

# Hermes and the Tortoise: A Prelude to Cult

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**T**HE *HOMERIC HYMN to Hermes*, one of the four longer poems of the corpus, tells the story of Hermes' conception, birth, and inauguration into the Olympic pantheon after his first two mischief-filled days of life. Almost immediately after his birth, the infant springs up from his cradle, intent on stealing the cattle of Apollo (22).<sup>1</sup> On the threshold of his mother's cave, however, he meets a tortoise, whom he greets politely and quickly dispatches. Then, using her shell, he invents the lyre, and composes a song to its music. The episode is described in some detail (30–61), as if the poet, like his young subject, had been diverted from his main purpose by this chance encounter with the animal. But the narration then returns to the god's original goal, as Hermes places the new toy in his cradle and sets off once again after Apollo's cattle. This time he steals the animals and sacrifices two of them to the twelve gods before returning home to await Apollo's discovery and anger. The remainder of the hymn deals with the inevitable confrontation between Apollo and his younger brother, and the final resolution of their conflict.

The myth of Hermes' trickery was a popular one, and several versions existed in antiquity. But the other accounts of which we hear either omit the tortoise scene altogether and focus entirely on the theft of the cattle, or place the cattle theft and sacrifice before the invention of the lyre. Thus the Hesiodic version describes the adult Hermes' theft of the cattle and his subsequent encounter with a man

<sup>1</sup> We learn later, however, that he has a greater purpose in mind. At 167–75 he tells his mother why he has stolen Apollo's cattle:

... οὐδὲ θεοῖσι  
νώϊ μετ' ἀθανάτοισιν ἀδώρητοι καὶ ἄλιστοι  
αὐτοῦ τῆδε μένοντες ἀνεξόμεθ', ὡς σὺ κελεύεις.  
βέλτερον ἤματα πάντα μετ' ἀθανάτοισι ὀαρίζειν  
πλούσιον ἀφνειὸν πολυλήϊον ἢ κατὰ δῶμα  
ἄντρῳ ἐν ἡερόεντι θαασσέμεν' ἀμφὶ δὲ τιμῆς  
κἀγὼ τῆς ὀσίης ἐπιβήσομαι ἧς περ' Ἀπόλλων.  
εἰ δέ κε μὴ δώησι πατὴρ ἔμός, ἧ τοι ἔγωγε  
πειρήσω, δύνάμαι, φηλητέων ὄρχαμος εἶναι.

named Battos, whom he turns to stone for informing on him (fr.256 M.-W.). Alcaeus' account apparently told of the god's theft, not only of Apollo's cattle, but also of his bow and arrows (fr.α.2 L.-P.). Both Sophocles and Apollodorus include the episode of the lyre in their versions,<sup>2</sup> but treat the invention as a secondary feat of the god, describing it only after they have dealt with the cattle theft, and then almost as an afterthought. Both these authors tie the two episodes together logically, with the slaughtered cattle providing a hide and strings for the lyre, whose creation remains a subordinate point.

In contrast, the unique treatment of this episode and its placement in the narrative of the hymn suggest that, for this poet, the invention of the lyre, not the cattle episode, is of primary interest. Hermes' theft and sacrifice of the cattle *are* important in establishing the character of the new god, and, more specifically, in precipitating his conflict with Apollo. But it is the lyre, and the music and song this instrument makes possible, that have the power to bring about a reconciliation of the two rivals.<sup>3</sup> And it is the power of music (and song) which ultimately wins for Hermes the place among the gods that is his goal from the start. This is the theme of the hymn. So the poet, I would argue, has quite deliberately orchestrated his treatment of the lyre's creation to emphasize the importance of the music which results.

The priority of this scene in the narrative serves two purposes. First, by allowing the encounter with the tortoise initially to intrude on a quite different scheme in Hermes' mind, the poet keeps our attention on the (necessary) opposition between Hermes and Apollo, while at the same time showing the younger god for what he is: a child, easily distracted from one venture to another.<sup>4</sup> This is important, for the subject of the hymn is precisely a celebration of Hermes' 'coming of age' and initiation as a god. At the same time, the hymnist places the scene first in order to give it the prominence it deserves as

<sup>2</sup> Soph. *Ichneutae* fr.314.312ff Radt; Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.10.2.

<sup>3</sup> Apollo's speech upon hearing the lyre for the first time makes clear that he is taken both with the sound of the instrument and with the song itself. So e.g. 441-47:

ἦέ τις ἀθανάτων ἠέ θνητῶν ἀνθρώπων  
 δῶρον ἀγαθὸν ἔδωκε καὶ ἔφρασε θέσπιν ἀοιδῆν;  
 θαυμασίην γὰρ τήνδε νεήφατον ὄσσαν ἀκούω,  
 ἦν οὐ πῶ ποτέ φημι δαήμεναι οὔτε τιν' ἀνδρῶν,  
 οὔτε τιν' ἀθανάτων οἱ Ὀλύμπια δώματ' ἔχουσι,  
 νόσφι σέθεν φηλῆτα Διὸς καὶ Μαιάδος νιέ.  
 τίς τέχνη, τίς μοῦσα ἀμηχανέων μελεδῶνων . . .

<sup>4</sup> Note however that in the swift mind of the infant god, this discovery of the tortoise (and her subsequent metamorphosis) becomes almost instantly another way of out-doing Apollo.

the origin of the central theme, the power of music. To underscore the essential rôle this invention plays, moreover, the poet links the earlier scene thematically with the cattle sacrifice (which sets up a need for the newly created lyre) and presents the killing of the tortoise and its aftermath as a sacred act in its own right. A closer examination of the episode reveals its connection with song and sacrifice.

The standard elements of a hymn are the identification of the subject, the invocation, the greeting (*χαῖρε*), the naming of the deity (or subject of the song)—usually with some mention of parentage or birth-place, epithets that define the god's domain or powers, and a celebration of those powers, along with a promise by the singer to glorify his subject.<sup>5</sup> All these elements are present in Hermes' encounter with the tortoise, whom he pictures immediately in her transformed state as a lyre.

The subject is given first in line 25, where the poet notes the connection of the tortoise with music (*Ἑρμῆς τοι πρώτιστα χέλυν τεκτήνατ' αἰοιδόν*). An invocation follows as Hermes begins his address by identifying the animal at once as a *σύμβολον* (30). The standard commentaries take this to mean an 'omen' (presumably of Hermes' imminent success),<sup>6</sup> which of course it is. But the word here has broader implications. A *σύμβολον* is also a token or symbol by which a god can be recognized, one which gives power over the deity and is therefore used when calling on him.<sup>7</sup> Hermes acknowledges the important association of god and tortoise with his use of this term, which presages the rôle of the animal-turned-lyre in the exchange that will ratify his reconciliation with Apollo.<sup>8</sup> The address of

<sup>5</sup> For discussion of this form see e.g. E. Norden, *Agnostos Theos* (Leipzig 1913), esp. 143ff; R. Keyssner, *Gottesvorstellung und Lebensauffassung in griechischen Hymnos* (Stuttgart 1932). More recent studies pertinent here include R. Janko, "The Structure of the Homeric Hymns: A Study in Genre," *Hermes* 109 (1981) 9–24, and W. Race, "Aspects of Rhetoric and Form in Greek Hymns," *GRBS* 23 (1982) 5–14. The form is observable in most of the Homeric hymns.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. L. Radermacher, *Der homerische Hermeshymnus* (*SitzWien* 213.1 [1931]); T. W. Allen, R. Halliday, E. E. Sikes, *The Homeric Hymns*<sup>2</sup> (Oxford 1936); F. Cassola, *Inni omerici* (Milan 1975).

<sup>7</sup> This use can also be observed, for example, in the magical papyri: e.g. *Pap.Graec. Mag.* I 4.2304, 2311; II 7.786 (*εἰρηκά σου τὰ σημεῖα καὶ τὰ σύμβολα τοῦ ὀνόματος, ἵνα μοι ἐπακούσης, ὅτι σοι ἐπέυχομαι*); see III index s.v. *σύμβολον*.

<sup>8</sup> The use of *σύμβολον* as part of an exchange, especially in rites of hospitality, is attested elsewhere. See P. Gauthier, *Symbola: les étrangers et la justice dans les cités grecques* (Nancy 1972) 62ff; W. Müri, *Σύμβολον: Wort- und Sachgeschichtliche Studie* (Bern 1931). The same word recurs in line 527, where it may mean 'pact, agreement' (so Cassola), and in any case refers to the reconciliation being effected between these two gods. There, as in the earlier use, the connection between Hermes and the lyre (and hymnic form) that he invents remains a strong undercurrent in the scene.

the tortoise in her ‘immortal’ transformation as the lyre that Hermes will exchange for his acceptance as a god, and as a symbol of the hymn with which he soothes Apollo’s anger, acts as an invocation by establishing her divine nature and power.

The invocation is followed closely (31) by the common hymnic greeting, *χαῖρε*, and the naming of the animal. Here Hermes focuses on the tortoise-shell (the only part of the animal in which he has any interest), asking where it came from (32–33),<sup>9</sup> and using a string of epithets that foreshadow its transformation into the lyre (31–32): he calls the tortoise “lovely in shape” (*φνήν ἐρόεσσα*), “played/beaten at the dance” (*χοροιτύπε*), and “comrade of the feast” (*δαιτὸς ἐταίρη*).<sup>10</sup> Hermes draws his speech to a close with a promise to honor the tortoise (*οὐδ’ ἀποτιμήσω*, 35); this final element of the hymnic form leads directly into Hermes’ next act, the killing of the tortoise.

All the standard elements of hymnic language are thus present (and in the appropriate order) in this scene. The associations with sacrifice are less precise, but their presence too can be demonstrated. A sacrifice regularly includes the playing out of a kind of ‘game’ in which the victim becomes a willing participant in the rite. This was the case, for instance, at the Bouphonia, where the victim, by the sprinkling of barley on the ground, was induced to bow its head and ‘agree’ to the sacrifice. Such ritual has been described by Karl Meuli as a ‘comedy of innocence’, enacted to defuse the guilt of the killer through the supposed acquiescence of the animal to its death.<sup>11</sup> Included also in the ritual is the actual killing, the cutting up of the animal, sometimes the stretching out of its skin, and a song of celebration to inaugurate the event at which the rite occurs, often in the context of a feast.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> This question, focusing on the ‘birth-place’ of the shell, takes the place of the usual mention of parentage or cult location, neither of which would be appropriate here.

<sup>10</sup> This last epithet is the very one Apollo will use of Hermes himself, at 436, when the connection between god and lyre, suggested by his initial identification of her as his *σύμβολον* (and, perhaps, by his substitution of the lyre in his own place in the cradle during his nocturnal adventures), is made complete. It is here that Hermes wins Apollo’s favor (436–38):

*Βουφόνε μηχανιώτα πονεύμενε δαιτὸς ἐταίρε  
πεντήκοντα βοῶν ἀντάξια ταῦτα μέμηλας.  
ἡσυχίως καὶ ἔπειτα διακρινέεσθαι οἴω.*

<sup>11</sup> K. Meuli, “Griechische Opferbräuche,” in *Phyllobolia für Peter von der Mühl* (Basel 1946) 185–286 = *Gesammelte Schriften* II (Basel 1975) 907–1019. See also W. Burkert, *Homo Necans*, tr. P. Bing (Berkeley 1983) s.v. “Comedy of innocence,” for a discussion of this idea.

<sup>12</sup> See Burkert (*supra* n.11) 3–12 for a discussion of the full rite of sacrifice and its variations (e.g. the selling of the victims’ skins). Of particular importance as a model is

Once again, the hymn's lyre episode contains each of these elements. As Hermes pledges to honor the tortoise, at the end of his 'hymnic' address, he adds that she must aid him first (34–35). The only way she can do so (naturally) is by giving up her shell to become the instrument on which he will sing her praises. Implicit in this 'bargain', then, is the animal's assumed acceptance of her death, from which she will gain honor as a lyre sacred to the god. This is precisely the 'comedy of innocence' described by Meuli. The tortoise, of course, has no more agreed to her death than did any of the Bouphonia victims, but the inclusion of this 'bargain' between Hermes and the tortoise is important in marking the ensuing death as suggestive of the regular 'game' of sacrificial ritual.

The description of the killing itself is brief (41–42), but it uses language appropriate to sacrificial ritual, and remarkably similar to that which describes the cattle sacrifice in 118–19. Hermes is said to have "pierced out the life-force of the mountain tortoise" (αἰῶν' ἐξετόρησεν ὄρεσκῶιο χελώνης), just as, in the later scene, he "pierced through the life [marrow] of the cows" (δι' αἰῶνας τετορήσας). The repetition of αἰῶν and of τορέω to describe both killings is noteworthy, especially since we do not find this word combination in either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*.<sup>13</sup> Conspicuous too is the image of the god in each case turning his victim(s) over before dealing the final blow (ἀναπηλήσας, 41; ἐγκλίνων δ' ἐκύλινδε, 119).

In the earlier passage, the unparalleled use of ἀναπηλήσας (apparently a form of \*ἀναπηλέω from ἀναπάλλω), has baffled most commentators, who have tried, unconvincingly, to emend the text.<sup>14</sup> Even those who accept the form, and take it to mean 'swing/toss up', seem uncomfortable with the sense, which ought to refer to the motion of turning the animal onto its back, not tossing it in the air. Help may come, however, from archaeological evidence. The scene of a child swinging a tortoise (or a lizard), suspended by its tail on a short string is a motif found in vase painting by at least the second

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the sacrifice which Hermes in the hymn makes to the twelve gods (115–37), and which follows precisely this form (including the absence of the feasting).

<sup>13</sup> Scenes of sacrifice are common in both Homeric epics, and could have provided traditional language for these scenes (as they do for others in the hymn) had the hymnist wished to gloss over the two episodes. See *e.g.* *Il.* 1.315–18, 458–67; 7.520–23; *Od.* 3.432–63.

<sup>14</sup> For example, ἀναπιλήσας of 'pounding' the tortoise to death (Hermann; now accepted by Cassola); ἀναπειρήσας of impaling the creature (Stephanus). See Allen/Halliday/Sikes (*supra* n.6) *ad* 41 for a discussion of the passage (in which they accept ἀναπηλήσας), and a review of the conjectures.

half of the fifth century B.C.<sup>15</sup> If the practice was in fact commonplace, the poet may well have used this verb to suggest, at one stroke, both a child's game and the act of ritual killing.<sup>16</sup> For the play of the child-god exposes the underside of the tortoise, enabling him to kill the animal—and, as before, the animal becomes a 'willing victim' by its participation in the 'game'.

The notion that sacrifice was a natural, if not necessary, accompaniment to the creation of a musical instrument is not new. Walter Burkert, for instance, asserts that "any new creation, even the birth of music requires ritual killing. Underlying the practical use of bone-flutes, turtle-shell lyres, and the tympanon covered with cowhide is the idea that the overwhelming power of music comes from a transformation and overcoming of death."<sup>17</sup> So the 'mock sacrifice' of the tortoise is the first step in this birth process. And the subsequent cutting up of the animal and treatment of her shell continues the rite.

As he did with the description of the killing, the poet continues to link the lyre's creation with the later sacrifice, using language that bears a striking resemblance to his description of Hermes preparing the slaughtered cattle for the twelve gods. In each case, he stresses the deed (ὡς ἄμ' ἔπος τε καὶ ἔργον ἐμήδετο, 46; ἔργω δ' ἔργον ὄπαζε, 120), and makes explicit the act of cutting (ταμών, 47, 120).<sup>18</sup> Since the tortoise's flesh is of no interest to Hermes—as the meat of the victim would be in a regular sacrifice<sup>19</sup>—the poet describes here the cutting up, not of the animal herself, but of reeds to form a

<sup>15</sup> For an illustration see *British Museum Catalogue* IV (London 1896) F 101; a drawing of the same vase in T. Reinach, *DarSag* I 695; a discussion of the practice, with a photograph of this oinochoe, in A. E. Klein, *Child Life in Greek Art* (New York 1932) 13 and pl. XV.c. Cf. also the interesting suggestion of J. Maxmin ("A Note on Praxiteles' Sauroktonos," *G&R* 20 [1973] 36–37) that the famous statue of Apollo Sauroktonos may originally have portrayed that god in the act of catching a lizard at the end of a string held in his left hand. If so, we have an interesting parallel for the action of Hermes in the hymn. It may be objected that these representations cannot help us understand a *hapax* from a Homeric hymn. But if, as I believe, the Hermes hymn dates to the end of the sixth century, it seems entirely reasonable that the same childhood game could be reflected in all three examples.

<sup>16</sup> Part of the hymn's charm is exactly in this play between the images of Hermes the child and Hermes the god. Compare, among many examples, the description of Hermes snuggling back into his cradle after a full night of miraculous deeds (150–53), and his indignant response to Maia's scolding only a few lines later (163–65).

<sup>17</sup> Burkert (*supra* n.11) 39. Cf. the Pindaric account of the invention of the flute by Athene after the Gorgons' death, *Pyth.* 12.4–24.

<sup>18</sup> ταμών, while not itself formulaic, is placed in both lines at the trochaic caesura of the third metron.

<sup>19</sup> Note, however, that the later cattle rite also does not follow the regular pattern in this respect; although the meat is divided into portions, it is not eaten.

bridge for the new instrument.<sup>20</sup> He continues the image of sacrifice with vocabulary (repeated in the later scene) such as *νώτα* (48, 122) and *ρίνοιο/ρίνούς* (48, 126) to describe the victim's body, in spite of the awkward usage of *ρίνός* for 'shell'. And he focuses finally on the stretching of hide (*ἀμφὶ . . . τάνυσσε*, 49; *ἐτανύσσατο*, 51; *ἐξετάνυσσε*, 126). As before, the regular process is perverted, as the verbs of 49 and 51 refer not to the *discarded* part of the victim but to the strings and hide (*δέρμα βοός*, 49) that Hermes stretches over the shell in constructing his lyre.

Finally, when the instrument has been completed, Hermes draws the event to a close with a song which not only tests the quality of the new lyre, but also celebrates the transformation of the tortoise after her 'sacrifice' (52–61).<sup>21</sup> The content of the song confirms that the power of music and of the hymnic form is the poet's real subject. The god sings first of the association of Zeus and Maia, his own conception and birth, and then the cave that was his and Maia's home. His subject, in short, is identical to that of the hymn up to this point. And the beginning of his song (*ἀμφὶ Δία Κρονίδην καὶ Μαΐαδα καλλιπέδιλον ὄν*, 57–58) recalls in detail the introductory formulae common to this and other hymns (e.g. 7.1–2, *ἀμφὶ Διώνυσον Σεμέλης ἐρικυδέος υἱὸν . . . ὦς*). Here we can see in the myth a mirroring of the hymn's actual performance, as the singer glorifies the very instrument on which he plays, and the poet simultaneously celebrates his own art.

This same celebration recurs in Hermes' second song (423–33), where the subject matter once again mimics (in part) that of the hymn. The god sings the origin of the world, the birth of the gods, in order of age, and how each one received his or her divine share.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> 47–48: *πῆξε δ' ἄρ' ἐν μέτροισι ταμῶν δόνακας καλάμοιο πειρήνας διὰ νῶτα διὰ ρίνοιο χελώνης*. The passage has been variously interpreted. Reinach (*DarSag* III 1438) explained these reeds as part of a frame, set within the hollowed shell, over which to stretch the ox-hide (49); but there is no need for such a device. The bridge was generally called the *δόναξ* or *κέρας* (depending on the material from which it was made), but the plural here includes the reeds used to fasten the bridge to the shell. For a confirmation of this view, see now P. Phaklares, "Χέλυσ," *Δελτιον* 32 (1977) 218–33, who catalogues the archaeological remains of tortoise-shell lyres (all from the end of the Archaic period) and gives a detailed account of how the instrument was constructed. I am grateful to E. Vermeule for making me aware of this article, and to C. C. Vermeule for making it available to me.

<sup>21</sup> A similar song is also part of the cattle sacrifice, but it is postponed until the return to Apollo of his remaining animals (418), when it has the additional function of causing the brothers' immediate reconciliation.

<sup>22</sup> As the last born of the gods, Hermes will occupy a place of emphasis at the end of his song, particularly as he sings of the divine portion he wants to acquire (or, as the performance of *this* hymn attests, already has).

But he sings first of Mnemosyne, the mother of the Muses, whose servant he, like the singer of the hymn, has become (429–30).<sup>23</sup> Apollo's reaction is immediate: charmed by the music, and the hymn, he laughs with joy and forgets his anger, so that, by the end of Hermes' performance, he announces his willingness to accept a reconciliation with his brother peacefully (*ἡσυχίως καὶ ἔπειτα διακρινέεσθαι οὖω*, 438). It is in this reconciliation that Hermes exchanges the lyre (= *σύμβολον*) for a share of divine power and achieves his original aim.

The poet here completes the link between cattle theft/sacrifice and the lyre episode, as the healing power of the music and song resolves the conflict which Hermes initiated with his theft. This is the same ability of music to bring about peace and harmony—a force strong enough even to make gentle the harshness of Ares, god of war—which Pindar praises in the opening lines of *Pythian* 1.<sup>24</sup> The hymnist emphasizes this power inherent in the lyre (and the hymn it accompanies) by his treatment of their invention both as Hermes' first exploit and especially in terms of a (mock) sacrifice. If we understand this, we will not misunderstand the hymn. For, as it tells of Hermes' passage from new-born infant to god of craft, the hymn is at the same time celebrating its own origins, and those of the power of music, a power that comes from the conquering of death. The invention of the lyre and the hymnic form is a prelude to Hermes' acquisition of cult, and to the performance of this hymn that honors him.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> This mention of the Muses recalls the regular invocation at the outset of all hymns, but the poet emphasizes their importance (and especially that of Mnemosyne, their creator) by beginning Hermes' song, and then reverting to speak of them. As so often in the hymn, the focus is on the music and the poetry.

<sup>24</sup> For other expressions of this power, compare *e.g.* the embassy to Achilles (*Il.* 9.186–91), which finds him sitting outside his tent, playing the lyre and, for a moment, forgetting his anger, or *Hymn.Hom.Ap.* 184ff, where the gods themselves are described as “having a care only for the lyre and song” when Apollo plays among them.

<sup>25</sup> I am grateful to J. Hamilton, G. Nagy, and the anonymous referees of this journal for their valuable suggestions on an earlier draft of this article, and to L. Koenen for his encouragement and advice at the outset. The flaws which remain in spite of their efforts are my own.