

Journeying to the Underworld

Key Terms

Oral tradition : the passing on of information by word of mouth rather than the written word

Muse : nine sister goddesses who preceded over various arts

Taenarus : the traditional entrance to the underworld in the south of the Peloponnese

Key Individuals

Homeric Hymn to Demeter

Demeter : goddess of the harvest, sister of Poseidon, Hades, and Zeus, mother of Persephone. She is given the epithet of *the lovely hair*

Persephone : Daughter of Demeter. She is given the epithet of *the slender ankles*

Hades : Brother of Poseidon, Zeus and Demeter. In the Hymn he is rarely called Hades, instead he has other epithets, which include *God Who Receives So Many, The Ruler of Many, and Receiver of Many*

Zeus : Brother of Demeter, Poseidon and Hades. In the hymn he is also referred to as Son of Cronus. He has epithets *loud thundering and far seeing*

Daughters of Oceanus : Daughters of Oceanus, god of fresh water

Hermes : Son of Zeus. Also referred to as the Slayer of Argos

Hecate : goddess of magic, witchcraft and the night

Helios : god of the Sun. he pulled the sun across the sky with his chariot

Orpheus and Eurydice

Hymen : god of weddings

Orpheus : Thracian musician and poet

Eurydice : wife of Orpheus

Proserpina : queen of the underworld, daughter of Ceres and wife of Pluto

Pluto : king of the underworld, husband of Proserpina. He was also called *the lord of shadows*

Key Knowledge

The Homeric Hymn to Demeter

Hymn 2 recounts the story of Demeter and her daughter, Persephone . One day Persephone is picking flowers on Mount Olympus with her cousins when the ground opens underneath her. Hades, the god of the dead, pulls her into his chariot and takes her to the underworld with him. Hades is the brother of Zeus, Persephone's father, and both he and Zeus are brothers of Demeter, so the abduction has complicated ramifications. After a futile search for her daughter, Demeter leaves Mount Olympus and travels, disguised as an old woman, to the town of Eleusis. She is taken in by the wife and daughters of King Keleos. In return for their kindness, Demeter offers to raise the king and queen's infant son. The baby thrives under Demeter's care, but when his mother spies on him to see how he's being treated, an angry Demeter gives him back to his family and demands that the residents of Eleusis build her a great shrine.

Once the shrine is built, Demeter gives the king instructions on how to perform rites to appease her. Then she settles into the shrine and remains there, grieving, for many years. Without her presence to bless the harvest, the earth grows cold and barren. Realizing that the human race may die out, Zeus orders Hades to let Persephone return to her mother. Before Persephone leaves, Hades feeds her a pomegranate seed. He knows that anyone who eats the food of the dead will have to return to the underworld. Zeus decrees that Persephone must thereafter spend a third of each year in the underworld but can remain with Demeter for the rest of the time. Demeter returns to Eleusis to teach its residents the rites they must now start performing for her. Then she and Persephone return to Mount Olympus.

Orpheus and Eurydice

Orpheus joined the expedition of the Argonauts, saving them from the music of the Sirens by playing his own, more powerful music. On his return, he married Eurydice, who was soon killed by a snakebite. Overcome with grief, Orpheus ventured himself to the land of the dead to attempt to bring Eurydice back to life. With his singing and playing he charmed the ferryman Charon and the dog Cerberus, guardians of the River Styx. His music and grief so moved Hades, king of the underworld, that Orpheus was allowed to take Eurydice with him back to the world of life and light. Hades set one condition, however: upon leaving the land of death, both Orpheus and Eurydice were forbidden to look back. The couple climbed up toward the opening into the land of the living, and Orpheus, seeing the Sun again, turned back to share his delight with Eurydice. In that moment, she disappeared .

Possible Questions

1. Why is this myth important to Greeks? (1)
2. In the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, how does Orpheus persuade Pluto to release Eurydice and why does she not manage to return with him? (2)
3. 'the underworld is not something to look forward to.' To what extent do you agree with this statement? Use **both** the *Homeric hymn to Demeter* and the myth of Orpheus in your answer. (15)

Sources

Prescribed

Homeric hymn to Demeter

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 10.1-64

Further