

The ancient Greek god Hermes and his illustration on Greek stamps ***by Baltso Georgia***

Mythological details about Hermes

“Maia the shy Nympe and daughter of Atlas and Pleione was living in a dark cave of Arcadia on the mountain of Cyllene. This was the place where Zeus made love to Maia during an impervious night, while Hera was sleeping. Nobody knew about that, either god or human. The secret was unveiled ten months after: Nympe gave birth to a son, Hermes “. With these words we are informed about the birth of the Greek winged god, Hermes, from the introduction of the “Homeric hymn to Hermes”.

From the very first day of his life, Hermes proved that people deservedly attributed him with hatful characterizations. Such characterizations were the following: Pikilomythos (the one who can talk about many different things), Emilos (devious), Diactoros (Zeus’s deacon), Eriounis (the one that brings luck), Efron (cheerful), Mihaniotis (inventive), Sokos (strong), Tahigounos (the one with fast knees), Okipetis (the one that flies fast) and many many others.

According to Carl Kerényi, while Hermes was a newborn baby, he jumped out of his cradle and crawled out of the cave without being noticed by anyone. Right out of the cave he accidentally stumbled on a turtle which impressed him. He was so inventive, that he immediately created the music instrument Lyre from the turtle’s carapace. Later in the same day he felt a strong desire for meat, so he climbed on the mount of Pieria. There, in the shady mount of Gods, he found his brother’s Apollo herd of oxen and he stole all the animals. Two days after Hermes returned to his cradle. Even if he was very noiseless, his mother Maia realized his mischief and scolded him. Hermes told her that he was not so willing as her to live without riches. Meanwhile, Apollo realizes that his animals were stolen and starts following their traces. Thus, he reaches in the woody Cyllene and finds the shady cave in which Maia and her son live. When Hermes saw Apollo he tried to hide, but his brother saw him. After a wrangle between the brothers, their father Zeus decided to mediate. As a result, Apollo decided to donate his animals to Hermes but asked for the Lyre as a bargain, from which had been already enchanted. He was actually so impressed, that he also donated to Hermes the gift of divination “by voting” that was, till then, a privilege of Thries. Thries were Nymphes and daughters of Zeus. It was them who taught the art of divination “by voting” to Apollo. In this process, the votes where kept in a pot and one of them was selected. The oracle was then given after taking into consideration the shape and the color of the vote, that was thought to be of great importance.

As long as Hermes was a little child, needed a nurse to take care of him. Hera offered to be his nurse, as she did not know yet that Hermes was child of Zeus. One day, while Hera was breastfeeding Hermes, someone informed her that she was holding a whoreson of her eternally unfaithful husband. She became so furious and pulled Hemes away from her breast. Simultaneously, little drops of milk were scattered in the infinite sky and created the Milky Way (galaxy).

The abilities of Hermes were very useful to all the Gods who admired him for his intelligence and his cunning. They also trusted him to accomplish many difficult missions. First of all, his father, Zeus, who deemed him as his messenger and donated him golden, winged sandals, the Talaria, and the Caduceus. Caduceus was a kind of wand that had wings and two snakes were surrounding it, facing one each other. These snakes symbolized the reconciliation of two opposite traits. Hermes Caduceus was miraculous: whenever he wanted, he could use it to send somebody to sleep or to awake him. That is why Hermes

was considered as "dream guide" and protector of sleep. Hermes was also capable of being transported very fast in any place on earth even in the sky, so he also used to go to the underworld whose king was Hades. Hades also appreciated Hermes's capabilities, and he made him the escort of the dead during their passage to the underworld. Thus, Hermes got one of his main roles, that of the psychopomp or "soul guide" — a conductor of souls into the afterlife. Although Hermes in lyric poetry seems to act more like an assistant god, he was soon developed to a pluralistic one, reflecting almost every aspect of life.

The popularity of Hermes was increased critically in the later years of antiquity, when his evolution was completed. It was only then that he acquired many new attributes, very different from his, till then, chthonic nature. So, from a god of the underworld and a psychopomp he became a god of the athletics, the protector of athletic games. Many gyms were dedicated to Hermes as well as to Hercules, as many signs that have been found, revealed. Pausanias inform us that in Megalopolis, there has been found temple dedicated to the two gods, which was near a stadium. Many great feasts were organized in the honor of god Hermes. The famous Harmaea was celebrated in many towns of Greece but also in Rome, and many athletes participated in. In Greece, the fourth day of the month, and in Rome the fourth day of the week, were dedicated to Hermes.

As the years passed, the gyms lost their athletic character as in special rooms in them, theoretical courses were held. Actually, great men of Letters were teaching in such courses. This fact gave another characterization to Hermes, that of patron of Letters and the rhetoric.

Romans were the first to transform Hermes into the god of trade, Mercurius. He was the god not only of the fair trade but also the thieves. He was also supposed to protect the incidental findings.

During the whole antiquity, Hermes was considered the smartest and the most philanthropist god. Thus, he became the most well-loved and the most amusing god of the Greek pantheon, "expression of all the virtues and all the defects of the ancient Greeks".

Besides the evolution of Hermes during the ancient years, there was also artistic differentiation in the depiction of the god. The archaic ceramicists wanted to depict the chthonic nature of Hermes, so they usually portrayed him as a venerable old man with beard, focusing on his psychopomp behavior. Later though, during the classic period and especially the Hellenistic years, the god was represented as a beautiful adolescent with a sculpted (praxitelion¹) body, as it can be seen in the nude sculpture of the god that was found in Andros island (the only thing that reminds us Hermes' chthonic nature, is the snake that is twisted in a nearby tree trunk). This is the silhouette that Hermes became popular as the god of athletics and gyms, as it was mentioned before. N. Papahatzis mentions: "This praxitelion image of Hermes is so far from his old chthonic one, that it's like it represents another god".

Anything but calm was his love life too. Some of his lovers were Aphrodite, Apemosyne, Ersi, Chione and Dryope from which many children were born. Among them are Hermaphroditos, Pan, Eros, Angelia etc. The most lyric story though, belongs to Hermaphroditos, the son of Hermes and Aphrodite. One day, while the young man was bathing in Salmakis lake, the homonym Nympe Salmakis saw him and immediately fell in love with him. The two young bodies became then one and as their connection was so passionate, the Gods decided to never separate them. That was the day that a creature with both male and female attributes was "born". Hermaphroditos was not any longer the son of Hermes and Aphrodite, but a bisexual creature of supernatural beauty.

1 From Praxitelis. Praxitelis was a famous ancient Greek sculptor.

Hermes is usually represented wearing his Talaria (winged sandals) and Petasos (a kind of winged sun hat), which were both symbols of the airy speed of the messenger of Gods, and holding his magical wand, Caduceus, ancient symbol of his pastoral nature and also of the abundance. Other symbols that are related to Hermes are the phallus -symbol of fertility, the helmet, the sword and the scythe -symbols of his chthonic nature, the discus -symbol of the god as the protector of athletics, the syrinx (type of flute), the Lyre and the guitar -symbols of his music nature, and last the purse -symbol of the god as the protector of trade.

Hermes has been the main subject of many stamps and actually not only Greek ones. Some of the countries that has selected god Hermes as stamp issue are Antigua, Argentina, Austria, France, Cuba, Liberia, Malta, Somalia etc.

Hermes illustrations on Greek stamps

- 1861 – Paris issue – Large Hermes head wearing his winged Petasos
- 1886 – Belgium issue – Small Hermes head similar to the above
- 1896 – Olympic Games issue, 2 drachmas (dr) – Hermes of Praxitelis. He is holding Bacchus and raising a bunch of grapes
- 1900 – Cretan State 1, 50 cents – Hermes is fastening his sandals
- 1901 – The flying Mercury issue – Hermes as messenger with his winged sandals and holding the Caduceus
- 1902 – Metal Value issue – Hermes head with art nouveau characteristics
- 1907 Cretan State 10 cents – Bust of Hermes of Praxitelis
- 1911 Engraved issue 1, 3, 10 cents, 25 dr – Hermes wearing Petasos and holding his Caduceus. Scene from silver stater of Cretan town Syvrita of 320-270 B.C., 5, 30, 50 cents – Hermes is fastening his sandals, 1, 2, 3, 5, 10 dr – Hermes is holding his brother Arkas²
- 1912 Ikaria island issue – Hermes head
- 1912 Samos island issue – Hermes head, similar to those of the first Greek stamps of 1861
- 1912 Lithographic issue 1, 3, 10 cents – Hermes wearing Petasos and holding his Caduceus. Scene from silver stater of Cretan town Syvrita of 320-270 B.C., 5, 30, 50 cents – Hermes is fastening his sandals
- 1933 (Air mail) 20 dr Aeroespresso issue
- 1935 (and reprint) (Air mail) 10 dr Mythological issue
- 1961 100 years of Greek stamps issue– Emblazonments of the first Greek stamps of 1861
- 1974 10 dr Greek Mythology III issue– Hermes as messenger
- 1974 4.5 dr International Postal Union issue
- 1983 25 dr Postal Code issue
- 1986 18dr Olympian Gods issue
- 1987 40 dr Aesop Fables issue – Hermes and the logger
- 1990 Miniature sheet of Greek Stamp Day issue – Emblazonments of past stamps with Hermes
- 1995 120 dr The Expedition of Argonauts issue – Phineas, Voreades and Hermes
- 1996 Miniature sheets for the 100 years of Olympic Games - Emblazonments of the stamps of Olympic Games issue of 1896

² Arkas was stepbrother of Hermes as he was son of Zeus and Callisto. Maia raised Arkas too, as Hera transformed Callisto into a bear, because of her anger when she discovered his husband's infidelity.

- 2001 140, 200 dr ELTA – The New Corporate Identity issue
- 2010 5 cents Greek Art issue – N. Engonopoulos 1949, Orpheus, Hermes and Eurydice
- 2011 150 years of Greek stamps issue + miniature sheet – Emblazonments of the first Greek stamps of 1861

Hermes was the only subject of Greek stamps for 50 years. In 1861 the first Greek stamps of the Large Hermes head were printed in Paris. After this issue, the first Athens prints took place and afterwards the cleaned plates prints, the meshed paper prints, prints with new values, prints with or without control numbers as well as prints with color differentiations, from 1875 till 1882, followed.



40cents Paris print, 1861



20cents Meshed paper print, 1871-76

In 1886 the first Small Hermes head stamps were printed and circulated. Till 1901 there were both Large and Small Hermes head stamps with overprints.



40cents Belgium print, 1886-88



1dr Athens print II, 1891-96

Both Large and Small Hermes head on the Greek stamps, are inspired by the figure of Hermes during the Classical period. We can find many pieces of art belonging in that particular period such as pots or coins from which the depictions of Hermes were inspired.



*Coin of Ionia depicting Hermes,
circa 420 B.C.*

In 1896 the Olympic Games issue was printed and circulated. In the 2 dr. of this issue, we can find Hermes as a creation of the famous sculptor Praxitelis. More specifically, Hermes is depicted as a young man with the God Dionysus as a baby on his left hand. This sculpture is considered to depict the model of beauty during the Classical period and it is attributed to the edge of Classical and Hellenistic times. This depiction of Hermes was supposed to replace the one of Small head stamps as the newspaper ‘Acropolis’ of 1890 informs us, but this never happened.



2dr. Olympic Games issue, 1896

In 1901 the Flying Mercury (=God Hermes for the Romans) issue was printed. The theme of the stamps was the homonymous statue of the sculptor Giovanni da Bologna. The former was obligated by the Pope to create a sculpture of Hermes so as it could adorn the university yard in Italy. According to the Pope’s command, the God should be depicted with his forefinger pointing the sky, indicating the divine origin of knowledge and inspire the students. We should keep in mind that Hermes was the patron of arts and rhetoric. The sculpture that was created in 1580, Hermes balances on a copper stele that comes out of Zephyrus mouth, from which water was bursting out. Thus, it creates the feeling that the God is flying.



The bronze sculpture of Flying Mercury, Giovanni da Bologna



50cents Flying Mercury issue, 1901

In 1902 the Metal Value issue was circulated. On the stamps of this issue we can see the depiction of Hermes with attributes from the Hellenic-Roman antiquity. Besides, in the background of these stamps, there are for the first time art nouveau characteristics.



50cents Metal Value issue, 1902

In the Engraved issue of 1911, there are twelve values which have as main subject the God Hermes. On the values of 1, 3, 10 cents and 25 dr. we can see Hermes wearing Petasos and holding his Caduceus. On the 5 cent one, Hermes is fastening his sandals, 1, 2, 3, 5, 10 dr – Hermes is holding his brother Arkas. All the former emblazonments can be found on coins of Classical period. More specifically, the depiction of Hermes on the 2 dr. stamp that is wearing his sandals leaning on a rock, is inspired by the a narration of Homeros in Odyssey as I. Svoronos informs us. In particular, Homeros is describing Hermes going to the island of Calypso to transfer her Zeus message of setting Odysseus free.



From left to right: 1. Statiras, Arcadia, Hermes with Arkas, 320 B.C., 2. Syvrita, Crete, Hermes is fastening his sandals, 320 B.C., 3. Thessaly, Hermes, 369-357 B.C.



1 dr., 50 cents and 25 dr. Engraved issue, 1911

In the years that followed, many of the above-mentioned stamps re-circulated with several overprints.

During the years 1900 – 1912 Hermes became the main subject of stamps of the New Territories. More specifically, on the 1, 50 cents of 1900 and on 10 cents of 1907 of Cretan State issues, and on all the classes of Ikaria and Samos islands issues respectively. The illustrations that were selected for those stamps, were the same or quite similar with those of past Greek issues, except for the 10 cents value of Cretan State, where we can find a different depiction of Hermes of Praxitelis. We should note that the stamps of Cretan State continued their circulation with overprints for a great amount of time after their first appearance. In addition, the before-mentioned stamps were circulated with the overprinted “ΕΠΙΘΑΝΑΣΤΑΣΙΣ 1922” (in English: “Revolution of 1922”) as a Greek issue in 1923.



*1 cent Cretan State,
1900*



*10 cents Cretan State,
1907*



*5 cents Ikaria island,
1912*



*25 cents Samos island,
1912*

In 1912 the Lithographic issue was printed. Here we can find the same illustrations of Hermes as those on the Engraved issue.



*80 cents Lithographic
issue, 1918-23*

In 1933 and in 1935 Hermes appears in two values of airmail issues. In particular, on 20 dr. of Aeroespresso issue with attributes of both academic art and art deco, and on 10 dr. of Mythological issue, with academic art characteristics as well as symbolism ones. Hermes was chosen for these two stamps in order to introduce to the people the new airmail service.



Airmail issues: 20 dr. Aeroespresso and 10 dr. Mythological

In the following years, Hermes does not appear many times on stamps. In 1961, because of the completion of 100 years after the first Greek stamp printing, ELTA issued seven classes of stamps with the Large Hermes head, similar to the Paris printed ones of 1861.



1.5 dr. 100 years after the first Greek stamp printing, 1961

Hermes continues to be part of some issues of ELTA from 1974 till 2010 as we can see in the following figures.



10 dr. Greek Mythology III issue, - Hermes as messenger, 1974



4.5 dr. International Postal Union issue, 1974



25 dr. Postal Code issue, 1983



18 dr. Olympian Gods, 1986



40 dr. Aesop Fables issue – Hermes and the logger, 1987



Miniature sheet of Greek Stamp Day issue – Emblazonments of past stamps with Hermes, 1990



120 dr. The Expedition of Argonauts issue – Phineas, Voreades and Hermes, 1995



Miniature sheets for the 100 years of Olympic Games - Emblazonments of the stamps of Olympic Games issue of 1896, 1996



140, 200 dr. ELTA – The New Corporate Identity issue, 2001



5 cents Greek Art issue – N. Engonopoulos 1949, Orpheus, Hermes and Eurydice, 2010

In 2011, because of the completion of 150 years, ELTA circulated the second issue that had as theme the redesign of the first Greek stamps, the Large Hermes head. This issue was the first to be created with baptismal engraving by Greek engraver. The plates were constructed in Austria, but the printing was held in Greece. Alongside with the stamps, there were also 150.000 miniature sheets available for 5€ each.



2€ and Miniature sheets for the 150 years of the first Greek stamp - Emblazonments of the stamps of Large Hermes issues of 1861, 2011

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