Myths and Legends: Hermes, messenger of the Greek gods

By E.M. Berens, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.19.16

Greek mythology evolved thousands of years ago. There was a need to explain natural events, disasters and events in history. Myths were created about gods and goddesses that had special powers and human feelings. These ideas were passed down in beliefs and stories.

The God Of Many

Hermes is the fast moving messenger of all the gods. He watches over the care and education of the young. He is also the god of gymnastic exercises and athletic skill. That is why statues of him stood in all the gymnasiums and wrestling schools in Greece. Hermes is said to have invented the alphabet. He could interpret all languages, which is why Zeus always chose him as his servant whenever he traveled on earth.
Hermes is worshiped as god of good speech for always knowing the right thing to say. He is also the god who created large flocks and herds of animals. This is why shepherds and herdsmen worshiped Hermes.

Thousands of years ago, the most important trade was the exchange of cattle. As the god of herdsmen, Hermes was also the protector of merchants and trade. He had special skills for buying and selling, so many believed he was also the god of thieves and tricksters.

**A Baby Thief**

Hermes was the son of Zeus and Maia. He was born in a cave. As a newborn baby, he was tricky and sneaky. A few hours after he was born, he crawled out of the cave to steal some oxen from his brother Apollo. On his way to steal the oxen, he found a tortoise. He killed it and stretched seven strings across its empty shell to make an instrument called a lyre. He placed the lyre in his cradle and continued crawling toward the field where the cattle were eating. He arrived at sunset and stole 50 oxen from his brother’s herd. However, the little thief was seen by an old shepherd named Battus. Hermes promised him the finest cow in the herd if Battus would keep his secret. Later, Hermes returned to Battus in disguise and asked who had stolen the oxen. When Battus betrayed his secret, Hermes punished him by turning him into a stone. He sacrificed two of the oxen to the gods and hid the rest in his cave.

**Silver Cap And Silver Wings**

Apollo soon learned that his baby brother had robbed him. He went to the cave where the baby Hermes was sleeping. The baby’s mother, Maia, did not believe Apollo when he said Hermes had stolen the oxen. Apollo grabbed the baby and brought him to their father Zeus, the king of the gods. Zeus listened and then sternly asked Hermes to tell where he had hidden the cattle. The sneaky baby continued to lie. Zeus smiled at his clever and sneaky son, but then told the baby that he knew he had taken the cattle. He ordered Hermes to return them to Apollo. At the cave, Apollo was about to take back his oxen when he heard Hermes touch the strings of his lyre. Apollo loved the sound. He offered Hermes all of the oxen in exchange for the instrument. Hermes accepted the offer and the brothers became friends. Hermes became the god of all the wild animals of the woods and forests, and Apollo became the god of music.
Zeus gave Hermes a silver cap and silver wings for his feet, which allowed the baby to fly. Zeus made Hermes the messenger of the gods.
Mercury

In Rome, Hermes was known as Mercury, the god of trade and business. He had a temple and a sacred fountain dedicated to him. During the festival of Mercury, merchants sprinkled themselves and their goods with holy water from the fountain.
Quiz

1 Based on the article, why are statues of Hermes important in Greek gymnasiums?
(A) because the statues were given as gifts to all the schools in Greece
(B) because Hermes has special powers for gymnasts and athletes
(C) because the statues watch over the care and education of young students
(D) because Hermes invented the alphabet and interprets all languages

2 What is the relationship between Maia and Hermes in the article?
(A) she is the one who saw him steal Apollo’s cows and betrayed his secret
(B) she is his sister
(C) she is his mother
(D) she is the god of good speech who knows the right things to say

3 Read the sentence from the section “A Baby Thief.”

He heard Hermes touch the strings of his lyre.

Which word from the article helps you understand the meaning of lyre?
(A) instrument
(B) tortoise
(C) disguise
(D) friend

4 Which phrase in the section “Mercury” BEST shows that statues and objects related to Hermes or Mercury are considered to be holy?
(A) god of trade and business
(B) sacred fountain
(C) festival of Mercury
(D) sprinkled themselves