

HERMES – A FIGURE IN TRANSITION

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In the middle of the last century, considering the crescent power of the mass media, many specialists deduced that the medium itself had converted itself into a message¹ and there was no longer any reason for us to think of it as a simple *bearer* (messenger) of information. From this perspective, the statement that the Greek deity Hermes (the roman Mercury) is just messenger/herald of Zeus neglects the complicated and significant role which this god plays in the tangled web of relationships between the inhabitants of the mountain Olympus, on a one hand, and between the gods and the mortals, on the other. All of this reflects on Ancient Greek and - latter on – on other European culture systems. At best, such a simple perspective puts the stress of our attention – as observers (or at least partly successors) of the classical Greek-roman culture tradition - on only one of the numerous faces of Hermes and attaches a particular label on him² which turns into cliché and threatens to empty off the content of the multiplied (many-sided) image of this mythological character.

A large number of work of art and sources of literature we have today at our disposal certainly form one very wide but fragmentary and full with contradictions image of Hermes, which, assessing the various analyses available on the topic, has overwhelmed a lot its researchers. With regard to this the present paper aims in a few lines to make a draft of more consistent and not so superficial image of the Greek god. For that purpose I will use a several key works, based on different instruments, which try to penetrate much deeper through but and beyond separated parts we have. Thus, the question which we have to have in mind and which

¹ The original phrase is „The medium is the message” by Marshall McLuhan and Umberto Eco. The first time when this phrase and the “message” of Hermes meet each other is in the books of the French philosopher Michel Serres (Harari, Bell 1982, xxxiv and next).

² The current rapid moving culture circulation causes pressure to people to avoid the depth and to look for the shortest path for categorization of the culture realia. Because of that things have definitions easy for comprehension, as for example Achilles is indicated purely and simply as a “superhero”, Aphrodite – as a “goddess of beauty”, and so forth.

looks for an answer here is not “who” is Hermes but rather “what” is he and why this, which is he, is so important for the culture (both Greek and European) as a whole?

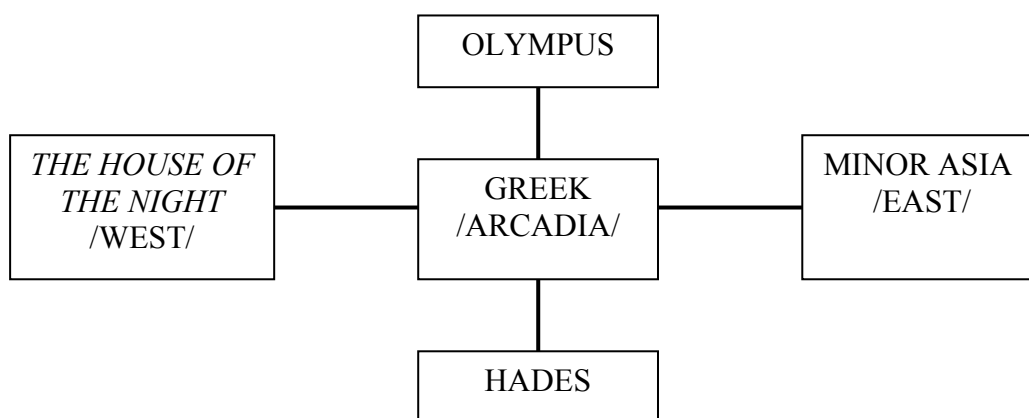
For a start we could point that Hermes is a typical representative of the polytheistic believes in which complicated and multilayered religious images are allowed. This is due to the fact that the limit between human interactions and the everyday events, on the one hand, and the divine universe, on the other, is not that obvious as we are used to in Christian paradigm. Thus, we have to entrust to the experts’ opinion which says that the examination of any god and the selection of his/her basic characteristic features need to be accomplish without intervention of the researcher’s proper culture-religious prejudice (Hynes, Doty 1993, 49-50). In this way we can easily see that Hermes appears as an obligatory element in the Pantheon, filling the vacuum which would exist if there would not was *channel of communication* (i.e. connection), and clearly definite *field*, on which particular mythic actions to enact. Even if there was not such an image, it would, however, still be invented in order to cover the strategically important position between particular characters in mythology and to strengthen the particular stages of mythological narratives. Although he has been indicated as a god with minorasian origin (Tokarev 1997, 292), Hermes is rather successor of the Egyptian deputy of the supreme god Ra – *Thoth*. The latter is not only a leader and a carrier of wisdom but the *instrument* by which Ra sent his messages to the people (Chevalier 1996, 536; Campbell 2004, 67; Hynes, Doty 1993, 49).

- The most important role of Hermes form semiotic point of view is most of all in relation with the outline of the mythological space, which makes him automatically very influent in ancient Greek concept about the system of the world. In fact, this is the figure which does not have his private, well defined area of motion and because of that the transitions which he undertakes do not bring up any further questions. The winged god is the only figure which moves without problems from the one end of the culture field which the Ancient Greeks were familiar with and the other, visits towns, different islands and mountains, cuts across various seas far and wide, etc (Fig.1). This is a movement along the **horizontal line** of the map. A movement of this kind is naturally expressed in the material culture of the Greeks through so called “herms” (ἑρμῆς), dedicated to Hermes - which were marked the distances along the roads, which were situated on the crossroads as well, and even were placed in frond of the main entrances of the houses. In a sense, the fact that the aviation did not exist in that époque reflected on the image of the god as a flying creature, at that known as “fast as thought” (Kun

1994), but the mortals had not any other way for paying tribute to him than constructing his symbols on the surface of the Earth.

Along the **vertical line** of the map we could observe the Hermes movement *from above* and *upwards*, from the top of the Olympian hierarchy – the home of his father Zeus – and *downwards/from below* to the kingdom of the dead men, by which he established the byname „Ψυχοπομπός” (a Guide of the souls). C. Waldstein paid attention to this, examining the ancient silver ritual container (patera) with image of Hermes on it which was found in Southern France in 1830. He underlined that the look which young god fixes upwards „is to indicate his double nature, which though it is chthonic in part is essentially concerned with the world above and the actions of men and of the Olympian gods” (1882, 101). Hermes is a ruler of the air movement, honored by the mortals as a ruler of the land movement and in the same time is a reputable member of the divine family whose work is, literally speaking, “to circulate” from the highest point to the lowest one (and vice versa) through the religious space of the Greeks. Moreover, Hermes is the one who fixes and protects the *frontiers* of all various spaces in which we live. He is “in constant motion” - leads both alive and dead people through the particular arias, unites and divides spaces, creates *tipping points* between them, including the points between the realms of myth and science (Harari, Bell 1982, xxxii; Detienne, Vernant 1991, 41). This comes to demonstrate that Hermes as a “space philosopher” (Harari, Bell 1982, *ibid.*) fixes frontiers which in most cases are temporary, easy for breaking through, and created by our own consciousness but are not an objective factor of reality. Some authors find parity between the significance of the multi-sided god connected with the changeability of the destiny and the daughter of Ocean – Túcĥē (Túcĥĥ) who brings prosperity, but - just like Hermes – “she symbolizes the change and mobility” (Detienne, Vernant 1991, 223; see also Batakliiev 1992, 159).

Fig. 1



From this point we could agree to conclusion of Chevalier that Hermes “symbolizes the means of exchange between Heaven and Earth... which could be distorted into trade... Hermes patronizes journey, transition between Hell, Earth and Heaven.” (1996, 536). Mentioning trade, journeys and information transmission we could make a logical inference that this god serves to the people for indicating by mythological instruments that everything before which we could put prefix *trans*- (like transfer, transformation, transgression, transcendence, and even transsexuality³) is indicated as a phenomenon of the reality and, thus, it gets into jurisdiction of such kind of mobile figure like Hermes. Also, there is no contradiction in the circumstances that he is indicated simultaneously as a patron of tradesmen as well as a patron of thieves, and on top of it all, as well as a patron of shepherds and craftsmen (Campbell 2004, 66). In all these cases we are speaking about transfer of matter, ideas and messages from one state to another or from one subject to another, i.e. things constantly change their position in space (in the broad sense). The transitions from one state to another in mental and physical development are in the similar situation, because we can see images of Hermes in Ancient Hellas schools and gymnasia. At one subsequent stage he had been connected with the alchemy and the knowledge on harmony of the heavenly bodies movement, but also with the prophecies as a result of interpretation of the signs sent by gods (Van Bladel 2009).

As we could see from the mythological narrative, only for a day – the same day in which he came into the world – the winged god managed to escape from his home, to steal the sacred cow herd of his mighty half-brother Apollo, to cover up his tracks after this act, to deny successfully the accusations of stealing the herd, to create the lyre and by it to trade again the herd of his brother to whom had just brought the animals as a results of Zeus’ threats (Kun 1994, 48 and next.; Morford, Lenardon 2003, 258-267). The dynamics of the events described is an illustration how the deity underwent countless metamorphoses in a short period and for that reason we ought to perceive it as exceptionally significant (and descriptive) for the nature of Hermes. Here we do not see any actions reminding for transfer of messages or for

³ As to the subject of sexuality, in fact, the mythology assigns rather modest activity of Hermes. The researchers have counted 35 sexual relationships of the god with women and 4 with men; his offspring consists of 44 children (Hynes, Doty 1993, 51), but the phallic symbol, however, is directly related with his figure and respectively with the worship which the mortals pay him. Nevertheless, one possible explanation is that the sexual excesses were left to his sons – Eros and Hermaphrodite (Campbell 2004, 141; Graves 1985, Chapter 15), while in a closer look we could see that Hermes himself has and demonstrates fairly female characteristics. The arguments are that he is, however, a deity with terrestrial origin and has performances as an obstetrician (for example, during the childbirth of Asclepius) (Hynes, Doty 1993, 56). Daniel Ogden even considers that all efforts which Hermes put into the equipment of Perseus and the following help which he gave to the young hero against Medusa was result of love feelings (2008, 82). The transience and sex duplicity are very well displayed in the myth of the creation of Hermaphrodite who brings together both male and female characteristics and crosses beyond the frontier of our notion for sex (Morford, Lenardon 2003, 270; Batakliiev 1992, 17; Campbell 2004, 141).

translation of Zeus' will to particular subject. But we witness the forming of Hermes as a figure in transition. His mythological mission of "sharing" the divine will is secondary. Zeus charged him with a task of the messenger because he had been impressed by Hermes' skills and hidden wisdom which [his son] utilized with competence mainly for misleading the others.

- Further on, Zeus, extremely frightened by his own life filled with constant fights for power, edited a decree and sent Hermes to the Earth to deliver to the people "respect and justice", i.e. laws, which the social life should be based on and by which the individual should be subservient to the general good (Long 1999, 319). The main idea is the rules of the nature to be avoided (according to which the strongest animal survives), and to make human kind by force to leave this system and to ensure the welfare of the community because it is the only way it could survive (ibid.). By that reason Hermes has been connected not only with the formation of legislation, i.e. of the frames of the social life, but with the imposing of the Culture over the Nature. Namely this character as a trickster and thief is called to provoke the status quo and the social habits (Hynes, Doty 1993, 47 и сл.). And, while his brother Apollo is presentation of the exact and logical mind, Hermes symbolizes the skills of the intellect to invent irregular approaches, to break the rules and the straightforwardness, to delude and to use tricks.

- The work of Hynes and Doty on the "tricksters"⁴ in the mythology of different cultures places the winged deity at the top of the list. Unlike many other "brothers-in-arms" from the East and North America, however, Hermes is a creative figure and is a significant member of the Pantheon but he is not non-socially active and marginal character. His playing with the frontiers of the world, as mentioned above, continues as well in many other forms of marking and shaping of the material world. He is indicated as "god of weights and measures, of the science of measure, proportion, relation, and scale" (Harari, Bell 1982, xxxiii). All these potentialities are extended beyond the material world – in language and written texts. According to William Doty, "Hermes carries messages from one person or deity to another; he does not always originate on them, and he may select and adapt what he alone chooses to present, and when. As the divine messenger, he participates in the formidable creative power of Zeus as its facilitator, as the one who provides for bringing into language what was only potential" (Hynes, Doty 1993, 62). Chevalier adds that Hermes asks a riddles and in the same time practices the art of solving them which delivers to the mortals too (1996, 536-537). From this position to introduction of conception of hermeneutics there is only one step. After his

⁴ The word "trickster" is very accurate but unfortunately in Bulgarian it has only negative connotations and the exact translation is mostly like "impostor" or "cheater".

participation in *language* invention, the deity also puts a *meaning* in it which people shares in their communication. The link between Hermes and texts Doty describes as “an open-ended finding of new meanings that may change the interpretative force from one context to another; the values of a way-god must necessarily be flexible and adaptive” (Hynes, Doty 1993, 63).

- Another factor which makes Hermes so interesting and close to the mortals is his activity as “leader” but not in a sense of “guide in the space”, rather in a sense of *tutor helping for particular act to be done in right way*. This performance displays him in the role of “character-assistant” in the narrative schema which we are familiar with from the works of Vladimir Propp on fairy-tales (in Bankov 2001, 46-47). Some of the most emblematic examples of Hermes’ mythological activities may serve as an illustration. First of them is connected with the brave campaign of Perseus towards the far away island where he killed fearful Medusa; the second one is the appearance of the god-messenger before king Priam during the dramatic events of the war for Troy, and the third one – the help which Hermes gave twice to Odysseus who was off to his goal – the island of Ithaca.

The narrative about the heroic deed of Perseus just would not be the same without the well-timed interference of Hermes. The hero was stimulated by the king Polydectes - with definitely unclean motives – to start his journey. It is something which the classical school of structuralism called “loading” of the young warrior with *want*-modality, but, of course, this is not enough. In this very moment on the stage came Hermes⁵, who lent him his own lethal for monsters curve-shaped sword, also lent him his famous sandals and the magic helmet for invisibility of Hades (Kun 1994, 111-115). In this way Hermes loaded Perseus with the obligatory *to be able to*-modality and transferred (again key function of this deity!) the story to the next level. By this the participation of Hermes was not over. Since the mythology addressed itself to him again as a figure with “informational function” he performed as a *know*-modality loading character. Without knowledge the hero could not be able to achieve his goal. (Bankov 2001, 61 and 64-65). In this case, first Hermes gave to Perseus right instructions where the three Gorgons lived, then trained him how to play a trick on the one-eyed guardians of the road in order to show him the right direction and in the end – in the most important moment – indicated to him who exactly among the creatures was Medusa (Kun 1994; Ogden 2008, 43).

In the other two example the schema remains almost the same: Hermes, transformed like young-looking thief (according to Campbell he looks like dead son of Priam) went to

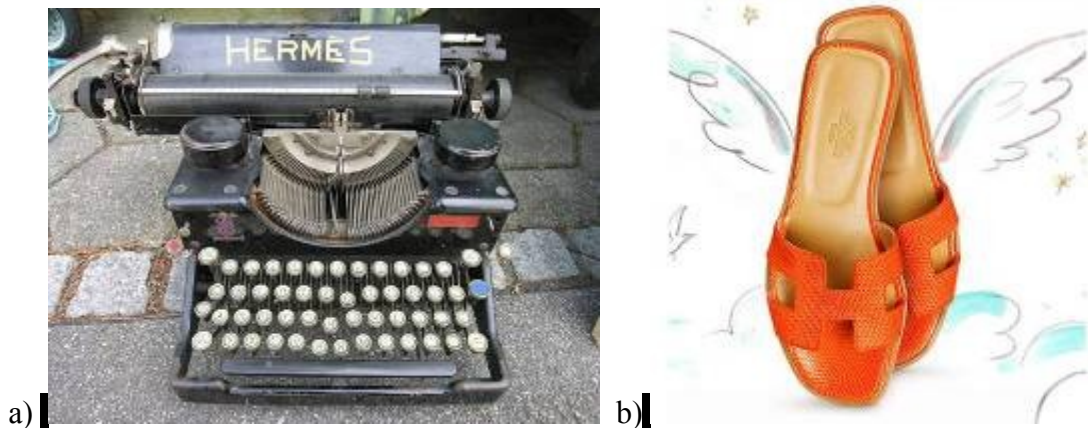
⁵ This active partnership of Hermes (who in principle is only a “messenger”) in the events around Perseus gives reason to Daniel Ogden to point that actually the deity “assimilates” the image of young hero to himself (Ogden 2008, 43).

Priam offering him some help (or more precisely “assistance” in the form of *knowledge* – know-how and physical protection) in order to enter the Greeks’ bivouac and to take back the mutilated dead body of Hector (Hynes, Doty 1993, 57; Campbell 2004, 90). In purpose of giving a new impetus of the narrative of *Odyssey*, Hermes rescued the traveling warrior from the magic of the nymph Circe, acting as a *healer*. Then Zeus sent the winged god to sorceress Calypso in whose home Odysseus was forced to stay for seven long years. Here we see Hermes acting like a persuasive orator in order to clear up to the mistress of the island of Ogygia that it was time to permit to the hero to leave her home, by which the deity started once again the next stage of the adventure of his relative (Kun 1994, 429; Batakliiev 1992, 112). As it is appears from the three deeds in question, Hermes is a helper-executor of the divine will and stimulates the mythological narrative but he does this by his specific hand.

- In conclusion, it would be useful for the analysis to spare some time focusing on one relatively modern phenomenon called “culture capital”, particularly peculiar for the tourism and the production of Hollywood. In is case, for the purposes of advertising companies “scoop up” ready-to-use forms from history and tradition as well as from the (local) legends and myths in order to connect the stories with their products (goods/services) and in such a way to grab the attention of the potential consumers. This is clear demonstration of the principle, defined by Yuri Lotman, which says that “old texts”, which circulate in the culture, occurs to be taken out on the surface and then refreshed by means of new codes (1992, 24). In the case of Hermes we consider, on the basis on a small research (without being exhaustive) on the forms by which he is used in terms of advertising and trade in the modern culture, we could conclude that in the mass consciousness, in the most cases the deity remains the one who rapidly delivers messages and objects from one point to another. His most usual attribute - the wings (no matter whether they are on his hat or on the sandals) are the most exploited symbol which is preferred among the shipping and logistic companies. But there are some curious exceptions, for example the use of caduceus (the Hermes’s scepter) and serpents in logos as a reference to the medicinal skills of the god, and there is also one case from the recent past when a typewriter producer named one of its model “Hermes” obviously alluding to the connection with the writing invention (Fig. 2a). Notwithstanding, among the most eloquent examples for the use of the *mythologeme* “Hermes” in its full brilliance remains the name of the French fashion producer „Hermès”. The company was established in distant 1837 by Thierry Hermès and nowadays is one of the major players in the fashion business along with „Gucci” и „Louis Vuitton”. The brand offers perfumes, jewelries and various accessories but

the main products which bring the fame of the company are bags and sandals. As we could presume, its management completely deliberately emphasizes in the ads on the connection between the commodities in question and the deeds of Hermes as messenger wearing winged sandals, one of whose main attributes is a bag. From this point we could decide (Fig. 2b) that the company does not count only on the coincidence in the names of its founder and the one of the Greek deity. Moreover, in the creation of the so called “visual identity” (predominantly in the logo) „Hermés” puts the main element – a cab with one horse before it – above two issues of caduceus (placed on the left and on the right side, with wings and interlaced serpents in addition). In this way we have opportunity to observe the mythology “in action” – in new context but with fairly changed message suitable for the perceptions of more different (contemporary) audience.

Fig. 2⁶



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⁶ Sources: a) <http://wapedia.mobi/thumb/7ef4502/en/fixed/470/353/TypewriterHermes.jpg?format=jpg> and b) http://s3.thisnext.com/media/largest_dimension/27918F95.jpg.

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