

# Ancient Greek and Roman Gods and Goddesses of Protection on Coins

The ancient Greeks and Romans had many amazing gods and goddesses of protection for various things they concerned them with. There would be one specific attribute a god or goddess would have that they called on from them for protection. This article is meant as a general overview about the various types of gods and goddesses on coins and what they helped people with. Studying the ancient coins, it is captivating to think about the power of the mind to create gods and goddesses that manifested certain attributes you wanted to have. Something like commerce, family are somewhat abstract terms, however if you have a symbol, a god or goddess that stood behind it, it may have been easier to visualize and think about. It has been believed for hundreds of years, if not thousands of years, and written about the power of the mind to bring things about. It was roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, that said, "The universe is change; life is what thinking makes of it."

So my conclusion is that the gods and goddess in some ways allowed common people to think about specifics they wanted success with in their lives. A young woman may pray for the health of her family to the goddess Vesta. A traveling trader may have prayed to Hermes or Mercury for the safety of his travels. And perhaps at different shrines, men and women would pray to Aphrodite to find the love of their lives. A young soldier on the front may pray to Mars or Ares for success in the military campaign, or to Virtus for valor in battle. Many of the ancient symbols of these god and goddesses are still around us today, and we may or may not be noticing them. Let's explore some of their fascinating stories together.

## The Gods and Goddesses of Protection

### Genius

The Genius was a protection spirit, analogous to the guardian angels invoked by the Church of Rome. The belief in such spirits existed in Greece and at Rome. The Greeks called them Daemons, and appear to have believed in them from the earliest times, though Homer does not mention them. Hesiod says that the Daemons were 30,000 in number, and that they dwelled on earth unseen by mortals, as the ministers of Zeus, and as the guardians of men and justice. He further conceives them to be the souls of the righteous men who lived in the golden age of the world. The Greek philosophers took up this idea, and developed a complete theory of daemons. Thus we read in Plato, that daemons are assigned to men at the moment of their birth, that they accompany men through life, and after death conduct their souls to Hades. Pindar, in several passages of the spirit watching over the fate of man from the hour of his birth. The daemons are further described as ministers and companions of the gods, who carry the prayers of men to the gods, and the gifts of the gods to men, and accordingly float in immense numbers in the space between heaven and earth. There was also a distinct class of daemons, who were exclusively the ministers of the gods.



The Romans seem to have received their notions respecting the genii from the Etruscans, though the name Genius itself is Latin (it is connected with *gi-gn-o*, *gen-ui*, and equivalent in meaning to generator or father). The genii of the Romans are the powers which produce life (*dii genitales*), and accompany man through it as his second or spiritual self. They were further not confined to man, but every living being, animal as well as man, and every place had its genius. Every human being at his birth obtained (*sortitur*) a genius, who he worshipped as *sanctus et sanctissimus deus*, especially on his birthday, with libations of wine, incense, and garlands of flowers. The bridal bed was sacred to the genius, on account of his connection with generation, and the bed itself was called *lectus genialis*. On other merry occasions, also, sacrifices were offered to the genius, and to indulge in merriment was not infrequently expressed by *genio indulgere*, *genium curare*, or *placare*. The whole body of the Roman people had its own genius, who is often seen represented on coins of Hadrian and Trajan. He was worshipped on sad as well as joyous occasions; thus,

sacrifices were offered to him at the beginning of the 2nd year of the war with Hannibal. The genii are usually represented in works of art as winged beings. The genius of a place appears in the form of a serpent eating fruit placed before him.

## Juno

Juno, called Hera by the Greeks. The word *Ju-no* contains the same root as *Ju-piter*. As Jupiter is the king of heaven and the gods, so Juno is the queen of heaven, or the female Jupiter. She was worshipped at Rome as the queen of heaven, from early times, with the surname of *Regina*. At a later period her worship was solemnly transferred from Veii to Rome, where a sanctuary was dedicated to her on the Aventine. As Jupiter was the protector of the male sex, so Juno watched over the female sex. She was supposed to accompany every woman through life, from the moment of her birth to her death. Hence she bore the special surnames of *Virginalis* and *Matrona*, as well as the general ones of *Opigena* and *Sospita*, and under the last mentioned name she was worshipped at Lanuvium. On their birthday women offered sacrifices to Juno surnamed *Natalis*, just as men sacrificed to their genius natalis. The great festival, celebrated by all the women, in honor of Juno, was called *Matronalia*, and took place on the 1st of March. Her protection of women, and especially her power of making them fruitful, is further alluded to in the festival *Populifugia*, as well as the surname of *Februlis*, *Februata*, *Februta*, or *Februalis*. Juno was further, like Saturn, the guardian of finances, and under the name of *Moneta* she had a temple on the Capitoline hill, which contained the mint. The most important period in a woman's life is that of her marriage, and she was therefore believed especially to preside over marriage. Hence she was called *Juga* or *Jugalis*, and had a variety of other names, such as *Pronuba*, *Cinxia*, *Lucina*. The month of June, which is said to have been originally called Junonius, was considered to be the most favorable period for marrying. Women in childbed invoked Juno Lucina to help them, and newly-born children were likewise under her protection: hence she was sometimes confounded with the Greek Artemis or Ilithyia. In Etruria she was worshipped under the name of *Cupra*. She was also worshipped at Falerii, Lanuvium, Aricia, Tibur, Praeneste, and other places. In the representations of the Roman Juno that have come down to us, the type of the Greek Hera is commonly adopted.



## Vesta

Vesta, one of the great Roman divinities, identical with the Greek Hestia, both in name and import. She was the goddess of the hearth, and therefore inseparably connected with the Penates; for Aeneas was believed to have brought the eternal fire of Vesta from Troy, along with the images of the Penates; and the praetors, consuls, and dictators, before entering upon their official functions, sacrificed, not only to the Penates, but also to Vesta at Lavinium. In the ancient Roman house, the hearth was the central part, and around it all the inmates daily assembled for their common meal (*coena*); every meal thus taken was a fresh bond of union and affection among the members of a family, and at the same time an act of worship of Vesta, combined with a sacrifice to her and the Penates. Every dwelling-house therefore was, in some sense, a temple of Vesta; but a public sanctuary united all the citizens of the state into one large family. This sanctuary stood in the Forum, between the Capitoline and Palatine hills, and not far from the temple of the Penates. The temple was round with a faulted roof, like the impluvium of private houses, so that there is no reason to regard that form as an imitation of the fault of heaven. The goddess was not represented in her temple by a statue, but the eternal fire burning on her hearth or altar was her living symbol, and was kept up and attended by the Vestals, her virgin priestesses. As each house, and the city itself, so also the country had its own Vesta, and the latter was worshipped at Lavinium, the metropolis of the Latins, where she was worshipped and received the regular sacrifices at the hands of the highest magistrates. The goddess herself was regarded as chaste and pure like her symbol, the fire; and the Vestals who kept up the sacred fire were likewise pure maidens. On the 1st of March every year her sacred fire, and the laurel tree which shaded her hearth, were renewed, and on the 15th of June her temple was cleaned and purified. The dirt was carried into an angiportus behind the temple, which was locked by a gate that no one might enter it. The day which this took place was a *dies nefastus*, the first half of which was thought to be so inauspicious, that the priestess of Juno was not allowed to comb her hair or



to cut her nails, while the second half was very favorable to contracting a marriage or entering upon other important undertakings. A few days before that solemnity, on the 9th of June, the Vestalia was celebrated in honor of the goddess, on which occasion none but women walked to the temple, and that with bare feet. On one of these occasions an altar had been dedicated to Jupiter Pistor.

## Hermes

Hermes, called Mercurius by the Romans. The Greek Hermes was a son of Zeus and Maia, the daughter of Atlas, and born in a cave of Mt. Cyllene in Arcadia, whence he is called *Atlantiades* or *Cyllenius*. A few hours after his birth, he escaped from his cradle, went to Pieria, and carried off some of the oxen of Apollo. In the Iliad and Odyssey this tradition is not mentioned, though Hermes is characterized as a cunning thief. That he might not be discovered by the traces of his footsteps, he put on sandals, and dove the oxen to Pylos, where he killed 2, and concealed the rest in a cave. The skins of the slaughtered animals were nailed to a rock; and part of their flesh was cooked and eaten, and the rest burnt. Thereupon he returned to Cyllene, where he found a tortoise at the entrance of his native cave. He took the animal's shell, drew strings across it, and thus invented the lyre, on which he immediately played. Apollo, by his prophetic power, had meantime discovered the thief, and went to Cyllene to charge Hermes with the crime before his mother Maia. She showed to the god the child in its cradle; but Apollo carried the boy before Zeus, and demanded back his oxen. Zeus commanded him to comply with the demand of Apollo, but Hermes denied that he had stolen the cattle. As, however, he saw that his assertions were not believed, he conducted Apollo to Pylos, and restored to him his oxen; but when Apollo heard the sounds of the lyre, he was so charmed that he allowed Hermes to keep the animals. Hermes now invented the syrinx, and after disclosing his inventions to Apollo, the 2 gods concluded an intimate friendship with each other. Apollo presented his young friend with his own golden shepherd's staff, and taught him the art of prophesying by means of dice. Zeus made him his own herald, and likewise the herald of the gods of the lower world.



The principal feature in traditions about Hermes consists in his being the herald of the gods, and in this capacity he appears even in the Homeric poems. His original character of the ancient Pelasgian, or Arcadian divinity of nature, gradually disappeared in the legends. As the herald of the gods, he is the god of eloquence, for the heralds are public speakers in the assemblies and on other occasions. The gods especially employed him as messenger, when eloquence was required to attain the desired object. Hence the tongues of sacrificial animals were offered to him. As heralds and messengers are usually men of prudence and circumspection, Hermes was also the god of prudence and skill in all the relations of social intercourse. These qualities were combined with similar ones, such as cunning, both in words and actions, and even fraud, perjury, and the inclination to steal; but acts of this kind were committed by Hermes always with certain skill, dexterity, and even gracefulness.

Being endowed with this shrewdness and sagacity, he was regarded as the author of a variety of inventions, and, besides the lyre and syrinx, he is said to have invented the alphabet, numbers, astronomy, music, the art of fighting, gymnastics, the cultivation of the olive tree, measures, weights, and many other things. The powers which he possessed himself he conferred upon those mortals and heroes who enjoyed his favor; and all who possessed them were under his especial protection, or are called his sons. He was employed by the gods, and more especially by Zeus, on a variety of occasions which are recorded in ancient story. Thus he led Priam to Achilles to fetch the body of Hector; tied Ixion to the wheel; conducted Hera, Aphrodite, and Athena to Paris; fastened Prometheus to Mt. Caucasus; rescued Dionysus after his birth from the flames, or received him from the hands of Zeus to carry him to Athamas; sold Hercules to Omphale; and was ordered by Zeus to carry off Io, who was metamorphosed into a cow, and guarded by Argus, who he slew.

In the Trojan war Hermes was on the side of the Greeks. His ministry to Zeus was not confined to the offices of herald and messenger, but was also his charioteer and cupbearer. As drams are sent by Zeus, Hermes conducts them to man, and hence he is also described as the god who had it in his power to send refreshing sleep, or take it away. Another important function of Hermes was to conduct the shades of the dead from the upper into the lower world.

The idea of his being the herald and messenger of the gods, of his travelling from place to place and concluding treaties, necessarily implied the notion that he was the promoter of social intercourse and of commerce among them. In this

capacity he was regarded as the maintainer of peace, and as the god of the roads, who protected travelers, and punished those who refused to assist travelers who had mistaken their way. Hence the Athenian generals, on setting out on expedition, offered sacrifices to Hermes, surnamed Hegemonius, or Agetor; and numerous statues of the god were erected on roads, at doors and gates, from which circumstance he derived a variety of surnames and epithets. As commerce is the source of wealth, he was also the god of gain and riches, such as are acquired by commerce. As the giver of wealth and good luck, he also presided over the game of dice.

Hermes was believed to be the inventor of sacrifices. Hence he not only acts the part of a herald at sacrifices, but is also the protector of sacrificial animals, and was believed to increase the fertility of sheep. For this reason he was especially worshiped by shepherds, and is mentioned in connection with Pan and the Nymphs. This feature in the character of Hermes is a remnant of the ancient Arcadian religion, which he was the fertilizing god of the earth, who conferred his blessing on man.



Hermes was likewise the patron of all the gymnastic games of the Greeks. This idea seems to be of late origin, for in Homer no trace of it is found. Athens appears to have been the first place in which he was worshipped in this capacity. At a later time almost all gymnasia were under his protection; and the Greek artists derived their ideal of the god from the gymnasium, and represented him as a youth whose limbs were beautifully and harmoniously developed by gymnastic exercises.

The most ancient seat of worship of Hermes is Arcadia, the land of his birth, where Lycaon, the son of Pelasgus, is said to have built to him the first temple. From thence his worship was carried to Athens, and ultimately spread through all Greece. The festivals celebrated in his honor were called Hermaea. His temples and statues were extremely numerous in Greece. Among the things sacred to him were the palm tree, the tortoise, the number 4, and several kinds of fish; and the sacrifices offered to him consisted of incense, honey, cakes, pigs, and especially lambs and young goats.

The principal attributes of Hermes are: 1. A travelling hat with a broad brim, which in later times was adorned with 2 small wings. 2. The staff, which he bore as a herald, and had received from Apollo. In late works of art the white ribbons which surrounded the herald's staff were changed into 2 serpents. 3. The sandals. They were beautiful and golden, and carried the god across land and sea with the rapidity of the wind; at the ankles of the god they were provided with wings, whence he is called *alipes*.

## Conclusion

With just four gods and goddesses presented, I feel that your eyes too may have been opened to the vast array of interesting topics and stories that are associated with the gods and goddesses on ancient Greek and Roman coins. One conclusion I came up with is that perhaps the modern birthday candle perhaps is almost a modern version of burning 'sacrifice' similar to those given to the Genius or Juno on your birthday. Also, if you think about it, the eternal flames burn at multiple cities across the world and are sacred, so perhaps could in some ways be connected from psyche or symbolism of the ancient times; another connection being, the bearing of the Olympic flame to various locations. Also interesting to note is the March 1st Roman holiday being sacred to both Juno and Vesta and their interconnections. You can also explore the different [Roman gods and goddesses](http://stores.ebay.com/Authentic-Ancient-Greek-Roman-Coins/) in my eBay store (<http://stores.ebay.com/Authentic-Ancient-Greek-Roman-Coins/>) as their depictions and stories are amazing to behold, and even own on authentic ancient Greek and Roman coins.



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