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Research Essay: Assessment 2

Choose a god and its representation in three-five ancient texts and/or ancient images. How was this god represented, and why? Focus your analysis on either one culture and time period, or compare examples from a variety of cultures and time periods (eg focus on Venus in the Age of Augustus, or compare Greek Ares and Roman Mars). Be sure to consider the source's context when analysing its meaning. (Considering Mercury and Hermes)

Most of the ancient cultures and civilisations believed in gods, goddesses and other mythical legends. Several mythologies have been uncovered in the past which span back 1000s of years. These include the Greek, Roman, Hindu, Egyptian, Buddhist, Chinese, Celtic and Norse myths. It is an intriguing find that many of these mythologies share strong similarities among them. These include various stories, for instance, the creation of life from clay which has been observed in various mythos; In Greek mythology, Prometheus moulded men out of mud and Athena breathed life into his clay, In Egyptian mythology, the god Khnum was thought to create human babies from clay and placed them in their mother's wombs, and this could also be observed in Hindu mythology where goddess Parvati created her son Ganesh from clay. This is not just limited to ancient stories but is also extended to gods and goddesses of different cultures with similar characteristics. The Greek Hermes is one such god who shares various similarities with different deities across different mythologies. Hermes is the main focus of this essay since he was a crucial part of many Greek myths and has a complicated history.

According to ancient texts, Hermes was the Olympian god of trade, herds and flocks, travellers, thievery and athletics. As explained in the Hymns to Hermes, he was born to the union of Zeus and Maia, a nymph who keeps her distance from the gods¹. Since he was skilful and cunning, he took on the role of the messenger of the gods. An infant Hermes is believed to have invented the lyre. This was done when he found a tortoise on his way to steal Apollo's cattle. According to the Homeric Hymns, he immediately realised the true potential of the tortoise in the invention of the lyre². This displays his traits of craftsmanship even as a young infant. In the lines, "But I will take and carry you within: you shall help me, and I will do you no disgrace, though first of all, you must profit me. It is

¹ Homeric Hymn to Hermes (trans. Evelyn-White)

² Homeric Hymn to Hermes [20-25] (trans. Evelyn-White)

better to be at home: harm may come out of doors. Living, you shall be a spell against mischievous witchcraft; but if you die, then you shall make the sweetest song.”³, It could demonstrate his cruelty since he deprives the tortoise of its life for his profitability. In the hymns, he goes on to steal Greek god Apollo’s cattle because he wanted the same entitlement that Apollo received as a Greek god, which was later bestowed upon him by Zeus who confirmed that Hermes should rule over various beings and was also appointed as the guide to Hades or the underworld⁴. Even as an infant, this presents Hermes’ skills of deception and the brilliance of his talents. The hymns conclusively show how cunningness and trickery can overcome many situations. Homer, in his hymn, show us a display of Hermes’ intelligence and at the same time gives us a hint of his dangerous capabilities since it also portrays negative connotations of his character. The killing of the tortoise and justifying his action, desiring meaty dish and slaughtering two of the immortal cows all reflect his wild instincts or even greed. Hesiod, in his Works and Days, discusses in the creation of the Pandora, which signifies the immortality of the gods⁵. Hermes also plays a part in Pandora’s creation but only because Zeus ordered him.

Most of the Greek gods have a Roman god counterpart; they were also worshipped for similar reasons. Hermes was known as Mercury among the Romans who worshipped them. Mercury, just like Hermes, is a psychopomp and is tasked to guide the souls of the dead into Hades. Both of them share other similar qualities and even stories. This could be because the Greek culture heavily influenced the Romans, who were relatively newer than the Greeks⁶. Like Hermes, he is believed to have invented the lyre and also employed as the messenger of the gods. In Hellenistic art, they both were portrayed as a young athlete wearing wing shoes and an iron hat, bearing the Caduceus in his hand. Although in archaic art, he was portrayed as a mature bearded man. In Greek epics, Hermes is portrayed more like a trickster than a messenger, whereas, in the Aeneid, he was heavily depicted as a messenger and an influential divine character⁷. Mercury carries out his tasks as instructed by Jupiter to convey his message to Aeneas, a pivotal moment in Aeneid. Mercury is portrayed as a negotiator in Book 1 and 4 between the Trojans and Dido. It is an interesting observation that due to Mercury’s

³ Homeric Hymn to Hermes [30-38] (trans. Evelyn-White)

⁴ Homeric Hymn to Hermes [568a] (trans. Evelyn-White)

⁵ Hesiod: Works and Days [89-82] (trans. Evelyn-White)

⁶ The Story of Greece and Rome, pp (1-12)

⁷ *Lethaeum ad fluvium*: Mercury in the Aeneid, pp 99

warning to Aeneas to depart Carthage is the reason for Dido's suicide⁸. In her death, she cursed the Trojans, which is a mythic origin for the war between Rome and Carthage.

Hermes and Mercury both have shown their wrath in a few instances. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Aglauros and Herse, were Athenian princesses. Mercury had fallen in love with Herse, and Aglauros demanded bribes from Mercury before he could associate with her sister. In time Aglauros grew jealous of her sister's good fortune and prevented Mercury from visiting her chambers. This enraged Mercury, who punished her for her disapproval by turning her into a stone⁹. Battos or Battus was a man who witnessed the theft of Apollo's cattle by Hermes (Mercury). Hermes warned him and to unsee and forget about the theft. In Hesiod and Ovid's version, Hermes disguised himself and went back to see if the Battos kept his vow but instead he charged the disguised god for revealing the truth. In Homer's account, he revealed the truth to Apollo about the infant Hermes stealing the herd. In all accounts, he was betrayed and decided to punish Battos by transforming him into a statue. Hermes again shows his trickster capabilities to seek the truth and also displays his wrath. Another instance of Mercury's wrath is shown when he accompanies Zeus to the hills of Lydia, where they visited every household disguised as travellers looking for a place to rest but were turned away from all except one. Being considered the god of hospitality, this enraged him and along with Zeus, turned the entire village into a marsh¹⁰.

Hermes traded his lyre with Apollo, and in return, Apollo offers him the golden staff, the Caduceus (Greek **Kērykeion**). The lyre had a soothing effect on Apollo, which delighted him, and as a token of friendship, Hermes offered it to him¹¹. The Caduceus is a wand with two serpents wrapped around it, which in today's world is associated with the medical symbol. It is often confused with the staff of Asclepius, son of Apollo, which instead has a single serpent wrapped around it. Mercury is also depicted in images on coins and Roman artwork to be carrying the Caduceus. Another myth tells us that Mercury saw two serpents entwined in combat. He separated the two with his wand and induced a state of mutual peace; as a result, the Caduceus was born and symbolised peace. In some sources,

⁸ Aeneid [554-583] (trans. A.S. Kline)

⁹ *Metamorphoses*, pp 111 (trans. Melville and Kenney)

¹⁰ *Metamorphoses*, pp 299 (trans. Melville and Kenney)

¹¹ Homeric Hymn to Hermes (trans. Evelyn-White)

the snakes are considered to be male and female, which might represent fertility, something heavily weighed on in ancient Greek culture¹².

Hermes has been known to bestow favours onto people to help them in their quest. He assisted and guided Perseus along with Athena on his quest¹³. He even lent him his winged sandals to fly and to make his way to the Gorgon's cave. He even came across Odysseus when he was near the witch Circe's dwelling. Mercury disguised as a young man warned him of Circe and gave him a herb which would protect him from all kinds of mischief¹⁴. Both Roman and Greek poets discuss how Hermes helped Hercules on his way to the underworld and in defeating creatures. This gives us a glimpse of his gentle nature and also shows us him being more active in the duties assigned to him as a god.

As mentioned earlier, different mythologies shared gods with similar characteristics. According to Hermeticism and its principles, Hermes is often associated with the Egyptian god Thoth¹⁵.

Hermeticism is heavily inclined towards cosmological knowledge, and Hermes Trismegistus is supposedly an incarnation of Hermes and Thoth. Scholars have compared and found similarities between Norse and Greek mythologies, Loki shares his traits of trickery and mischievousness with Hermes. In Hindu mythology, Hermes could be associated with Narada Muni, who is also like Hermes, the son of a supreme god. They both act as a messenger of the gods and play influential roles in their own cultural stories. Narada Muni was a proficient in music and is also credited to have created the seven-stringed musical instrument called Tempura¹⁶.

These parallelisms in ancient cultures and mythologies could just be an amalgamation or divergence of mythologies or even be just highly coincidental. Even the world's two major religions, Christianity and Islam, share similarities throughout their Holy texts. It is important to be aware of the fact that we do not have a linear Greek or Roman myth but reports of these myths which have been

¹² Babylonian Origin of Hermes the Snake-God, and of the Caduceus, pp 197

¹³ Apollodorus's Bibliotheca II

¹⁴ The Odyssey, pp 170 (trans Samuel Butler)

¹⁵ The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: hermeticism from ancient to modern times

¹⁶ <https://blogntalk.wordpress.com/tag/greek-vs-hindu/>

discovered in the works of Roman and Greek poets and scholars or even deduced from images found in relics or statues. The reason for parallelism between the two cultures could be because of vague geographical boundaries between ancient Greece and ancient Rome. Even though they had different terrains, Greece was hillier, latitudinally they were similar enough. The representation of gods evolving overtime in different cultures (Greek and Roman) could insinuate the evolution and growth of human beings in time.

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