

HERMES: THE GOD OF MERCHANTS, THIEVES, AND TRAVELERS

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Abstract:

The Ancient Greek god Hermes was the patron god of merchants, thieves, and travelers. In Greek Mythology, his was the son of Maia and Zeus. He started his career very early, by stealing Apollo's cows. In honor of this attainment he was proclaimed the patron of thieves. Because he was the god of travelers his statues were ubiquitous at crossroads. Hermes was also the messenger of the gods and the conductor of the dead to Hades. He is the only god that achieved the immortality as a result of a contract.

Keywords: Hermes, commerce, thievery, gods

1. Who was Hermes?

Ἑρμῆς (Hermês) (in epic, also Ἑρμείας, Hermeías, Ἑρμείης, Hermeíēs, and Ἑρμῶν, Hermáōn) is the name of an Indo-European god. Some versions of this name appear already in Mycenaean Linear B inscriptions from the 14th c. BC. Although it is etymologically probably false, his name was traditionally linked with the noun ἕρμα: the *herm* means a heap of stones used in the countryside to demark boundaries or as landmarks (Beekes, 2010, p. 462). There was a custom that wanderers passing-by should throw stones at the *herms*: the practical aspect of this custom was clearing stones from the road, the mythical-psychological aspect was “an act of controlled aggression aimed against the challenge of the apotropaic sign” (Baudy, 2019). Since the name Hermês resembled the noun *herm*, it is no wonder that the god of this name would be associated with wanderers and passengers. Consequently, Hermes was also the messenger for and among the gods and the conductor of the dead to the underworld. In virtue of being a god-messenger, he was also credited with the invention of language.

In Greek myths, Hermes was the youngest and most intelligent of the gods. His mother was Maia and his father Zeus. As soon as he was born, he tricked his half-brother Apollo:

Slipping out of his tightly bound baby clothes, he set out to steal a hundred of Apollo's heifers. So they could not be traced, he tied leaves to their tails which wiped out their tracks. When the Diviner Apollo complained to Maia, she showed him the day-old child still in his cradle (Vivier, 2004, p. 68).

Because he pulled off such a bold trick at such a tender age, he was proclaimed to be the god of thieves. But it was not his only function. Worshipped as the dream god he was as well responsible for any stroke of fortune. He was, same as Apollo, the patron of music

and is celebrated to be the inventor of lyre and flute. Hermes was likewise connected with the protection of cattle and shepherds. His sacred number was four, and, naturally his birthday was celebrated on the fourth day of the month.

He was the protagonist of many myths. For instance, he brought Persephone from the underworld back to her mother goddess Demeter. Hermes also slaughtered the many-eyed giant Argus. He was wearing winged sandals and winged cap which made him swift:

[...] he was portrayed as a full-grown and bearded man, clothed in a long tunic and often wearing a cap and winged boots. Sometimes he was represented in his pastoral character, bearing a sheep on his shoulders; at other times he appeared as the messenger of the gods with the *kērykeion*, or herald's staff which was his most frequent attribute. From the latter part of the 5th century BC he was portrayed as a nude and beardless youth, a young athlete ("Hermes", 2018).

Hermes had several feminine companions: Hermione, the only daughter of Menelaus and Helena of Troy, Hermiona, the goddess of harmony and concord, and Iris, the personification of the rainbow. (Faivre, 1995, p. 13) He had a lot of children but the most famous are: Abderus, Autolycus, Cephalus, Erytus and Pan. Initially, Hermes was worshiped at Mount Cyllene in Arcadia where he was born. Then the cult was taken to Athens from where it was spread all over Greece.

However, Hermes sometimes uses his ingenuity to save people he likes. This is what he did to Odysseus. On Circe's island, Aea, which was identified as Lošinj by Robert Graves, Hermes offered Odysseus a scented white flower with a black root, called moly. This plant served Odysseus as a protection against Circe's charming potion. Homer describes the whole event in these words, put in Odysseus's mouth:

"Leaving the ship and shore, I headed inland, clambering up through hushed, entrancing glades until, as I was nearing the halls of Circe skilled in spells, approaching her palace--Hermes god of the golden wand crossed my path, and he looked for all the world like a young man sporting his first beard, just in the prime and warm pride of youth, and grasped me by the hand and asked me kindly, 'Where are you going now, my unlucky friend--trekking over the hills alone in unfamiliar country? And your men are all in there, in Circe's palace, cooped like swine, hock by jowl in the sties. Have you come to set them free? Well, I warn you, you won't get home yourself, you'll stay right there, trapped with all the rest. But wait, I can save you, free you from that great danger. Look, here is a potent drug. Take it to Circe's halls-its power alone will shield you from the fatal day. Let me tell you of all the witch's subtle craft ... She'll mix you a potion, lace the brew with drugs but she'll be powerless to bewitch you, even so-this magic herb I give will fight her spells. Now here's your plan of action, step by step. The moment Circe strikes with her long thin wand, you draw your sharp sword sheathed at your hip and rush her fast as if to run her through! She'll cower in fear and coax you to her bed--but don't refuse the goddess' bed, not then, not if she's to release your friends and treat you well yourself. But have her swear the binding oath of the blessed gods she'll never plot some new intrigue to harm you, once you lie there naked--never unman you, strip away your courage!' With that the giant-killer handed over the magic herb, pulling it from the earth, and Hermes showed me all its name and nature. Its root is black and its flower white as milk and the gods call

it moly. Dangerous for a mortal man to pluck from the soil but not for deathless gods. All lies within their power (Homer, 1996, pp. 239–240).

Because he was the god of transition and the mediator between gods and men Hermes was also the god associated with mystical rites. Under the name Hermes Trismegistus/Trimegistos he was associated with Egyptian god Thoth. There was a whole tradition of the so-called Hermetica, or Corpus Hermeticum, i.e. a corpus of texts on the Ancient Egyptian and Greek mystical wisdom, whose ideal authorship had been attributed to Hermes. These texts, dating from 2nd c. AD or later, are mostly written in the form of dialogues between a student and a teacher, the teacher identified as Hermes Trismegistus or in its Latin version as Mercurius Termaximus. However, these texts

[...] were certainly not written in remotest antiquity by an all-wise Egyptian priest, as the Renaissance believed, but by various unknown authors, all probably Greeks, and they contain popular Greek philosophy of the period, a mixture of Platonism and Stoicism, combined with some Jewish and probably some Persian influences (Yates, 1964, p. 3).

2. The God of Thieves and Merchants

Hermes the god started his career as a brigand at a very early age. According to the Homeric Hymn to Hermes, on the first day after he was born, unlike normal human babies, he did not stay in his crib and cried, but rather set off for his vagabondages. One of the first endeavors he did upon leaving the cave in which he was born was stealing fifty of Apollo's cows. The whole event is described in these words:

The chariot and horses of Helios were going down below the earth toward Ocean when Hermes came running to the shadowed mountains of Pieria. There the divine cattle of the blessed gods have their stable and graze in lovely, unmown meadows. There and then, Maia's son, the keen-eyed slayer of Argus, cut fifty loudly lowing cattle from the herd and drove them zigzag across the sandy place. He thought to drive them backward, too, another crafty trick, mixing up their footprints the front behind and the hind before while he himself walked straight ahead. And right away on that sandy beach he wove himself fabulous sandals, such as no one ever thought or heard of. Tying together the newly sprouted myrtle twigs and tamarisk, he bound them, leaves and all, securely to his feet, a pair of shoes for those who travel light. (The Homeric Hymn to Hermes, 1999, p. 318)

So, Hermes not only stole his brother Apollo's cows but also devised a trick to cover his traces! Of course, it is not hard to guess that Hermes was also the god of guile: of deception, persuasion, the wiles of thieves and merchants etc. However, it was just a beginning of his career. Later in the hymn, we can read:

“And as for honor, my plan is to have a share of Apollo's power. If my father won't give it to me, I intend to be—and I mean it—the Prince of Thieves. If Leto's glorious boy comes after me, he'll soon be in more trouble than he is now. I'll go to Pytho, break into his big house and steal all his wonderful tripods, his caldrons and his gold, all his gleaming iron and his fancy clothes. See if I don't!” (The Homeric Hymn to Hermes, 1999, p. 328)

This is one of the oldest stories about Hermes: it can be found in the Homeric Hymn to Hermes from the late seventh or sixth century BC (Iles Johnston, 2002, p. 109). This means that it was diffused around Ancient Greek society during its early formations and the times of flourishing. Similar to other myths, it must have served both as a descriptive and as a normative text. Based on such texts, the Greeks formed their value-systems and their understanding of gods as paradigms. Hermes thus “seved as a guide for the perplexed. The traveler who found himself in unfamiliar territory, the soul making its way to the Underworld, and the mystic who wanted to understand the nature of the gods all turned to Hermes for help in their confusion” (Iles Johnston, 2002, p. 109).

However, Hermes was not a common thief. He also puts stolen goods back into circulation. Of course, this is what commercial activity is about: circulation of goods. Since Greek soil and climate conditions were not particularly good for edible plants and cattle, trade, and especially agricultural trade, had a special significance for the Greeks. In this sense Hermes was very important figure in ancient Greece: he was not only connected with cattle and shepherds, but also with merchants – and everyday life depended on good functioning of these classes of the Ancient Greek society. However, it is important to mention that traders or merchants were a younger layer of classical Greek society – the earliest Greek forms of aristocracy had been bound to the land, immobile, amassing wealth without really spending it. Hermes, on the other hand, is mobile, trading, fluid – thus the wings on his heels – a symbol of a new generation, the one of mobile merchants and traders:

Before the invention of the coin, and the arrival of international trade that accompanied its use, the economies of Greek city states were controlled by the local aristocracy through a system of ritual gift exchange. This system excluded lower class locals and foreigners, as reflected in the myth of Perseus, who was humiliated by the king Polydectes when he was unable to provide the gift of a horse. The pre-Hermetic Apollonian aristocracy in Greece regarded merchants as thieves, because they violated the system of gift exchange, and because they stole across boundaries. The verb “steal” still carries this double meaning, referring both to robbery and to surreptitious, transgressive forms of movement (Cook, 2018).

Not only as a thief or a merchant, but also as a mediator, Hermes was called for help while making contracts – not a long way of being associated with commerce (Comte, 1991, p. 104). Paradigmatically, this role of his gained its power when he guided Priam in the ransom of the body of Hector. So, in Iliad is written:

Then when they descended from the city and reached the plain, / the rest, turning back, returned to Ilion, / the sons and the husbands of his daughters; but the two men did not escape the notice / of far-thundering Zeus as they came into view upon the plain, and he pitied the old man as he saw him / and swiftly spoke to Hermes his dear son: / “Hermes, it pleases you beyond all other gods / to act as man’s companion, and you listen to whomever you will; / go now, and lead Priam to the hollow ships of the Achaeans / in such a way that none of the other Danaans sees him, / no one notices, until he arrives at the shelter of the son of Peleus.” / So

he spoke; nor did the messenger, the Slayer of Argos, disobey. / Straightway he bound beneath his feet his splendid sandals / immortal, golden, which carried him over the water and over the boundless earth with the breath of the wind; / he took up his wand, with which he charms the eyes / of whichever men he wishes, and rouses them again when they have slumbered; / and taking this in his hands the mighty Slayer of Argos flew away. / Swiftly he arrived at Troy and at the Hellespont; / then he set out in the likeness of a noble youth / with his first beard, which is when early manhood is most graceful. (Homer, 2015, Book 24, v. 335–350.)

Hermes is identified with the Roman god Mercurius (Mercury). His Roman name is probably related to the Latin word *merx* (merchandise), which demonstrates the relationship between Hermes and trade. Mercurius same as Hermes was the god of trade, mostly of the grain trade. He was among the most popular of all Roman gods. Mercurius was portrayed on two coins of the Roman Republic, the sextans and the semuncia. His festival was the Mercuralia during which the merchants sprinkled water from his sacred well on their heads.

3. Conclusion

Hermes was the god-patron of some crucial everyday moments of good functioning of Greek society: language, cattle, trade. Trade and exchange of goods made life easier and brought many extra commodities: therefore, Hermes was associated with development of culture in broad terms. Thus, Hermes was associated with merriment, good fortune and charm. He was a vivid god, so people could easy relate to him, and his boyish charm was also very appealing. Hermes was one of the most popular gods, and he was worshipped throughout ancient Greece. In the Byzantine Greek lexicon from the 10th c. A.D. we can read the following description of Hermes: “He was responsible for profit and an overseer of the businesses: consequently, they set up the statue of him weighing a purse.” For the Greeks, the stories of Hermes’s mythical deeds served as a paradigm of a profitable operations and successful business.

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