



Historically Speaking

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Hermes

In my opinion, Hermes is the most complex of the Olympian gods. While the other major Olympian gods presided over the most basic elements of life (for example: Aphrodite/ love, Apollo/ light, Artemis/ moon, Hades/ death, etc.) Hermes assumed the sophisticated elements of society while still dealing with some basics as well. He certainly had the most diverse set of responsibilities. He was primarily the protector of travelers and hospitality, which included the god of roads and trade. He was the patron god of thieves. He was associated with cunning, heralds and diplomacy. He was the god of language and writing (including poetry), athletic contests and gymnasiums, astronomy and astrology. Hermes was the god of herds and flocks which made him particularly important to shepherds and herdsmen.

Hermes most active role was as the messenger god, specializing in messages from Zeus to immortals and mortals alike, and he also guided the dead souls to the underworld. He was generally depicted as a handsome youth with three sacred items: the Petasus (a winged cap), the Caduceus (a winged staff usually with serpents wrapped around) and the Talaria (winged sandals). All these wings represented the speed of the wind when he was delivering messages. With all that speed, it is interesting that the tortoise is a symbol for Hermes, but the Greeks seemed to love to juxtaposition many things in their culture.

Sidebar piece

Hermes have been addressed before in these newsletters, but deserve some additional comment. The herm is a type of monument that takes its name from Hermes, the messenger god, who was also the protector of travelers, communities and houses, entrances and exits, as well as flocks. Herms were typically set up along roads and boundaries, at gates, and also at tombs. It was usually a post with two features; the head of Hermes and midway down the post an erect male organ (representing his role as a fertility god).

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Because of his role as messenger god, florists use him as a symbol of their business (delivering messages through flower arrangements.)



Another name for Hermes, or a perhaps a god derived from him, is Hermes Trismegistus [trīs'mə-jīs 'təs, trīz'-] – “Hermes Thrice-blessed.” This concept of Hermes was a combination of the Greek god and Thoth [thōth, tōt], the Egyptian god of wisdom. Various magical and alchemical writings came to be associated with Hermes Trismegistus who, it was believed, invented a magic seal to keep air out of vessels containing magical compounds, giving us the term “hermetically sealed.”

Hermes had a very busy first day of his life. As a newborn, he snuck out of his crib and stole the cattle of Apollo (symbolically - clouds). To soothe Apollo's anger, he created the first lyre from a tortoise shell and gave it to Apollo which suited that god's role as a patron of musicians. He punished the herdsman, Battos, for reporting the theft to Apollo, by turning him into stone.

The animals sacred to him in addition to the tortoise were the ram and the hare. The fable of the tortoise and the hare is related to this god. His sacred plants were the crocus flower and the strawberry-tree. The hawk is his sacred bird.

The Roman's were fascinated by this god as well: Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1. 583 ff (trans. Melville) (Roman epic C1st B.C. to C1st A.D.) :

"[Hermes disguised himself as a] herdsman [in order to slay the giant Argos Panoptes], he drove a flock of goats through the green byways, gathered as he went, and played his pipes of reed. The strange sweet skill charmed Juno's [Hera's] guardian. ‘My friend,’ he called, ‘whoever you are, well might you sit with me here on this rock, and see how cool the shade extends congenial for a shepherd's seat.’

So Atlantiades [Hermes] joined him, and with many a tale he stayed the passing hours and on his reeds played soft refrains to lull the watching eyes. But Argus fought to keep at bay the charms of slumber and, though many of his eyes were closed in sleep, still many kept their guard. He asked too by what means this new design (for new it was), the pipe of reeds, was found. Then the god told this story [of Pan and his pursuit of the Nympe Syrinx] . . . The tale remained untold; for Cyllenius [Hermes] saw all Argus' eyelids closed and every eye vanquished in sleep. He stopped and with his wand, his magic wand, soothed the tired resting eyes and sealed their slumber."