. Peitho
  4. Priapus (in some traditions)
  5. Rhodos
  6. Tyche
8. Carmentis Arcadian nymph
  1. Evander founder of Latium
9. Chione Phocian princess
  1. Autolycus thief
10. Chryses priest of Apollo
11. Crocus who died and became the crocus flower
12. Dryope Arcadian nymph
  1. Pan rustic god
13. Eupolomia Phthian princess
  1. Aethalides Argonaut herald
14. Herse Athenian priestess
  1. Cephalus hunter
  2. (Also Ceryx)
15. Pandrosus Athenian priestess
  1. Ceryx Eleusinian herald
16. Peitho ("Persuasion" his wife according to Nonnos)
17. Penelope Arcadian nymph (or wife of Odysseus)
  1. Pan (according to one tradition)
18. Persephone (according to one tradition)
19. Polymele (daughter of Phylas according to Iliad)
  1. Eudorus (myrmidon; soldier in Trojan War)
20. Sicilian nymph
  1. Daphnis rustic poet
21. Theobula Eleian prince
  1. Myrtilus charioteer
22. Therses
  1. Born of the urine of Hermes, Poseidon and Zeus
    1. Orion giant hunter (in one tradition)
  2. Unknown mothers



Hermes with *petasus*, *talaria* and *caduceus*: *Mercury fastening his sandals*, by François Rude, (Musée du Louvre)

## 1. Abderus squire of Heracles

# Hermes in myth

## *The Iliad*

In Homer's *Iliad*, Hermes helps King Priam of Troy (Ilium) sneak into the Achaean (Greek) encampment to confront Achilles and convince him to return Hector's body.

The body of Sarpedon is carried away from the battlefield of Troy by the twin winged gods, Hypnos (Sleep) and Thanatos (Death). The pair are depicted clothed in armour, and are overseen by Hermes Psychopompos (Guide of the Dead). The scene appears in book 16 of Homer's *Iliad*:

"[Apollon] gave him [the dead Sarpedon] into the charge of swift messengers to carry him, of Hypnos (Sleep) and Thanatos (Death), who are twin brothers, and these two presently laid him down within the rich countryside of broad Lykia." [10]

## *The Odyssey*

Hermes goes to demand from Calypso Odysseus's release from the island of Ogygia; Hermes protects Odysseus from Circe by bestowing upon him a plant, moly, which protects him from her shape-shifting spell. Hermes also appears in book 24, where he plays the role of psychopomp and leads the freshly slain suitors and disloyal maids to the underworld. Odysseus, the main character of the *Odyssey*, is of matrilineal descent from Hermes.<sup>[6]</sup>

## Perseus

Hermes aided Perseus in killing the gorgon (Medusa) by giving Perseus his winged sandals and telling him to find the Gray Sisters (the Graeae) so they could direct him to the nymphs of the North. When he reached the nymphs they would give him Zeus' sword, Hades' helmet, and Athena's shield.

## Herse/Aglaurus/Pandrosus

When Hermes loved Herse, one of three sisters who served Athena as priestesses or parthenos, her jealous older sister Aglaurus stood between them. Hermes changed Aglaurus to stone. Hermes then impregnated Aglaurus while she was stone. Cephalus was the son of Hermes and Herse. Hermes had another son, Ceryx, who was said to be the offspring of either Herse or Herse's other sister, Pandrosus. With Aglaurus, Hermes was the father of Eumolpus.

## Other stories

In the story of the musician Orpheus, Hermes brought Eurydice back to Hades after Orpheus failed to bring her back to life when he looked back toward her after Hades told him not to.

Hermes helped to protect the infant god Dionysus from Hera, after Hera destroyed Dionysus' mortal mother Semele through her jealousy that Semele had conceived an immortal son of Zeus.

Hermes changed the Minyades into bats.

Hermes learned from the Thriae the arts of fortune-telling and divination.

When the gods created Pandora, it was Hermes who brought her to mortals and bestowed upon her a strong sense of curiosity.

King Atreus of Mycenae retook the throne from his brother Thyestes using advice he received from the trickster Hermes. Thyestes agreed to give the kingdom back when the sun moved backwards in the sky, a feat that Zeus accomplished. Atreus retook the throne and banished Thyestes.

Diogenes, speaking in jest, related the myth of Hermes taking pity on his son Pan, who was pining for Echo but unable to get a hold of her, and teaching him the trick of masturbation to relieve his suffering. Pan later taught the habit to shepherds.<sup>[11]</sup>

Battus, a shepherd from Pylos, witnessed Hermes stealing Apollo's cattle. Though he promised his silence, he told many others. Hermes turned him to stone.

## Hermes in classical art

*Main page: :Category:Hermes types*

In the course of the fifth century, the traditional bearded image of Hermes was replaced by a younger, beardless god. The most famous depiction of Hermes in classical art is perhaps the Hermes and Dionysus group by Praxiteles, son of Kephisodotos, which is dated to about 360–350 BC. The group shows Hermes playing with the baby Dionysus, and although we have lost the hand that held the baby's interest, it is probable that it held a bunch of grapes (a nod to the fact that Dionysus became the god of wine).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> ^ Norman O. Brown, *Hermes the Thief: The Evolution of a Myth*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press), 1947.
- <sup>2</sup> ^ Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* 1985 section III.2.8; "Hermes." *Encyclopedia Mythica* from Encyclopedia Mythica Online. Retrieved October 04, 2006.
- <sup>3</sup> ^ *Hymn to Hermes* 13. The word *polutropos* ("of many shifts, turning many ways, of many devices, ingenious, or much wandering") is also used to describe Odysseus in the first line of the *Odyssey*.
- <sup>4</sup> ^ In the Homeric hymn, "after he had fed the loud-bellowing cattle... he gathered much wood and sought the craft of fire. He also invented written music and many other things. He took a splendid laurel branch, gripped it in his palm, and twirled it in pomegranate wood" (lines 105, 108–10)
- <sup>5</sup> ^ "First Inventors... Mercurius [Hermes] first taught wrestling to mortals." – Hyginus (c.1st CE), *Fabulae* 277.
- <sup>6</sup> ^ *a b* Meletinsky, *Introduzione* (1993), p. 131
- <sup>7</sup> ^ *a b* Mabel Lang (1988) (PDF). *Graffiti in the Athenian Agora*. Excavations of the Athenian Agora (rev. ed.). Princeton, NJ: American School of Classical Studies at Athens. p. 7. ISBN 87661-633-3. <http://www.ascsa.edu.gr/publications/upload/Graffiti%20in%20the%20Athenian%20AgoraLR.pdf>. Retrieved 2007-04-14.
- <sup>8</sup> ^ Hyginus, *Fabula* 160, makes Hermes the father of Pan.
- <sup>9</sup> ^ Kerényi, *Gods of the Greeks*, 1951, p. 175, noting G. Kaibel, *Epigrammata graeca ex lapidibus collecta*, 817, where the other god's name, both father and son of Hermes, is obscured; according to other sources, Priapus was a son of Dionysus and Aphrodite.
- <sup>10</sup> ^ Homer, *Iliad* 16.681
- <sup>11</sup> ^ Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses*, vi.20

## References

- Walter Burkert, 1985. *Greek Religion* (Harvard University Press)
- Kerényi, Karl, 1944. *Hermes der Seelenführer*.
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- Meletinskii, Eleazar M. 1986, *Vvedenie v istoričeskuû poétiku éposa i romana*. Moscow,



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- Introduzione alla poetica storica dell'epos e del romanzo (1993) (Italian)

## External links

- Theoi Project, Hermes stories from original sources & images from classical art
- Cult & Statues of Hermes
- The Myths of Hermes
- Ventris and Chadwick: Gods found in Mycenaean Greece: a table drawn up from Michael Ventris and John Chadwick, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek* second edition (Cambridge 1973)

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