Hecate (Greek deity)

Goddess in Greek mythology. Associated with Artemis, she bestowed wealth and blessings, and presided over witchcraft, graveyards, and crossroads.

The goddess Hecate, whose name means "she who works her will," occupies an ambiguous place in Greek mythology. In early accounts she is an all-powerful deity associated with brightness, yet later writers connected her with darkness and the underworld.

According to eighth-century-BCE Greek poet Hesiod's epic account of the origins of the gods, *Theogony*, Hecate was a goddess who had strong links to the Titans, the divine race that flourished before the Olympian gods. Her mother was Asteria, the daughter of Titans Coeus and Phoebe; her father was Perses, the son of Titans Crius and Eurybia. In Hesiod's version, Hecate had a special status among the Titans and controlled the three earthly realms: the land, the sea, and the sky. Other divine beings sacrificed and prayed to her because she had the power to bestow wealth and blessing.

A new world order, however, commenced when Zeus vanquished his father, the Titan Cronus, in a ten-year-long battle that put an end to the reign of the Titans and ushered in the rule of the Olympians. Unlike the Titans, whom Zeus imprisoned in Tartarus, a terrible place far below the earth, Hecate was allowed to keep her honors and privileges. In addition, Zeus made her the benefactor of rulers, farmers, horse riders, and sailors, with the power to grant victory in battle and in athletic contests. He also named her the nurse of all the babies who survived to see their second day of life. Hecate reciprocated by fighting on the side of the gods in their epic battle against the Giants, during which she slewed the Giant Clytius with torches—objects with which she was often associated.

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This first-century-BCE carved relief, in the collection of the Vatican Museum in Rome, depicts Hecate using torches in battle.

**Downgrading a deity**

In *Theogony*, Hecate's great powers and authority placed her above the Olympian goddesses who oversaw such areas of life as marriage, love, sex, and domestic affairs. However, in later centuries, Greek writers such as fifth-century-BCE dramatist Euripides and third-century-BCE poet Apollonius of Rhodes downgraded Hecate's imposing powers to put her on a par with other goddesses. They described Hecate as a goddess of sorcery and poisoning, whose presence preceded doom and destruction. One reason for this change may have been that, by the time of Greece's classical era (479–338 BCE), an all-powerful female deity did not suit the requirements of its patriarchal society. The Greek pantheon reflected this male-centered society—the gods ruled the universe and the goddesses played subsidiary roles.

Hecate's treatment in mythology resembles that of another old and powerful female god, Gaia, the primordial goddess of the earth, who mated with Uranus to give birth to the Titans. As happened with Hecate, Gaia's authority was subsumed by the Olympian gods, but she retained some prestige as a result of her earlier power. Both goddesses may represent the attempt to assimilate pre-Greek deities into the Greek pantheon. Gaia's origins can be traced back to the Pelasgians, Stone Age Greeks who strongly believed in a mother goddess. Some scholars think that Hecate may first have been worshiped by the Carians, an ancient people of western Asia.

**Changing reputation**

As well as downgrading Hecate's status from that described in *Theogony*, later writers further broke with Hesiod's account by associating the deity with darkness and destruction. One possible source for this change may be the "Homeric Hymn to Demeter," an anonymous poem—once thought to have been the work of the ninth- or eighth-century-BCE Greek poet Homer—written in or around the seventh century BCE. The poem tells the story of the abduction of Persephone by Hades, king of the underworld. Demeter, Persephone's mother and the goddess of corn, does not know where her daughter has gone and despairs of finding the culprit. She is counseled by Hecate, whose "shining headband" and torch symbolize the light of understanding. Hecate tells Demeter that she has heard the voice of the abductor but has not seen his identity. She suggests that they seek out the sun god Helios, whose lofty position makes him privy to many secrets. Helios reveals that Hades is the perpetrator. After mother and daughter have been reunited, Hecate lovingly tends Persephone. Because Persephone is forced to spend part of every year with Hades, Hecate becomes her attendant in the underworld.

Two aspects of the poem may have influenced Hecate's later, sinister reputation. The first is that Hecate lives in a cave, a part of the earth that links what is above the ground to what is underneath it. Caves are also associated with monsters—in Homer's epic the *Odyssey*, the giant one-eyed Cyclopes live in caves. The second aspect is Hecate's role as Persephone's servant in the underworld. This role foreshadowed the deity's connections with death and dark forces. In his epic the *Aeneid*, Roman writer Virgil (70–19 BCE) describes Hecate as "queen of the sky and the dark domain below the earth," which emphasizes her estrangement from the world of mortals, who could not journey to either of these realms. Many Roman writers also identified her as one aspect of the triple moon-goddess, called Luna in heaven, Diana on earth, and Hecate below the ground.

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Hecate's mythological transformation, from Hesiod's account to that of later writers, contains a series of reversals. Initially she was a goddess of light, but later her torches signified not their own light but the darkness that they dispelled. Hecate had also been a goddess of blessing, who was honored for making crops grow. According to later writers, however, her role was quite different: Hecate governed the harmful and destructive weeds that sprouted into the earth from the underworld.

**Hecate's ambiguous role**

In classical Greece and later, people believed that Hecate inhabited the space between the world of the dead and the world of the living. This position made her a frightening goddess, but also suggests an ambiguity—she may have been both bad and good. The idea that Hecate could cross normally unbridgeable boundaries shows up in the myths that developed her darker side. She was the goddess of highways and especially of crossroads, where, according to Virgil, she could be invoked at night by cries of alarm. Travel in the ancient world was notoriously dangerous, and bandits often ambushed people at crossroads at nighttime. For some people, Hecate may have personified the evil forces operating at night and, in order to appease her, they left food offerings called "Hecate's supper" at crossroads. Other people, however, may have looked to the goddess to keep away evil spirits—pillars known as Hecateae were erected at crossroads and doorways for this purpose.

**Magic, gods, and monsters**

Hecate appears in many myths as a deity with magical powers, and one from whom mortals could learn dark secrets. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, the Sibyl, or prophetess, of Cumae orders Aeneas to sacrifice to Hecate upon entering the underworld. Then she guides Aeneas safely through this realm, because she has learned all about it from Hecate. In his account of Jason and the Argonauts, Apollonius of Rhodes tells how Hecate taught the witch Medea to use magic herbs. Roman poet Ovid (43 BCE–17 CE) elaborated that Hecate's followers picked their poisonous herbs in the dark of the moon. Worshipers used honey as a libation for the goddess, one of many traditional offerings to the dead.

Hecate was connected with many divinities and monsters. According to several sources, she mated with the sea god Phorcys and gave birth to Scylla, a beautiful nymph who, when she grew up, rejected all her suitors. The witch Circe grew jealous of Scylla's charms and poisoned the pool in which she swam, causing six terrible dogs to sprout from her body. Greek historian and geographer Pausanias (143–176 CE) mentions Hecate in his account of the Trojan War. When a lack of wind prevents the Greek forces from sailing to Troy, the seer Calchas declares that Agamemnon, king of Mycenae and commander of the Greek army, must sacrifice his daughter Iphigeneia to appease the goddess Artemis. In Pausanias's retelling, Iphigeneia does not die at her father's hand but, by the will of Artemis, becomes Hecate. This curious mythological variant can be explained by the association of Iphigeneia with Artemis, and of Artemis with Hecate. Many scholars consider Iphigeneia to have been a form of Artemis, while Hecate represented the dark side of Artemis. In her role as the goddess of highways and meeting points, Hecate was sometimes known as Artemis of the Crossroads. Roman writers' identification of Hecate as one aspect of the moon, with Diana—the Roman name for Artemis—as another aspect, further strengthens the connection between the two deities.

**Representations of Hecate**

A number of surviving descriptions and representations of Hecate reveal her as having three complete bodies joined together. This form makes her slightly different from the mythical character Geryon,
whose herds of cattle the hero Heracles stole as his 10th labor and who had three torsos joined at the waist. One explanation for Hecate's three bodies is her association with crossroads —three bodies would allow the goddess to look in all directions at once. Virgil called Hecate the triple-shaped Diana and the three-faced virgin—the latter description indicates that he did not credit her as the mother of Scylla.

Pausanias, however, observed that in Hecate's temple on the Greek island of Aegina the statue of the goddess had only one head and body. He believed that it was the fifth-century-BCE sculptor Alcamenes who originated her triple-bodied form in a statue that the Athenians called Epipurgidia, meaning "on the tower." Apollonius of Rhodes wrote that Hecate wore on her head a wreath of serpents entwined with oak leaves, a description that links her to the three female monsters known as the Gorgons. Hecate appears in the frieze on the Great Altar of Zeus (c. 180 BCE), which archaeologists discovered on the site of the ancient Greek city of Pergamum. The frieze depicts the battle between the Olympian gods and the Giants, in which Hecate fought on the side of the gods.

**See also:** AENEAS; ARTEMIS; CIRCE; CYCLOPES; DEMETER; DIANA; GAIA; GIANTS; GORGONS; GREECE; HADES; HELIOS; HERACLES; IPHIGENEIA; JASON; MEDEA; PERSEPHONE; SIBYL; TITANS; ZEUS.

**Further reading**

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