

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

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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. 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.

The Youngest Brother Of Zeus

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. This region was inhabited by the spirits of the dead.

The early Greeks thought of Hades as their greatest enemy. In their eyes, he was the grim robber who stole from them their loved ones, and eventually took their own lives. His name was so feared that humans never mentioned it.

The Greeks believed in a sad and cheerless afterlife. They believed that when a man died, his spirit took on the shadowy frame of his human form. These shadows were known as shades. Hades drove them into the underworld, where they complained about their troubles on earth and regretted their lost pleasures.

In the underworld there were four great rivers. One of these was the Styx, the river of great darkness. The old boatman Charon carried the shades over this river. On the opposite shore was the court of Minos, the chief judge. All the shades had to appear before him. He listened to their confessions and decided whether they had earned everlasting happiness or suffering. The court was guarded by the terrible three-headed dog Cerberus, who allowed all shades to enter, but none to return.



Elysian Fields Or Tartarus

The happy spirits were sent to the Elysian Fields. This paradise was filled with peaceful streams and beautiful meadows glowing with flowers.

The wicked souls were sent to the great judgment hall of Hades, which was surrounded by a flaming river. Inside, they were beaten with whips and dragged to the gate of Tartarus. Then the sinners were tossed into the awful depths.

Tartarus was an enormous gloomy pit, as far below Hades as the earth is away from the skies. In the pit were the ancient gods known as the Titans. With them were other gods and creatures who had been thrown out of the heavens. The main dwellers in this place of gloom were Tantalus, Sisyphus and Ixion.

Tantalus was a rich king who stole food from the table of the gods. However, his greatest crime was killing his own son and serving him up at one of the dinners for the gods. For these crimes, Zeus sent him to Tartarus, where he was plunged up to his chin in water. Each time he stooped to drink, the water moved away from his thirsty lips.

Sisyphus was a king who murdered travelers to his land by throwing rocks at them. In Tartarus, he was sentenced to forever roll a huge block of stone up a steep hill. As soon as it reached the top, the rock always rolled back down.

Ixion was a king who tried to win the favor of Zeus's wife Hera. This made Zeus so angry that he struck Ixion with his thunderbolts. He told Hermes to throw Ixion into Tartarus and tie him to a turning wheel.

Hades And Persephone

Hades is usually represented in paintings as an older man with a marvelous appearance. He sits on a throne beside his queen, the sad Persephone. He wears a full beard and has long flowing black hair. In his hand he carries a pitchfork or the keys to the underworld, and at his feet sits Cerberus.



Hades was worshiped all over Greece. 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 they learned about Greek mythology, the Romans did not believe in an afterlife. Instead, they thought that in the center of the earth was a huge dark pit called Orcus. They believed it was a place of unending rest for the dead. Later, the Roman Orcus became more like the Greek Hades. 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.