

Myths and Legends: Hades, the Greek god of the underworld

By E.M. Berens, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.02.16

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TOP: "Crossing the River Styx" painted by Jacob Isaacz van Swanenburg. In Greek mythology, Styx was the name of a river which formed the boundary between Earth and the underworld. SECOND: Charon crossing the Styx. Paradise to the left, with two angels, to the right hell with Cerberus and hellfire. Between the two, Charon in his boat ferrying a soul. BOTTOM: Pluto and Persephone. Photo: God and goddess of the underworld, with the three-headed dog Cerberus at their feet. Getty Images.

Greek mythology is thousands of years old. The Greeks made up the gods to explain the weather, disasters and events in history. They wrote myths about gods and goddesses. The gods had supernatural powers, but they acted like humans.

Replaced Erebus As Ruler Of The Underworld

Hades was the son of Cronus and Rhea, and the youngest brother of Zeus and Poseidon. He was the ruler of the underground world called Erebus, which was inhabited by the spirits of the dead. Hades, the grim and gloomy monarch of this lower world, replaced Erebus, the ancient god after whom these realms were named.

The early Greeks regarded Hades as their greatest foe. He was, in their eyes, the grim robber who stole from them their nearest and dearest, and eventually deprived each of them of their own lives. His name was so feared that it was never mentioned by mortals, who, when they invoked him, struck the earth with their hands, and in sacrificing to him turned away their faces.

The Greeks believed in a sad and cheerless afterlife. It was supposed that when a mortal died, his spirit took on the shadowy outline of his human form. These shadows, or shades as they were called, were driven by Hades into the underworld, where they passed their time, some brooding over their troubles on earth, others regretting the lost pleasures they had enjoyed in life. Even the heroes of ancient Greece suffered during their time in the underworld. The poet Homer says that when Odysseus visited the shades of the heroes of the Trojan War, the warrior Achilles told him that he would rather be the poorest laborer on earth than be the ruler of the underworld.

Crossing The Great Rivers Of Hades

In the lands of Hades there were four great rivers, three of which had to be crossed by all the shades. Those three were Acheron (sorrow), Cocytus (lamentation), and Styx (intense darkness).

The shades were carried over the Styx by the grim, unshaven old boatman Charon. On the opposite bank of the river was the court of Minos, the supreme judge, before whom all the shades had to appear. After hearing a confession of their earthly actions, he pronounced the sentence of happiness or misery to which their deeds had entitled them. This court was guarded by the terrible triple-headed dog Cerberus, who permitted all shades to enter, but none to return.

The happy spirits, destined to enjoy the delights of Elysium, passed by and set out for the Elysian Fields which lay beyond. This blissful region was filled with all that could charm the senses or please the imagination. The air was balmy and fragrant, and rippling brooks flowed peacefully through the meadows, which glowed with the colors of a thousand flowers.

The guilty souls were sent to the great judgement-hall of Hades, whose massive walls were surrounded by the flaming river Phlegethon. Inside, the wretched sinners were seized by the Furies, who beat them with their whips and dragged them to the gate of Tartarus. From there, the sinners were hurled into the awful depths, to suffer endless torture.

Tartarus Was A Place Of Endless Torture

Tartarus was a vast and gloomy pit, as far below Hades as the earth is distant from the skies. In the pit were the ancient gods known as the Titans, along with other gods who had been cast out of the heavens. The main sufferers in this region of gloom were Tityus, Tantalus, Sisyphus, Ixion and the Danaïdes.

Tityus, one of the Earth-born giants, had insulted Zeus' wife, Hera, on her way to Peitho. For this offense, Zeus flung him into Tartarus, where he suffered dreadful torture, inflicted by two vultures which perpetually gnawed his liver.

Tantalus was a wise and wealthy king of Lydia with whom the gods themselves were friends. One day, Tantalus stole nectar and ambrosia, the food and drink of the gods, from their table and brought it back to his friends. However, his greatest crime was killing his own son, Pelops, and serving him up at one of the banquets to the gods. For these crimes, he was condemned by Zeus to eternal punishment in Tartarus, where, tortured with an ever-burning thirst, he was plunged up to his chin in water. Each time he stooped to drink, the water receded from his parched lips.

Sisyphus was a great tyrant who brutally murdered all travelers who came onto his land by hurling enormous rocks at them. In punishment for his crimes, he was condemned to forever roll a huge block of stone up a steep hill. As soon as it reached the summit, the rock always rolled back down again to the plain below.

Ixion was a king of Thessaly who tried to win the favor of Hera. This so greatly angered Zeus that he struck Ixion with his thunderbolts, and commanded Hermes to throw him into Tartarus, and tie him to an ever-revolving wheel.

The Danaides were the 50 daughters of Danaus, king of Argos, who had married their 50 cousins. By the command of their father, who had been warned by an oracle that his son-in-law would cause his death, they all killed their husbands in one night. Their punishment in the underworld was to fill with water a vessel full of holes, a never-ending and useless task.

Hades And Persephone

Hades is usually represented as a man of mature years and stern majestic appearance, bearing a striking resemblance to his brother Zeus. He sits on a throne beside his queen, the grave and sad Persephone, and wears a full beard and long flowing black hair. In his hand he carries either a two-pronged fork or the keys to the underworld, and at his feet sits Cerberus.

Hades was universally worshiped throughout Greece, and temples were built in his honor in Elis, Olympia and Athens. The priests who worshiped him wore black robes and sacrificed black sheep.

Pluto

Before the introduction into Rome of the religion and literature of Greece, the Romans did not believe in an afterlife. Instead, they thought that at the center of the earth was a vast, dark cavity called Orcus, which was a place of eternal rest for the dead. With the introduction of Greek mythology, the Roman Orcus became the Greek Hades, and the Romans began to worship Hades under the name of Pluto.

From "The Myths and Legends of Ancient Greece and Rome" by E.M. Berens.

Quiz

- 1 Which statement would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
- (A) Hades was related to other major gods in the Greek canon, including Cronus, Rhea, Zeus, and Poseidon.
 - (B) The ancient Greeks feared and worshipped Hades for his role in escorting souls into the afterlife.
 - (C) When Romans were introduced to the religion and literature of Greece, they gave their own names to Greek gods.
 - (D) The priests who worshipped Hades wore black robes and sacrificed black sheep in his honor.
- 2 Which of the following sentences from the article BEST develops a central idea?
- (A) These shadows, or shades as they were called, were driven by Hades into the underworld, where they passed their time, some brooding over their troubles on Earth, others regretting the lost pleasures they had enjoyed in life.
 - (B) The poet Homer says that when Odysseus visited the shades of the heroes of the Trojan War, the warrior Achilles told him that he would rather be the poorest laborer on Earth than be the ruler of the underworld.
 - (C) The guilty souls were sent to the great judgment-hall of Hades, whose massive walls were surrounded by the flaming river Phlegethon.
 - (D) In the pit were the ancient gods known as the Titans, along with other gods who had been cast out of the heavens.
- 3 Read the section "Replaced Erebus As Ruler Of The Underworld."
- What is the MOST important reason why the early Greeks thought of Hades as their greatest foe?
- (A) because he was the son of Cronus and Rhea
 - (B) because he had replaced Erebus as ruler of the underworld
 - (C) because he took the souls of people and their loved ones
 - (D) because he caused dead mortals to take on a shadowy form

4 Read the section "Crossing The Great Rivers Of Hades."

The author explains Minos' importance by:

- (A) describing his role in the underworld
- (B) summarizing ceremonies that occurred in his honor
- (C) alluding to his superiority over Hades
- (D) contrasting his methods of judgment with those of Hades

Answer Key

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