



Experimental School of the University of Thessaloniki (Primary)

HELL AND HEAVEN BELIEF BEFORE CHRISTIANITY



ARISTOTLE
UNIVERSITY OF
THESSALONIKI

Since the dawn of time, humans have tried to answer life's biggest question: What happens when we die?

In many cultures, possible answers lied in the many symbols of death. Things like black cats and images of the grim reaper remind us that death is always lurking in the shadows.

For those from ancient times, death was much closer than it is today. War, famine, and disease took people from this earth before their prime.

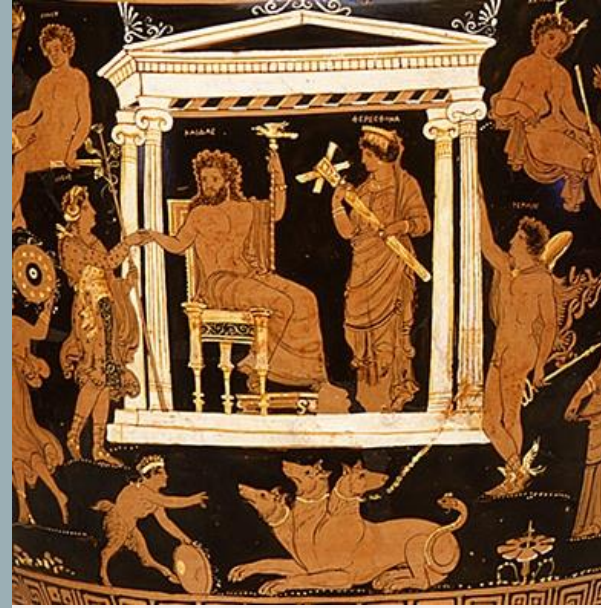
To provide some clarity and comfort, ancient people assigned gods to overlook their dead and the afterlife.



Afterlife at Ancient Greek Mythology

The Ancient Greece concepts for Heaven and Hell are of course different in many ways from those propounded by Christianity, but in other aspects they closely mirror the horror and the ecstasies of these places that we associate them with today.

People believed that the soul went to the Underworld in the afterlife. This doesn't have many similarities with the Christian version of Heaven and Hell in the afterlife. It's simply a final resting place for all, regardless of their sins.

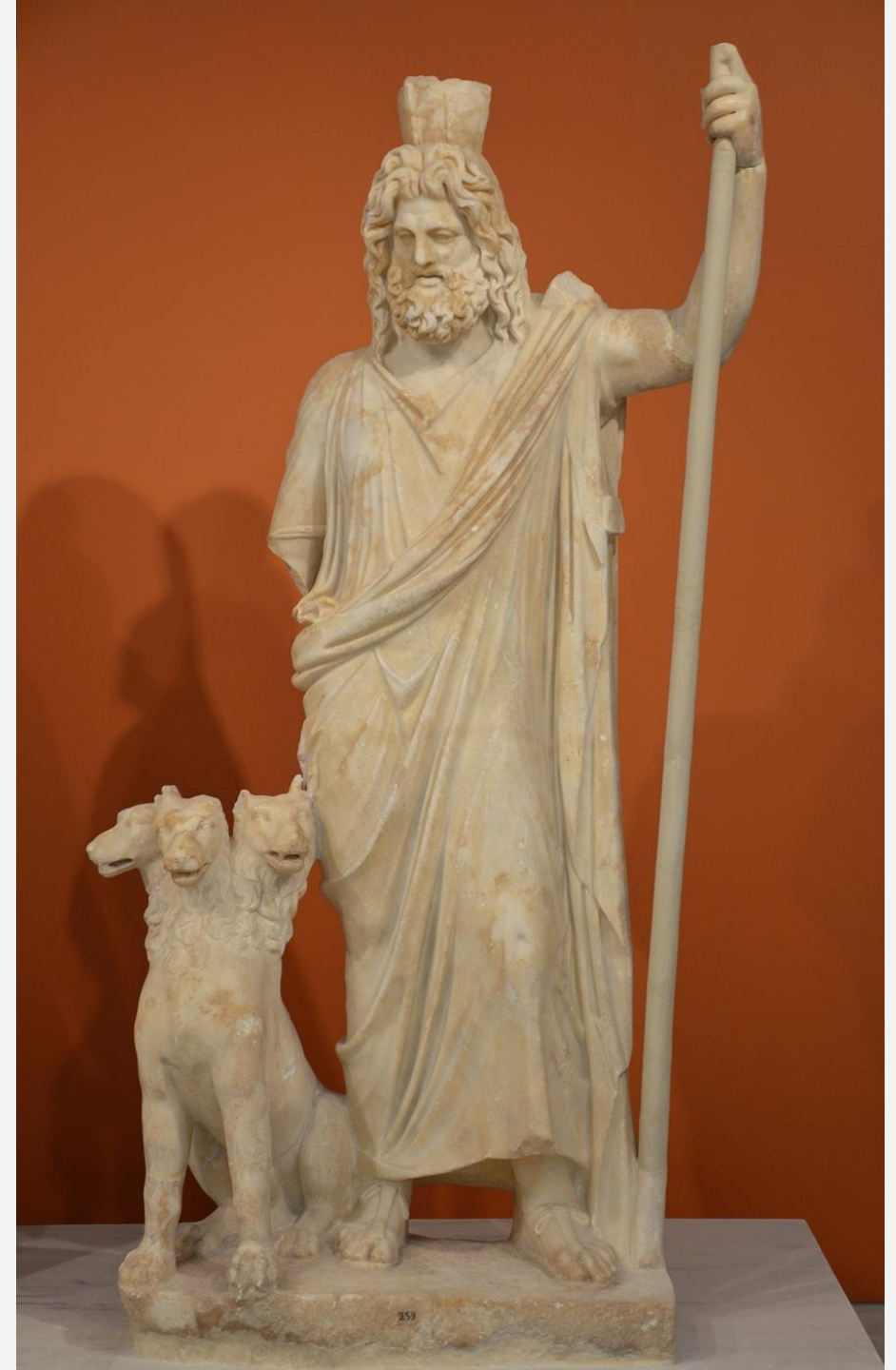


What gods inhabit the Underworld?

Ancient Greeks had multiple gods of the dead. While this might sound sinister, these were complex, intriguing narratives based on myths and culture.

The most well-known and powerful god of the Underworld is Hades, the God of Death. He's the leader of this dark world, and he oversees all the souls at rest.

Hades was the eldest son of Cronus and Rhea, brother of Zeus and Poseidon. Perhaps from fear of even pronouncing his name, around the 5th century BC, the Greeks started referring to Hades as Plouton, with a root meaning "wealthy," considering that from the abode below (i.e., the soil) come riches (e.g., fertile crops, metals and so on).



What gods inhabit the Underworld?

Hades, as the god of the dead, was a fearsome figure to those still living; in no hurry to meet him, they were reluctant to swear oaths in his name and averted their faces when sacrificing to him.

In the Underworld, he rules with his queen, Persephone. She was the daughter of Demeter, the goddess of the harvest, and Zeus. Was abducted by Hades when she was gathering flowers and was carried into the underworld. Then, Demeter's grief is said to have caused all the crops on earth to die and stop growing altogether.

Though Persephone returns to earth, she is doomed to spend six months of the year with Hades in the Underworld until the end of time. Because of this, the earth dies at the beginning of autumn and through the early months of spring with Demeter's mourning.



*Hades' Abduction of Persephone. 18th Century.
Oil on wood with gilt background.
Credit: Property of Missing Link Antiques.*

What gods inhabit the Underworld?

All souls depart to the Underworld after death, but there are other spirits and deities who occasionally call this dark land their home.

The God of death (Thanatos), the god of sleep (Hypnos), and the goddess of the night (Nyx) all live in the Underworld.

Nyx is the Greek goddess of the night. She was also one of the first Greek gods, forming at the dawn of creation. Created by both air and darkness, she gave birth to both light and day.

Nyx is one of the more mysterious gods of ancient Greece. She was seen as the very substance of night, nothing but a veil of dark mists. She spent her time in the Underworld with Hades, helping him look over the dead.



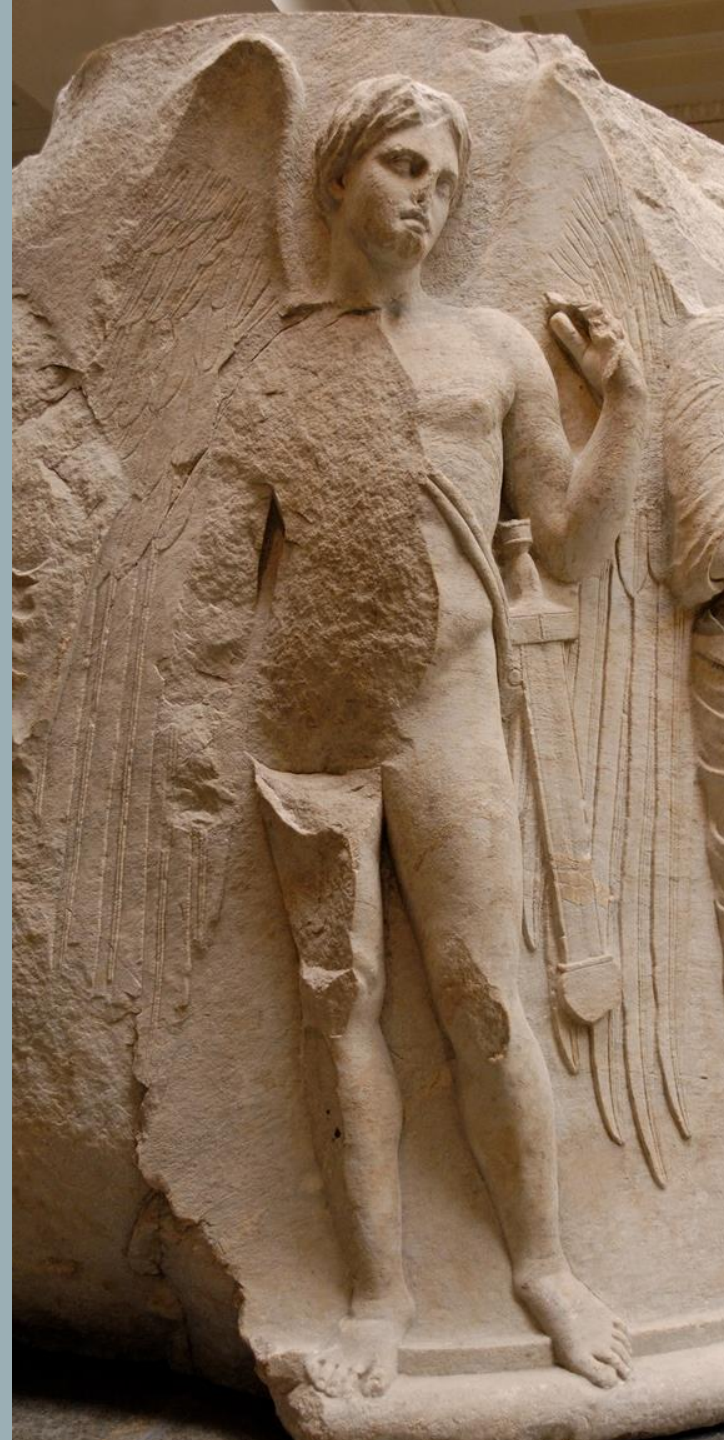
Gigantomachy frieze, north panel, a young goddess, possibly Nyx, hurls a vase with a snake wrapped around it at her enemy. Berlin. Germany. Pergamon Museum. Pergamon Altar.

What gods inhabit the Underworld?

No mention to Greek gods of death would be complete without Thanatos.

Thanatos is death personified. He's the son of Nyx, the goddess of night, and the brother of the god of sleep (Hypnos). He's a relentless, merciless god that believes all mortals should be subject to death eventually.

Death, in the form of Thanatos, is the great equalizer.



Thanatos as a winged and sword-girt youth.

Sculptured marble column drum from the Temple of Artemis at Ephesos, c. 325–300 BC.

What gods inhabit the Underworld?

The Furies (also known as The Erinyes) in Greek mythology are goddesses of revenge and death. They aiding Hades in the Underworld. Though their origin isn't clear today, there are some ideas for where the Furies developed from. Most believe they were originally ghosts of the murdered, turned into goddesses of vengeance.

There are three different Furies referred to throughout Greek mythology. The first is Allecto, the goddess of anger. The next is Tisiphone, the avenger of murder. Finally, there is Megaera, the jealous fury. Together, they reign with Hades in the Underworld. These were the ones who punished the dead souls in the afterlife.



The Furies visit Tereus and Procne during their wedding night by Crispijn van de Passe and Johannes Posthius in the early 17th century, via Creative Commons and the Rijksmuseum



What gods inhabit the Underworld?

Cerberus (Kerberos), or the "Hell-Hound", is Hades' massive multi-headed (usually three-headed) dog with some descriptions stating that it also has a snake-headed tail and snake heads on its back and as its mane.

Born from Echidna and Typhon, Cerberus guards the gate that serves as the entrance of the underworld. Cerberus' duty is to prevent dead people from leaving the underworld.



Cerberus and Heracles.
Etching by Antonio Tempesta (Italy, Florence, 1555–1630).
The Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

The road to the Greek Underworld

In Ancient Greece, the land of the living is separate from the Underworld.

The Underworld is where the dead go when they die, and this land is watched by Hades, the god of the Underworld.

However, when people died, they didn't magically appear in the Underworld. They had to travel there by boat.

Between the land of the living and the Underworld is the River Styx and Acheron. These two rivers divided the souls of the living and the departed.



Joachim Patinir's depiction of the River Styx.

The road to the Greek Underworld

Those joining the Underworld needed to cross by boat. The ferryman of Hades was Charon. In Greek paintings and poetry, you'll frequently find depictions of Charon taking the dead through the river to the Underworld.

Charon did not ferry passengers for free. According to Greek legend, he needed to be paid an obol for his service. An obol was a type of coin from ancient Greece. The only way to make sure he got his payment was to bury the dead with a coin on their eyes or even in their mouths.

What happened if the ferryman didn't get paid? Greek belief argues these souls wander the earth side of the river for hundreds or even thousands of years before they're permitted to cross.



*A 19th-century interpretation of Charon's crossing
by Alexander Litovchenko*

What Are the Three Levels of the Underworld?

There are different divisions of the Ancient Greek Underworld. Each soul goes to a specific geographic area depending on the life they led. The three levels are as follows:

Tartarus: This region is easily associated with Christianity's Hell. This is where people were imprisoned and doomed to suffer the worst punishments for all of eternity. It takes souls nine days to reach the depths of Tartarus.

Asphodel Meadows: This is where the vast majority of deceased souls reside. This is an in-between place for souls who lived a mild life. They weren't overly bad, nor were they overly good. Those in the Asphodel Meadows drink from the River Lethe, meaning they forget their previous lives and live in eternal mindlessness.



Aeneas and a Sibyl in the Underworld
Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568–1625) - PD-art-100

What Are the Three Levels of the Underworld?

Elysium: Finally, this is the region of the Underworld where all mortals aspire to reside. Elysium is for the most heroic of mankind, and this is close to Christianity's Heaven. The souls in Elysium spend eternity enjoying the greatest pleasures.

The vast majority of souls aren't bad enough to warrant Tartarus, and they're not good enough for Elysium. As such, they spend eternity in the Asphodel Meadows, an endless greyness. Though it's not always easy to understand the Greek mythology behind this belief system, there are clear similarities between modern religion's understandings of the afterlife.



Elysium, or "Serenity,"
by Henri Martin, based on the Classical understanding of heaven.
Credit: Public Domain

Greek Duty to the Dead

In Ancient Greece, honoring the dead is a part of daily life. To not honor the dead is considered impious and frowned upon socially. Regardless of the type of life the individual led, whether virtuous or otherwise, they were to be remembered by friends and family in death.

Proper burial is a way to honor the deceased, and the funeral traditions were very elaborate. Funeral practices, the body was laid out, there was a procession, and the body was either buried or burned. Special funeral pyres were used for these occasions.

Graves were marked with sculptures, carvings, statues, and other memorials. Today, much of the art and cultural artifacts leftover from Ancient Greece are part of these memorial structures.



Facing Eternity in the Greek Afterlife

In Greek mythology, mortals are doomed to spend their eternity after death in the Underworld. They're watched by Hades, the God of the Underworld, and they're at the mercy of their decisions during their limited time on earth. Those who led the life of a hero could kick back and relax once their days were up. For those who don't reach these standards, there was much less to look forward to after death.

Ultimately, Greek mythology about the Underworld is a reminder to consider our own legacy and impact. When studying a time and culture like Ancient Greece where honoring the dead is a sign of piousness, what can we learn? Those who came before us found meaning and balance in a world that held more questions than answers. They proved that human memory and legacy is one of the most powerful myths of all.





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