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Mercury (mythology)

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Mercury (associated with the **Greek** deity **Hermes**) (pronounced /ˈmɜːrkjʊri/, Latin: **Mercurius** listen[ⓘ]) was a messenger,^[1] and a **god** of trade, the son of Maia Maiestas and Jupiter in Roman mythology. His name is related to the Latin word *merx* ("merchandise"; compare *merchant*, *commerce*, etc.), *mercari* (*to trade*), and *merces* (*wages*)^[2]. In his earliest forms, he appears to have been related to the Etruscan deity Turms, but most of his characteristics and mythology were borrowed from the analogous **Greek** deity, **Hermes**.

Mercury has influenced the name of a number of things in a variety of scientific fields, such as the planet **Mercury**, and the element **mercury**, which was formerly associated with it. The word *mercurial* is commonly used to refer to something or someone erratic, volatile or unstable, derived from **Mercury's** swift flights from place to place. The term comes from astrology and describes the expected behavior of someone under the influence of the planet **Mercury**.

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Worship

Mercury did not appear among the numinous *di*



Mercury by 17th-century Flemish sculptor Artus Quellinus, identified by his hat, drawstring purse, caduceus, winged sandals, cock (rooster), and goat

Ancient Roman religion



Practices and beliefs



Hendrick Goltzius:
Mercury, with his symbols

indigetes of early Roman religion. Rather, he subsumed the earlier *Dei Lucrui* as Roman religion was syncretized with **Greek** religion during the time of the Roman Republic, starting around the 4th century BC. From the beginning, **Mercury** had essentially the same aspects as *Hermes*, wearing winged shoes *talaria* and a winged *petasos*, and carrying the *caduceus*, a herald's staff with two entwined snakes that was *Apollo's* gift to *Hermes*. He was often accompanied by a cockerel, herald of the

new day, a ram or goat, symbolizing fertility, and a tortoise, referring to **Mercury's** legendary invention of the lyre from a tortoise shell. Like *Hermes*, he was also a messenger of the **gods** and a **god** of trade, particularly of the grain trade. **Mercury** was also considered a **god** of abundance and commercial success, particularly in Gaul. He was also, like *Hermes*, the Romans' psychopomp, leading newly-deceased souls to the afterlife. Additionally, Ovid wrote that **Mercury** carried *Morpheus'* dreams from the valley of *Somnus* to sleeping humans.^[3]

Mercury's temple in the *Circus Maximus*, between the *Aventine* and *Palatine* hills, was built in 495 BC. This was a fitting place to worship a swift **god** of trade and travel, since it was a major center of commerce as well as a racetrack. Since it stood between the plebeian stronghold on the *Aventine* and the patrician center on the *Palatine*, it also emphasized the role of **Mercury** as a mediator.

Because **Mercury** was not one of the early deities surviving from the Roman Kingdom, he was not assigned a *flamen* ("priest"), but he did have a major festival on May 15, the *Mercuralia*. During the *Mercuralia*, merchants sprinkled water from his sacred well near the *Porta Capena* on their heads.

Syncretism

When they described the **gods** of Celtic and Germanic tribes, rather than considering them separate deities, the Romans interpreted them as local manifestations or aspects of their own **gods**, a cultural trait called the *interpretatio Romana*.

Roman festivals • Imperial cult
Mystery religions • *Res divina*
Roman temple • *Cultus*
polytheism • numen

Rituals

Animal sacrifice • Funerals •
Votive offerings • Libation

Priesthoods

College of Pontiffs • Augur
Vestal Virgins • Flamen • Fetial
Epulones • Arval Brethren
Quindecimviri sacris faciundis

Dii Consentes

Jupiter • Juno • Neptune • Minerva
Mars • Venus • Apollo • Diana
Vulcan • Vesta • **Mercury** • Ceres

Other deities

Janus • Quirinus • Saturn •
Hercules • Faunus • Priapus
Bacchus (*Liber*) • Bona Dea • Ops
Castor and Pollux • Cupid

Chthonic deities: Proserpina •

Dis Pater • Pluto • Orcus •
Hecate • Di Manes

Domestic and local deities:

Lares • Di Penates • Genius

Hellenistic deities: Sol Invictus • Magna

Mater • Isis • Mithras

Deified emperors:

Divus Julius • Divus Augustus

See also **List of Roman deities**

See also

Roman mythology
Glossary of ancient Roman religion
Religion in ancient Greece
Etruscan religion
Gallo-Roman religion
Decline of Hellenistic polytheism



A three-headed image of a Celtic deity found in Paris; interpreted as **Mercury** and now believed to represent **Lugus**^[4]

Mercury in particular was reported as becoming extremely popular among the nations the Roman Empire conquered; Julius Caesar wrote of **Mercury** being the most popular **god** in Britain and Gaul, regarded as the inventor of all the arts.^[5] This is probably because in the Roman syncretism, **Mercury** was equated with the Celtic **god** **Lugus**, and in this aspect was commonly accompanied by the Celtic goddess **Rosmerta**. Although **Lugus** may originally have been a deity of light or the sun (though this is disputed), similar to the Roman **Apollo**, his importance as a **god** of trade and commerce made him more comparable to **Mercury**, and **Apollo** was instead equated with the Celtic deity **Belenus**.^[3]

Romans associated **Mercury** with the Germanic **god** **Wotan**, by *interpretatio Romana*; 1st-century Roman writer **Tacitus** identifies him as the chief **god** of the Germanic peoples.^[6]

In Celtic areas, **Mercury** was sometimes portrayed with three heads or faces, and at Tongeren, Belgium, a statuette of **Mercury** with three phalli was found, with the extra two protruding from his head and replacing his nose; this was probably because the number 3 was considered magical, making such statues good luck and fertility charms. The Romans also made widespread use of small statues of

Mercury, probably drawing from the ancient **Greek** tradition of hermae markers.

Names and epithets

Mercury is known to the Romans as **Mercurius** and occasionally in earlier writings as **Mercurius**, **Mircurios** or **Mircurios**, had a number of epithets representing different aspects or roles, or representing syncretisms with non-Roman deities. The most common and significant of these epithets included:

- **Mercurius Artaios**, a combination of **Mercury** with the Celtic **god** **Artaios**, a deity of bears and hunting who was worshiped at Beaucroissant, France.^[7]
- **Mercurius Arvernus**, a combination of the Celtic **Arvernus** with **Mercury**. **Arvernus** was worshiped in the Rhineland, possibly as a particular deity of the **Arverni** tribe, though no dedications to **Mercurius Arvernus** occur in their territory in the **Auvergne** region of central France.^[7]
- **Mercurius Cissonius**, a combination of **Mercury** with the Celtic **god** **Cissonius**, who is written of in the area spanning from **Cologne**, Germany to **Saintes**, France.^[7]
- **Mercurius Esibraeus**, a combination of the Iberian deity **Esibraeus** with the Roman deity **Mercury**. **Esibraeus** is mentioned only in an inscription found at **Medelim**, Portugal, and is possibly the same deity as **Banda Isibraiegus**, who is invoked in an inscription from the nearby village of **Bemposta**.^[8]
- **Mercurius Gebrinius**, a combination of **Mercury** with the Celtic or Germanic **Gebrinius**, known from an inscription on an altar in **Bonn**, Germany.^[7]
- **Mercurius Moccus**, from a Celtic **god**, **Moccus**, who was equated with **Mercury**, known

from evidence at Langres, France. The name *Moccus* ("pig") implies that this deity was connected to boar-hunting.^[7]

- **Mercurius Visucius**, a combination of the Celtic god Visucius with the Roman god **Mercury**, attested in an inscription from Stuttgart, Germany. Visucius was worshiped primarily in the frontier area of the empire in Gaul and Germany. Although he was primarily associated with **Mercury**, Visucius was also sometimes linked to the Roman god **Mars**, as a dedicatory inscription to "Mars Visucius" and Visucia, Visucius' female counterpart, was found in Gaul.^{[7][9]}



A Gaulish depiction of **Mercury**, now at the Carnavalet Museum in Paris

Mercury's net in Ludovico Ariosto's Orlando Furioso

Vulcan had created a net out of unbreakable steel so that he could catch Venus, the Goddess of Beauty, and Mars, the **God** of War, in the act of making love because he was jealous of their relationship. Vulcan managed to catch them but, afterwards, **Mercury** stole the net from the blacksmith **God** so that he could catch Cloris, a nymph who he admired. Cloris' job is to fly after the Sun while it rises, and to scatter lilies, roses and violets behind it. **Mercury** lay in wait for at least several days until he caught her wing in the net over an unnamed great river in Ethiopia, most likely the Awash/Awasi river. **Mercury** then gives the net to the temple of Anubis at Canopus to protect the sacred spot, but it was stolen 3,000 years later by Caligorant, who goes on to destroy the temple and city. Caligorant is an important character in Ariosto's Orlando Furioso^[10].

References

1. ^ Theoi.com
2. ^ <http://www.behindthename.com/name/mercury>
3. ^ *ab* Littleton, C. Scott (Ed.) (2002). *Mythology: The Illustrated Anthology of World Myth and Storytelling* (pp. 195, 251, 253, 258, 292). London: Duncan Baird Publishers. ISBN 1-904292-01-1.
4. ^ Bas-relief discovered in Paris in 1867 and preserved at the Carnavalet Museum, from J.-L. Courcelle-Seneuil, *Les Dieux gaulois d'après les monuments figurés* (The Gallic **Gods** According to the Figurative Monuments), Paris, 1910.
5. ^ De Bello Gallico 6.17
6. ^ Germania 9
7. ^ *abcdef* Green, Miranda J. (1992). *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend* (pp. 148–149). London: Thames and Hudson. ISBN 0-500-01516-3.
8. ^ Alarcão, Jorge de (1988). *Roman Portugal*. Volume I: Introduction (p. 93). Warminster: Aris and Phillips.
9. ^ Espérandieu, E. (1931). *Recueil Général des Bas-relief, Statues et Bustes de la Germanie Romaine*. Paris and Brussels.
10. ^ Ariosto, Ludovico. "Canto XV Lines 47-64." Orlando Furioso. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998. Print.

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Categories: Roman **gods** | Commerce **gods** | Deities in the Aeneid | Messenger **gods**

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THREE STATUES

If you enter the Gardens through the Morey Gates and take the path to the left past Wallace you will pass the three statues of Hercules, Mercury and Leda. They have an important role in the myths and legends of the Greeks and Romans, particularly regarding their birth and neo-natal development. Zeus, the head of the Gods, was the perpetrator of many acts of infidelity which caused his wife, Hera, to get very angry. One night he impersonated Amphitryon to seduce his wife Alcmena whom he fancied. She must have been pretty surprised when her true love returned from the wars that same night having disposed of a band of pirates who had killed her brother. As the result of all this activity she became pregnant with twins with different fathers, a case of heteropaternal hyperfecundity which occurs on occasions in animals but is pretty rare in humans. Hercules was the offspring of Zeus, Iphicle the offspring of Amphitryon. Hercules was a strong infant. He disposed of two serpents sent by Hera to kill him, hopping out of the crib to do so whilst his more fragile brother screamed his head off. Zeus continued his wicked ways with Leda, this time appearing in the guise of a swan, which caused the poor girl to produce two eggs, one containing the twins Castor and Pollux, the other Clytemnestra and Helen (who later stimulated the Greek shipbuilding industry having been seduced by Paris, causing all the trouble at Troy). And as for Mercury, son of Zeus and Maia, he left his cot and killed a turtle from which he designed the first lyre which he gave to Apollo to appease him when accused of stealing his cattle, using the intestine of one of the stolen beasts to form the strings. By comparison, the specialties of gynaecology, obstetrics and paediatrics seem a bit tame these days (fortunately)!