

Roman and Greek Mythology Names:

Gods, Planets, Astrology

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Roman & Greek Mythology Names: Gods, Planets

This page will give the Roman and Greek mythology names of gods after whom planets were named, and will explain how those planets came to be named after them. It will also give pictures of these gods, and tell their stories. By extension, these gods' planets, in the minds of the ancients, influenced the personality traits of people born at various times of the year. Thus, the connection between gods, planets, and astrology.

In the Beginning Was Chaos

The ancients perceived that although most stars maintained a relatively fixed position, some of them seemed to move. Five such "wandering stars"--the word "planet" comes from a Greek word meaning "to wander or stray"--were obvious to the naked eye. These were Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. In fact, it is thought that both the seven-day week and the overall sacredness of the number seven within many mystical/religious traditions may have begun with the observation of seven heavenly bodies which moved: the five visible planets, the sun, and the moon. Each of these seven heavenly bodies is associated with a particular day of the week.

According to Greek mythology, the first god was **Chaos**. While the word Chaos brings certain images of mayhem and disorderliness to the English-speaking mind, the Greek god Chaos was just a big, empty, black, Nothing. Chaos was Nothingness, the Void, or empty space. After Chaos came the goddess Earth, who was known to the Greeks as **Ge** (or **Gaia**), and to the Romans as **Terra**. Earth appeared out of nothing according to Greek mythology: "Chaos was first of all, but next appeared broad-bosomed Earth" (Hesiod, *Theogony*). To the ancients, of course, earth was not perceived as a planet, as it was not perceived to "wander" or move at all.

The Virgin Birth of Heaven

Ge (Earth) was a virgin when she gave birth to her firstborn son, **Ouranos**, which means "Sky" in Greek. "Ouranos" is the Greek word which, in English translations of the Christian New Testament, is translated as "heaven." Although the Roman name for the god Sky was **Caelus**, the Latin spelling of the Greek name Ouranos was "**Uranus**." From this, we get the name of a modern planet. I call Uranus a "modern" planet because, being unseen by the naked eye, this planet was unknown to the ancients. The planet Uranus is so named because it is adjacent to Saturn. Saturn was the son of Uranus, as I

will explain next. In astrology, Uranus is associated in modern times (though not originally) with the zodiac sign **Aquarius**. Since Uranus is not one of the seven moving heavenly bodies that are visible to the naked eye, it is not associated with any of the seven days of the week.

Brief Aside

At this point, it should be noted that although, in this article, I'll treat the Greek gods and their Roman counterparts as identical, these gods had differing mythologies in the Greek and Latin traditions, respectively. These differing mythologies were eventually blended in many ways, as the Roman empire attempted to blend Hellenistic (Greek) culture with their own rule, but in other ways they remained distinct.

Also, I will use the word "Latin" and the word "Roman" interchangeably, as Latin was the language of the ancient Romans.

The Golden Age of Mankind

Although Ge gave birth to Ouranos via virgin birth, she gave birth to **Kronos** (Latin: **Saturn**) the traditional way: by copulating with her son Ouranos. Kronos was the last of the original Titans (children of Ge and her son, Ouranos), and should not be confused with **Chronos** (Time). When Ouranos angered Ge by stuffing some of her children back inside her, her son Kronos--Saturn--helped her by castrating his father, Ouranos, with a sickle. By this act, Kronos effectively became the supreme god for a long season. During his rule, mankind was a "golden race," which, like gods, "lived with happy hearts . . . untouched by work or sorrow. Vile old age never appeared . . . At peace, they lived with every want supplied" (Hesiod, *Works and Days*). Eventually, Kronos/Saturn was associated with harvest, agriculture, and a Golden Age for mankind. Considering Saturn's association with a Golden Age, I think it is fitting that Saturn was the original ruling planet of the sign **Aquarius**, since the so-called "Age of Aquarius" is, in the collective psyche, now associated with a sort of New Age. The association with agriculture leads to an ironic depiction of Saturn/Kronos as carrying a sickle (his tool for castrating his father) for harvesting.

Saturday is ruled by Saturn, for which the day got its name. It is fitting then, that Saturday was the traditional Jewish day of rest, since it was during the rule of Saturn that mankind was said to have lived in perpetual rest.

A Story of Beauty

While our modern sentiments may find it disturbing that Saturn was born of an incestuous relationship between Ge and her son, Ouranos, we may find the origin of our next god even more disturbing. After Saturn/Kronos castrated his father, his father's genitals fell into the sea, where "white foam surrounded the immortal flesh" (Hesiod, *Theogony*). This white foam grew into a beautiful girl: **Aphrodite**, the goddess of love

and beauty. In fact, Hesiod links the very name “Aphrodite” to this disturbing origin, saying that the name came from the word “aphros”, the Greek word for “foam/froth”. This is probably a false etymology for the name, but it certainly is memorable.

The Roman name for Aphrodite is **Venus**. The planet Venus is named after the goddess of beauty because, besides the moon, it is the brightest thing in the night sky, and is indeed beautiful. In astrology, the planet Venus rules **Libra** and **Taurus**. Venus also rules **Friday**, which is why, in Spanish, Friday is “**Viernes**.”

All's Fair in Love and War

Aphrodite’s lover, **Ares** (a son of Zeus), was the Greek god of war, masculinity, and courage. His Roman name was **Mars**. Symbolically, this partnered the ideals of love/beauty with war/destruction. The Romans saw war as the mechanism for preserving peace and order, the “Pax Romana,” Thus, Mars was one of the most important gods for the Romans. The Greeks didn’t give Ares/Mars the same glorification, and sometimes showed a bit of disdain towards him. I would say that the connection between love and war also expresses a truth present in other spiritual traditions: destruction is a form of creation. Destruction clears the old out of the way and paves the way for something new and beautiful. Thus, the Hindu god **Shiva**, while embodying the principle of destruction, is not thereby a malevolent god, but a god whose nature intimates the possibility of new beginnings.

A more modern connection between love and war can be found in Sigmund Freud’s concept of the id, which embodies basic drives, such as sex and aggression. Perhaps love and war were linked in the myths of the ancients because this partnership mirrors a partnership of drives within our "reptilian" consciousness.

An even more modern connection is found in the title of the book, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, Mars/Ares representing aggression and valor (renown for one’s accomplishments), and Venus/Aphrodite representing beauty and love (fulfillment in interpersonal relationship).

The planet Mars is named after the god of war because it is reddish in color, reminiscent of bloodshed. Not surprisingly, Mars (that is, **Ares**) rules the astrological sign **Aries**. He co-rules **Scorpio**. He also rules **Tuesday** (literally: Tiw’s Day, **Tiw** being a Germanic god of war) and the month of **March**. The term “martial,” as in “martial arts,” is derived from his name.

The Father of Gods and of Men

Let’s return to our story of Kronos (Saturn), who castrated his father, Ouranos/Uranus (Sky). Because of this violent act, his parents prophesied that Kronos would some day be overthrown by a son of his own. To prevent this from happening, Kronos began

eating his kids once they were born. He fathered several children with his wife, **Rhea** (Roman name: **Ops**), including **Hades**, **Poseidon**, and **Hera**. He ate them all immediately. But Rhea, who didn't much like having her children eaten by her husband, after giving birth to **Zeus**, devised a trick to prevent Kronos from eating Zeus. She wrapped a big rock in baby clothes, and apparently, Kronos couldn't tell the difference. He ate the rock. Rhea whisked Zeus away to safety, hiding him until he was grown. When he was grown, Zeus served his father a potion which caused him to vomit up the children he had swallowed (Zeus' siblings). Then Zeus and his siblings waged a cataclysmic war against Kronos and his siblings (the Titans), eventually defeating them and imprisoning them deep in the gloomy underworld, called **Tartarus**. With the Titans out of the way, Zeus was free to rule as king over all, both gods and men. Settling on Mt. Olympus with his siblings and children (the so-called "Olympian gods"), Zeus became all-powerful and all-knowing; no one could prevent his will.

The Roman name for Zeus is **Jupiter**. The planet Jupiter is named after the king of the gods because it is the largest planet. Jupiter also rules over **Thursday**. English, being a Germanic language, renamed Jupiter's day "**Thor's Day**," after a Germanic (Norse) god who bore many similarities to Jupiter. In Romance languages, which were derived directly from Latin, the name of Jupiter is retained. In Spanish, for example, Thursday is "**Jueves**", after an alternate form of the name Jupiter: **Jovis**.

Zeus/Jupiter was known by many different epithets. He was called Father of Gods and Men; even the gods who weren't his literal children called him father. He was called the Thunderer, as he was the one who held the thunder and the lightning-bolt. He was called The All-Wise, or Counselor, as he knew all, and was the source of wisdom and counsel for gods and men alike. These are just a few of his names.

Jupiter used to rule over the astrological sign, **Pisces**, but now rules the sign **Sagittarius**. Since I myself am a Sagittarius, the planet ruling my sign is associated with the All-Powerful, All-Wise King and Father of Gods and Men. How cool does that make me?

The Prince of Liars

Hermes, a son of Zeus, was the messenger of the gods (so was **Iris**, the Rainbow). Since he traveled a lot, he was associated with traveling and crossing over borders, both mundane and divine. Hermes used this ability to cross borders not only to deliver messages from the gods in the divine realm to humans in the mortal sphere, but to lead newly departed souls from earth to the Underworld. His Roman name was **Mercury**.

Hermes/Mercury was extremely fast, with winged shoes and a winged hat to get him from place to place. Thus, he was associated with running and athleticism. His position as a herald ties him with language: he is a god of writing, oration, literature, and poetry. He is also connected with diplomacy, negotiation, and interpretation.

Perhaps more interestingly, he was also the patron god of liars, thieves, tricksters, hustlers, and merchants. He was considered to be very cunning and shifty. From his association with merchants, he came to be associated with commerce and trade in general.

The planet Mercury was named after the swift messenger of the gods because of the speed of its orbit around the sun. It is the fastest of all the planets. Mercury rules over the astrological signs **Gemini** and **Virgo**. Mercury also rules **Wednesday**. Since English is a Germanic language, in English "Mercury's day" was replaced with "Woden's Day" (which later became "Wednesday"), after a Germanic god, **Woden** or **Odin**, who was similar to Mercury. In Romance languages such as Spanish, which were derived directly from Latin (the language of the Romans) the name of Mercury is retained in the word for "Wednesday." In Spanish, this is "**Miércoles**."

Ruler of the Dead

Whereas Mercury was the son of Zeus (Jupiter), Zeus also had two brothers: **Hades** and **Poseidon**. After Zeus defeated his father Kronos (Saturn), with the help of his two brothers, the three brothers divided up the rule of the cosmos by drawing lots. The earth and Mt. Olympus were divided between the three of them, but they each also received their own personal domains. Zeus got the Sky, Poseidon the seas, and Hades the underworld (which, in antiquity, was believed to exist literally beneath the ground). At first, Hades was strictly the name of the god who ruled the underworld. The underworld thus came to be known as the "house of Hades." Eventually, "house of Hades" came to be shortened to just "Hades," so that "Hades" now referred to both the god of the underworld and the underworld itself.

Although the modern mind negatively associates Hades with death and hell, he had a much more positive personality in ancient times. He was not evil. He was, in fact, associated in certain ways with both wealth and fertility/new life.

The association with wealth probably developed from the fact that the earth's natural wealth (gems and precious metals) are located underground, which was clearly the realm belonging to Hades. This association with wealth caused Hades to be called "Plouton," meaning "rich one." From "Plouton" comes the Roman (that is, Latin) name of "**Pluto**," a Roman god who eventually came to be associated with the Greek god Hades. Hades was also identified with the Roman god **Dis Pater**, also a god of riches, fertile ground, and the underworld. Dis Pater means "rich father" in Latin, "Dis" being an abbreviation of the Roman word for "wealthy": "dives." In the Christian parable of Lazarus and the rich man, it is interesting to note that the "name" sometimes given to the rich man, Dives, is simply the Latin word for "rich man." It is also interesting to note that this is the only parable in which the word "Hades" appears (and even features prominently).

Hades/Pluto is also associated strongly with the earth's fertility, which was a major concern to the ancients, whose society/economy was much more caught up in agriculture than our industrialized society. Hades' sister was **Demeter**, a fertility goddess of grain and the harvest. Hades' lover and co-ruler over the underworld was **Persephone**, a fertility goddess over vegetation. Her Roman name was **Proserpina**. Hades kidnapped Persephone from her mother, Demeter. Demeter protested by cursing the land and causing a famine. Zeus finally worked a compromise between Hades and Demeter: Persephone would stay with her mother for two-thirds of the year, and with her husband for one-third of the year. It is during the third of the year that Persephone (Proserpina) dwells underground with Hades (Pluto) that the effects of winter bring fertility and growth to a halt on the earth.

So to the ancient Greeks, death and birth were constantly cycling, even as the cycling of the seasons brought new birth (growth of plants) and death (death of plants). This belief is evident in Greek philosophy as well as mythology. Plato, for example, describes popular beliefs--although it is uncertain whether he himself adhered to these beliefs--in the transmigration of souls from one birth to the next, with death as an intermediate state. And the Greeks were far from being the only culture which thought this way about life and death.

The planet Pluto is named after the god of the underworld because, being the farthest planet from the sun, Pluto is dark and very cold. Pluto is associated with the zodiac sign **Scorpio**.

God of the Sea

The other brother of Zeus and Hades was **Poseidon**, god of the sea. His Latin (Roman) name was **Neptune**. Poseidon was also called Earth-Shaker, because he was the god of earthquakes. He carried a three-pronged fishing spear called a trident, and was also associated with horses. He traveled in a chariot drawn by a hippocampus, which was a sea-horse (From the Greek "hippos," meaning "horse," and "kampos," meaning "monster"). Incidentally, there is a structure in the human brain called the hippocampus, which is associated with the formation of new memories. It gets its name from its sea-horse shape.

The planet Neptune is named after the god of the seas because of its deep blue color. However, this name was given in modern times, not during the classical age, because Neptune (along with Pluto and Uranus) is not visible to the naked eye, and was thus unknown to the ancients. The zodiac sign associated with Neptune is **Pisces**, which makes perfect sense, since Pisces is the sign of the fish.