

12 Maia and Hermes

INTRODUCTION

The Titan Maia originally was a local Great Goddess whose sacred shrine was a cave on Mount Cyllene in Arcadia. When the invading Greek-speaking people moved into Arcadia, Olympian Zeus added Maia to his group of female conquests.

Their child, Hermes, was one of the most appealing Greek divinities, possibly because he exhibited personality traits that a broad segment of people can appreciate. He was the most "human" of the Greek gods, combining a lively intelligence with imagination, goodness, and a sense of humor. It was difficult to resist his irrepressible, fun-loving personality, because his mischievous deeds did no serious harm and, in fact, were not intended to hurt anyone.

Like Cronus and Prometheus, Hermes was crafty and cunning. These qualities were more necessary and were more appreciated in certain societies and in certain stages of civilization than they were in others. They accompanied a society in transition from the pastoral to the urban. They reflected independent, self-centered, acquisitive values as opposed to group-dominated values that emphasized conformity and equality. Thus, when Zeus made Hermes the patron god of liars and thieves, he also made him the patron of merchants, whom the ancient Greeks believed were also cunning and crafty. The myth gave Hermes credit for establishing a uniform system of weights and measures. Consequently, Hermes can be viewed as the father of commerce.

Of all the Olympians, Hermes was the friendliest to mortals. Because his personality enabled him to sympathize with their plight, Hermes was at their side whenever they needed a guide. As his father Zeus's messenger, Hermes helped the hero Perseus.¹

He was the God of Roads, guiding travelers while Zeus protected them.² As part of this function, Hermes was the god who, upon a mortal's death, guided his or her shade down to the land of grim Hades. Thus, the son of Maia accompanied mortals on all their journeys, those made in

daylight and those taken in the dark of night. When they were most afraid, Hermes was there, compassionately, to understand and to direct, to reassure and to protect.

1. Hermes also helps the hero, Odysseus, in *The Odyssey*. In *The Iliad*, Hermes compassionately leads King Priam of Troy through the camp of the Greek warriors to the tent of Achilles to plead for Hector's body.
2. Scholars have seen a connection between Hermes' name and the Greek word *herma* or *hermation*, which mean "stone heap." For years, Hermes had been called the God of the Stone Heap, since from the days before Zeus, travelers would leave a stone upon an existing pile at a crossroads in thanks for their successful journey. However, some modern scholars of ancient Greek script (*Linear B*) feel that others have read too much meaning into too little evidence.

ANTICIPATIONS

1. Is it an asset or a handicap to be clever? Discuss.
2. In what ways do people lie to themselves and to others?
 - a. excuses
 - b. denial
 - c. rationalization
 - d. blaming others
 - e. silence
 - f. half-truths

THE MYTH

While married to Hera, Zeus also loved Maia, who was the daughter of his great Titan enemy, Atlas. Maia shyly lived inside a dark cave, on the wooded and rocky slopes of Mount Cyllene, in Arcadia, away from all the immortal gods. There Zeus loved her secretly at night, while the unsuspecting queen of Olympus slept, and, there, their child, Hermes, was born. Even as an infant, glad-hearted Hermes was a calculating schemer, an expert musician, and a robber of cattle.

Hermes was born as dawn with rosy fingers made the day light. Shortly thereafter, he became hungry for adventure and, therefore, left his cradle in order to search for the cattle of Apollo. However, as he left his cave, he came upon a tortoise. "Oh, what good luck!" he exclaimed. "Alive you may be a spell against witchcraft, but dead you shall make beautiful music." He proceeded to pick up the creature and carry it back inside the cave, where he cut off its legs and scooped out its organs with an iron chisel. Then he cut reed stalks of proper size, pierced the tortoise shell, and fastened the stalks to the shell. Next, he stretched oxhide over the shell, added two arms and a bridge, and stretched seven sheep-gut strings along the bridge.

Shining Helios's chariot had pulled the sun high in the heavens by the

time clever Hermes had completed his instrument. The infant then plucked each string with a plectrum, creating lovely music, and in a beautiful voice, he sang of Olympian Zeus and of Maia, and of his own glorious birth.

Soon, however, he tired of his new toy. Placing it in his cradle, he remembered that he had intended to search for the cattle of far-shooting Apollo. Now he left the cave in search of meat, for, by this time, he was very hungry.

The horses of Helius were pulling the chariot of the sun into the ocean when Hermes came upon the immortal cattle of the gods grazing in their meadows. Since their cowherd, the Far-Shooter, was nowhere in sight, Hermes craftily led fifty cattle backward over the sandy shores of the loud-roaring sea so that all their tracks led toward the meadow. To disguise his own footprints, the clever infant wove a pair of wicker sandals from leafy myrtle twigs. Then, as he drove the small herd of cows, the infant shepherd noticed an old man working in his vineyard.

"Pretend that you have seen nothing and heard nothing," the young god called out to the old man, "because no one is harming anything which is yours." Then, Hermes drove the cattle through the countryside toward Pylos until dawn with rosy fingers would soon remove the sheltering cover of night.

Shining Selene, Goddess of the Moon, was watching from the heavens while cunning Hermes watered, fed, and penned the stolen cattle in a cave. Next, he created a way of making fire by rubbing sticks together. Upon this fire, he sacrificed two cows, roasting their meat and dividing it into twelve portions for the Olympian gods (including himself), while he stretched their skins on a hard, dry rock. Although the sweet smell of the meat sorely tempted him, he could not permit himself to eat the sacred sacrificial flesh.

When Hermes had finished his work, he threw his sandals into the river and extinguished his fire with sand. He returned to his dim cave as dawn with rosy fingers made the day light. He had met no living creature on his return. However, he quickly climbed into his cradle to the right of his lyre, wrapped himself in his infant sheet, and innocently lay there playing with his wrappings.

Maia, however, was not deceived by her infant son's pretext of innocence. "What is going on here, little schemer?" she asked. "What have you been doing outside in the middle of the night? If Leto's son doesn't tie you up and drag you away, you'll become a cattle thief! I'm afraid you're going to be nothing but a mischief-maker!"

Cunning Hermes replied, "Why, Mother, how can you accuse me, a mere infant, who is most afraid of displeasing his mother? However, I shall do my best to provide for the two of us. I have no intention of giving up gifts and honor by living isolated from the other immortals in this

dismal cave. We should live in friendship with the immortal gods, and be wealthy as they are. If my father will not make me an honored god, I shall become a great robber, and if the Far-Shooter tries to find me, I shall steal from his rich temple in Delphi."¹

Dawn was making the day light when Apollo found the old man grazing his flock and spoke to him: "Old man, I am searching for my curved-horn cattle, which wandered away from the meadow at sunset last evening. Have you seen anyone pass by with them?"

The old man replied, "It is hard to remember all that happens because one sees so many things, some good, others evil. However, as I was working in my vineyard, I think I saw a child, actually an infant holding a staff, who drove some curved-horn cattle backwards so that their heads faced him."

Apollo of the Silver Bow quickly continued on his way. He saw a huge bird with wings widespread and recognized, by this omen of Zeus's eagle, that the culprit was another of his father's sons. Soon he discovered the strange backward-turning tracks of cattle, plus even stranger tracks which he could not interpret.

"What wonders do my eyes behold!" he exclaimed. "These are cattle tracks, but they are heading toward the meadow. And here are other tracks which cannot belong to mortal men or to wolves, or bears, or lions, or even Centaurs."²

Far-shooting Apollo hurried on his way, and he soon arrived at the hidden cave on Mount Cyllene. There, he angrily entered the dark cavern. When cunning Hermes saw that Apollo was furious about his cattle, he rubbed his eyes with his little hands and smuggled into his infant sheet as if he were a sleepy, newborn baby. However, he really was very much awake.

The Lord of the Silver Bow noticed lovely Maia and her little son. Then he inspected their cave closely for signs of the theft. Finally, he spoke to the clever infant: "Oh, child, you had better tell me quickly what you have done with my cattle, or I shall hurl you down into dark Tartarus where you will remain imprisoned forever."

To this threat, crafty Hermes replied:

"Son of Leto, do I deserve such harsh words from you? What would I know about your cattle? Do I look like a shepherd? I have cared only for warmth, for my mother's milk, for a warm bath, and for a good nap. How could I, a newborn child, drive cattle? This would indeed be a wonder, even among the deathless gods. After all, I was only born yesterday, and my feet are not tough enough to trod the rough ground. However, if you wish, I will swear by my father's head that I have not heard anyone speak of your cattle, nor have I seen anyone steal them."³ Meanwhile, the wily infant turned away from Apollo and whistled casually, pretending that Apollo's story had nothing to do with him. The

Far-Shooter laughed appreciatively at his step-brother's skill in deception. He picked up the precocious infant and replied: "I think you are a mischievous rascal! Your innocent words do not fool me! You probably have robbed many a house tonight. Surely you deserve the title of master thief. I shall find my cattle, and you will direct my search."

As Apollo carried Hermes out of the cave, the cunning child cried out, "Where are you taking me, mighty son of Leto? Let our father, Zeus, decide which of us is right."

Apollo agreed, and the two stepbrothers climbed to the top of Mount Olympus. There the scales of judgment were set before them, and the assembly of immortals gathered to hear their arguments.

When Hermes the Shepherd and Apollo of the Silver Bow stood before Olympian Zeus, their loud-thundering father turned to Leto's great son and asked him: "Apollo, why have you brought this infant child to Mount Olympus?"

The Lord of the Silver Bow told his great father about the theft of his cattle including the backward tracks of the animals and the second set of tracks which looked as if someone were walking upon oak branches strapped to his feet. He also reported the words of the farmer and the declaration of the wily infant as he lay snuggled in his cradle in the depths of the dark cave.

Once Apollo had finished, the infant shepherd defended himself before the council of deathless Olympians. Using the same approach he had devised earlier for the benefit of his great step-brother, the wily infant again pleaded honesty, infancy, ignorance, and innocence. He concluded his defense with a declaration of his love for his majestic father. Meanwhile he innocently looked all about him and held his infant sheet prominently over his arm, so that the great council would consider his young age and believe in his innocence.

Olympian Zeus laughed aloud at his clever child's skillful denial. However, he was not deceived. He commanded the wily young shepherd to show far-shooting Apollo where he had hidden the cattle, and the infant god did not hesitate to obey his great father's decree.

As soon as the two sons of Zeus reached sandy Pyllos and the cave in the cliff, Apollo spied the two cowhides drying upon the rock. When he realized that the newborn infant had actually slaughtered two cows, he was filled with amazement and admiration for the strength and talent of Maia's son.

Hermes, meanwhile, was uncertain of the Far-Shooter's reaction to his deed, now that all the evidence was before him. Consequently, the clever infant decided to soothe his brother's anger by introducing his lyre, which he proceeded to play with great musicianship.

The Lord of the Silver Bow laughed with delight as he listened to

Hermes' songs, and he wished that that instrument were his own. Therefore, he announced to Maia's son:

"Cunning thief of cattle, your music is worth fifty cows. So, I think we can settle our argument peacefully. But, tell me, how did you ever learn to make such marvelous music? I have never heard anyone play so well. Now, you and your mother will receive great respect from the Olympians. In fact, I will make you an honored leader among the deathless gods. I will present you with glorious gifts, and I will never deceive you."

Glad-hearted Hermes replied artfully: "I do not object if you wish to learn my skill, for you are among the most powerful and illustrious of the immortal gods, and I would like to be your friend. Therefore, take my lyre. Play it with a gentle touch, and it will reward you with melodious sound. Receive this gift from me, and, in return, give me glory. Meanwhile, I will herd your cattle. You are a good bargainer, so you no longer have any need to be angry with me."

The Lord of the Silver Bow accepted the lyre and gave Maia's son a shining whip for the cattle, which delighted the new cowherd. Together, they drove the cows to the sacred meadow, then returned to the snow-covered summit of Mount Olympus, accompanied by Apollo's beautiful music. Clever Hermes, also, was busily creating lovely sound, for he was playing his latest musical invention, a pipe made from reeds.

Then far-shooting Apollo said: "Son of Maia, since our great father has commanded you to teach mortal men the skills of commerce, I fear that you may cleverly steal my lyre and even my curved bow. I would be relieved if you would take the great oath of the gods, upon the waters of the River Styx, that you will never make me one of your victims."

After Hermes agreed and had taken this oath, Apollo took a sacred oath in return. He promised that Hermes would always be his best friend among both the immortal gods and mortal men. This oath Olympian Zeus confirmed by sending forth his eagle. The Far-Shooter then promised to give Maia's son a splendid, triple-branched, golden staff which would prevent harm and would accomplish every good task.

The one gift Maia's son asked of great Apollo which could not be granted was the skill of divine revelation. To this request, Apollo replied: "It is not Olympian Zeus's will for you or for any other immortal to learn his mysterious mind. I have sworn a sacred oath that I alone of the deathless gods shall know great Zeus's wise counsel."

"However, there are three winged sisters who also dwell on Mount Parnassus. When I was a young cowherd, they taught me to prophesy by using pebbles. I give these teachers to you for your knowledge and pleasure. Then, when you instruct a mortal, if he is fortunate, he will listen to you."

Then, from Mount Olympus, far-seeing Zeus confirmed Apollo's

promises. The Loud-Thunderer also commanded Maia's clever son to become lord over boars and lions, domesticated herds, dogs, and all birds of omen. In addition, the Lord of Olympus made his cunning son the sole messenger to dark Hades, Lord of the Underworld, and the herald of truces and peaceful negotiations.

Thus, Hermes the Wayfinder became established among the deathless gods.

1. Great wealth was dedicated to Apollo and was stored in beautiful, small buildings called treasuries. Built between 657 B.C. (Corinth) and 371 B.C. (Thebes) only the ruins remain today. The major exception is the Treasury of Athens, built in 490 B.C., which was restored in 1903-1906.
2. Centaur: a creature with the head, chest, and arms of a man, plus the body and legs of a horse.

REFLECTIONS

1. Why was Hermes appealing even though he lied?
2. Why did Apollo choose Hermes to be his best friend?
3. Why did Zeus make Hermes god of merchants?
4. You are a traveling salesperson. Pick any household product and sell it to the class.
5. Role-play the appearance of Apollo and Hermes before Zeus, when they discuss the theft of Apollo's cattle.
6. Take the side of either Hermes or Apollo and present a written argument defending your position regarding the theft of the cattle.
7. Compare Hermes and Hephaestus.

13 Demeter and Persephone

INTRODUCTION

Originally Demeter was a local Mother Goddess, like Rhea and Athena. She may have originated in Crete, but she was worshipped in Greece before the Greek-speaking tribes from the North brought Zeus into the area of Eleusis, near Thebes. Demeter taught mortal men how to sow and cultivate corn, which became a major source of food. Given the importance of grain and fertility to these agrarian people, the worship of Demeter was a solemn procedure which gave rise to famous religious rites.

The farming peoples needed assurance that they would survive. Their physical well-being was so dependent upon their grain crops that the Great Goddess who watched over their wheat, barley, and corn was particularly dear to their hearts. They needed divine help in order to have enough rain for their semi-arid soil throughout the spring and summer, and yet not too much rain as it would mold the seeds before they sprouted, or wreck the crops before they were harvested. Given their dependence upon their grain crops, the question of whether the seeds they had sown would sprout was literally a matter of life or death.

The long, unproductive winter gave the agrarian peoples months to worry about their next year's crop. Without a good crop, food would be very scarce during the following winter, and a poor harvest meant starvation and death. Some farmers buried a female corn doll through the winter and dug it up in the spring to see whether it had begun to sprout. A sprouting corn doll was a miracle of nature, the portent of a productive spring. The earth had lived and had died, but now it had returned to life.

The myth of Demeter, Persephone, and Hades confirmed the idea of life, death, and rebirth. It symbolized the cycles the agrarian peoples witnessed in nature each year. As long as the cycle continued unbroken, they could hope to survive. They developed an agricultural and religious