

A Proposal upon the Figure of Hermes as an Ancient God of Fire (According to the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*)

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The origin and meaning of Hermes, whose figure is full of different and even contradictory aspects, has never been clarified. Now, starting from a passage from the Homeric Hymn dedicated to him – in which Hermes is considered the one “who first invented fire-sticks and fire” – as well as on the fact that he is often associated with Hestia, the goddess of the hearth, we propose here that he was originally a god of fire. This immediately explains his attributions, the meaning of his name and even the shape of the caduceus. Moreover, the Hermes-Hestia couple corresponds to the conception of the two fires in the Vedic world: one is the quadrangular “male fire” of the sky, while the other is the round “female fire” of the earth. This original dimension of Hermes as a god of fire also links him to lightning, that produces forest fires and is considered a divine omen, which explains his function as the messenger of the gods. At this point, it is even possible to identify the original counterpart of Hermes in the Roman world: he was not Mercury, but the ancient god Terminus, whose original dimension linked to fire gradually faded over the centuries, as it happened also for Hermes.

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Hermes in the Ancient Mythographic Tradition

The figure of Hermes is very complex. He is the messenger of the gods and their intermediary with the men; he is the protector of shepherds, merchants and thieves; he is the *Ψυχαγωγός* or the *Ψυχοπομπός*, because he accompanies the souls of the dead to the afterlife; he is the *Ἀργειφόντης*, because he killed Argos, and the *Κυνάγγης*, because he strangled a dog; he is the *Τετράγωνος*, that is, “the Quadrangular”; he is also a stone-god and the god of piles of stones, in a bizarre contrast with the wings on his feet, which make him very fast and unpredictable (Allan 2018, Miller and Strauss Clay 2019).

All this means that his real image is hidden behind a set, or rather, an inextricable tangle of heterogeneous if not antithetical attributions, which until now have made it very difficult to understand his origin and meaning. The same can be said of his name, which has not yet been adequately explained (Stockmeier 1988).

The key to the problem could be that Hermes is closely associated with Hestia, the goddess of the hearth and the sacred fire (North 2001, Friedman 2002, Kajava 2004), in the first of the *Homeric Hymns* dedicated to her. Not only that,

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because on the basis of the great statue of Zeus, in Olympia (Barringer 2010, Burton 2015), Phidias represented the Twelve Gods¹. Between the Sun and the Moon these twelve divinities, grouped two by two, were ordered into six pairs, a god and a goddess. Among these divine couples, Hermes-Hestia is a problem, because there is nothing in their genealogy and legend to justify such an association (Vernant 1963, p. 12).

However, sometimes it is precisely the anomalies that can indicate the solution of the problems. In fact, this apparently bizarre juxtaposition between these two deities fits perfectly with a key passage of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, which states that he was the inventor of fire (Johnston 2002, Vergados 2011, Jarczyk 2017): “He gathered a pile of wood and began to seek the art of fire./ He took a beautiful laurel branch and turned it into a pomegranate one./ holding it in his hands, and the hot smoke rose up./ For it was Hermes who first invented fire-sticks and fire” (σὺν δ’ ἐφόρει ξύλα πολλά, πυρὸς δ’ ἐπεμαίετο τέχνην./ Δάφνης ἀγλαὸν ὄζον ἐλὼν ἀπέλεψε σιδήρω/, ἄρμενον ἐν παλάμῃ· ἄμπνυτο δὲ θερμὸς ἀυτιμή./ Ἐρμῆς τοι πυρήια πῦρ τ’ ἀνέδωκε, *Hymn. Herm.* 107–111).

Since his name is comparable to the Sanskrit term *gharmah*, “heat”, whose root is found in the Greek adjective θερμός, “hot”, “ardent” (but also the Armenian *jerm* has the same meaning), it is reasonable to suppose that an ancient god of fire was hiding behind his features and his very name. On the other hand, this is not surprising, considering that also the Babylonian god Nusku (Lewy and Lewy 1948), messenger of the god Enlil and intermediary between gods and men, was a god of fire: another of his names is Girru or Gerra, perhaps comparable to *gharmah*.

So Hermes and Hestia are related to each other, as Hestia personifies the sacred fire and the hearth inside the houses (Carandini 2015), while Hermes represents the open fire, lit in the bivouacs by those who travel, work or wander at night, such as shepherds, merchants, travellers and thieves... In short, all those who in ancient Greece considered him their tutelary god.

This is the key to understand all of his multiple attributions. Hermes is both the god of domestic and wild animals (*Hymn. Herm.* 569–571), because during the night the shepherds’ fire protects the ones but terrifies the others. Fire also has a very strong power – that’s why he is considered a god – but it is ambivalent: in fact it is beneficial for men, but it is changeable, bizarre and unpredictable; moreover, it becomes very dangerous when it spreads too quickly or in an uncontrolled way, especially if it is powered by the wind. This perfectly explains Hermes’ “wings on his feet”, a lively metaphor of its tendency to spread very rapidly and above all to rise upwards. In addition, fire often “steals” the goods of men, that is, plants, trees, crops, livestock, which was probably another reason for considering him the god of thieves.

¹According to Brown (1947, p. 114), the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* was motivated by the establishment of the Altar of the Twelve Gods in Athens in 522/521 B.C. Newly observed congruencies between the *Hymn* and circumstances in Peisistratid Athens seem to confirm his theory (Johnston and Mulroy 2009-2010).

As for the fact that Hermes is called *Ἀργειφόντης* and *Κυνάγχης*, that is killer or strangler of dogs, this could allude to some mythical episode, unknown to us, in which a dog was suffocated by the smoke of a fire, perhaps in a sheepfold.

Moreover, Hermes has shamanic aspects (which show his great antiquity, that overshadowed his original attribution). He is in fact a psychopomp god, who leads the souls of the dead to the afterlife (*Od.* XXIV, 1–10), with an obvious reference to the fire of the pyres on which the bodies of the dead were burnt. He is also a music god, who in fact invents the lyre (κιθάρα) in the *Homeric Hymn* dedicated to him: indeed music has a strong shamanic dimension, not to mention the night bivouacs around the fire. The latter are also the key to understanding why baby Hermes, while he is in the arms of his elder brother Apollo, emits a noise: the reference is to the crackle of the fire (not surprisingly, the term of the Sicilian dialect, *pirita*, that expresses this idea contains the root of πῦρ, “fire”), whereas the sun, that is Apollo, gives light and heat without making any noise.

Hermes, moreover, is “eager for meat” (“after which the glorious Hermes began to desire the sacred food”: ἔνθ’ ὀσίης κρεάων ἠράσσατο κύδιμος Ἑρμῆς, *Hymn. Herm.* 130), but does not eat it (“his intrepid heart did not obey him”: οὐδ’ ὧς οἱ ἐπέιθετο θυμὸς ἀγήνωρ, v. 133), just like the fire of sacrifices that burns the victims. On the other hand, the sacrifice of oxen (vv. 121–123) is similar to that of an ox performed by Prometheus (*Hes., Theog.* 536–541), who is also a “thief god” linked to fire (Lloyd-Jones 2003, Baumbach 2014, Yona 2014–2015). However, these two characters are very different: Hermes is the messenger of Zeus, while Prometheus is a fierce opponent of the latter. In reality, while Hermes is the fire that ignites and spreads in the world naturally, for example when lightning strikes a tree, instead Prometheus is linked to Hephaestus, revealing that it is the fire of the forge and the fusion of the metals, which symbolizes the “Promethean” desire of *Homo faber* (Ferrarin 2000–2001) to master the forces of nature and to compete against the gods themselves by using technology: hence his rivalry with Zeus.

At this point it also becomes clear why Hermes is considered a stone-god, linked to stones: the reference is to flint, the stone that if struck noisily produces a spark – that is, a kind of little lightning bolt – which in turn is capable, just like real lightning, of producing a fire. On the other hand, for an archaic mentality it is natural to believe that the glare of lightning, followed by the roar of thunder, is produced by the equally noisy percussion of the hammer of a celestial god: let’s think of the Nordic Thor as well as of Tiermes, a Lapp god of lightning (Bosi 1995, p. 114), whose similarity with the name of Hermes (and with the Greek θερμός, whose root is linked to Hermes) appears rather curious. Regarding the relationship between Hermes and Tiermes, it is deepened in another study (Maiuri and Vinci 2021), in which an explanation of the anomaly of the lunar cycle found in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* (Humbert 1967, p. 108) is proposed.

In short, Hermes presumably was born in remote prehistoric times as a god of fire, as confirmed by his connection with Hestia. And it is from lightning (which causes fires in forests and trees) that his original dimension of fire of open spaces originates, as well as his function as a messenger of the gods (as probably also happened to his Mesopotamian colleague Nusku): that’s why thunders that accompany lightning strikes have always been considered signs and omens of the

divine will. In light of all this, it can be deduced that the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* is a “literary fossil”, which providentially escaped the troubles of history over the millennia.

Hermes, Hestia and the Two Vedic Fires

About the singular attribution of Τετράγωνος, a piece of information handed down by Pausanias (2nd century AD) is enlightening. He says that in a city of his time there was a stone statue depicting a quadrangular Hermes, in front of which was the hearth of Hestia (Vernant 1978, p. 195). This not only confirms what has already emerged so far, but makes us take a further step forward: in fact it corresponds to the geometry of the two fires of sacrifices in the primitive Vedic religion, on which Georges Dumézil dwells. He says that “during the ceremony, the sacrificer’s wife stands by the first fire. It indicates the bond with the earth [...] and, therefore, it is round. The other axial fire, east of the first, is called *āhavanīya*, the fire of offerings [...] Its smoke brings the gifts of men to the gods [...] This fire is ‘the other world’, ‘the sky’ and, therefore, it is oriented according to the cardinal points and is quadrangular” (Dumézil 1977, p. 278).

At this point it can be said that the Vedic concept of the main “two fires”, male and female, was also present in the religion of ancient Greece. This, therefore, represents the last memory of a common heritage, dating back to the time when the common ancestors of the Greeks and the Indians were still undivided (Macedo 2020).

The same concept appears in the Germanic world, where on the occasion of the Walpurgis Night (Barletta 2013), the eve of the Christian feast day of Saint Walpurga (1 May), according to tradition the witches meet to celebrate their Sabbath on the top of Mount Brocken, where there are two large rocks, called *Hexenaltar* (“Witches Altar”) and *Teufelskanzel* (“Devil’s Pulpit”): the latter, quadrangular in shape, corresponds to the “male fire”, while the former is the “female fire” of the Vedic world (Figure 1).

It is also noteworthy that on the same day, May 1st, according to Roman mythology there was the feast of *Paliliae* (Ov., *Fast.* IV, 721–862), when shepherds used to light fires on the Palatine hill (Vanggard 1971, Gjerstad 1976, Toporov 1977). In this regard, it seems significant that one of the two peaks of the Palatine was called *Cermalus* (Castagnoli 1977), a name that has the same root as Hermes; moreover, in a previous work (Vinci and Maiuri 2017: cfr. also Nissan et al. 2019, *max.* pp. 104–124) we have shown that the Palatine is the counterpart on the Earth of Maia, the goddess (Hermes’ mother connected to 1 May, as Ovid says in his *Fasti*) who is the central star of the seven Pleiades, of which the Seven Hills of Rome are the projection (according to the traditional saying of the *Emerald Tablet*, attributed to Hermes Trismegistus: “As above, so below”). In the same work we also show that Maia was the secret protective deity of Rome, while in later works (Vinci and Maiuri 2019, 2021a) we demonstrate that the traditional founding date of Rome, April 21, is also linked to the seven Pleiades. Incidentally, it is also curious that Cermalus is almost the same name as the biblical Mount

Carmel, where the prophet Elijah made fire come down from heaven to burn up a sacrifice (*1 Kings* 18:38).

Figure 1. “Devil’s Pulpit” and “Witches’ Altar” - Harz National Park (Lower Saxony)



Still upon Rome, Georges Dumézil emphasizes that “the Roman practice of sacred fires has remarkable analogies with the Indian practice [...] On the altar [...] the offering will be burnt and thus transmitted to the god; however, there must absolutely be a hearth next to the altar” (Dumézil 1977, p. 280). In short, the conception of the two fires is found in the archaic Roman world, in which Vesta, identical to Hestia for both function and name (Ampolo 2005), with her circular temple represents the fire of the earth: so *Virgines Vestales* were the priestesses who ensured the purification of the city (del Basso 1974, Martini 2004, Wildfang 2006, Arvanitis 2010).

Now, investigating the Roman divinities to look for some analogy with Hermes, it emerges that the ancient god Terminus (Piccaluga 1974, De Sanctis 2005), whose name also seems to recall both θερμός and Tiermes, represents “a cult of the terminal stones, the boundary stones of private properties” (Dumézil 1977, p. 386). In fact, Ovid says of him: “O Terminus, whether you are a stone or a log in the field, you too are a god since ancient times” (*Termine, sive lapis sive es defossus in agro/ stipes, ab antiquis tu quoque numen habes*, Ov., *Fasti* II, 641–642). On the other hand, Homer himself calls τέρματα (*Il.* XXIII, 333) the turning-post of a chariot race, consisting of a dry log with two stones beside it.

Ovid goes on to narrate that on February 23 a rustic altar was set up to honour the god Terminus, with stacked pieces of wood and branches planted on the

ground, that were then lit and on which sacrificial offerings were burned (Ov., *Fasti* II, 645–656). He also mentions a characteristic of the temple that Terminus shared with Jupiter on the Capitol: “Even now, so that he sees nothing but the stars above him,/ the roof of that temple has a small opening” (*nunc quoque, se supra ne quid nisi sidera cernat,/ exiguum templi tecta foramen habent*, vv. 671–672).

It was, therefore, a temple open upwards, which corroborates Terminus’ heavenly dimension and in particular the fact that he originally represented the heavenly fire, just like Hermes. Incidentally, this could give the *oculus*, the circular hole at the top of the roof of the Pantheon, a meaning that is not merely functional: since that structure, as its name implies, was dedicated “to all the gods”, it was necessary that the roof was open, in order to avoid that some heavenly divinities, such as Terminus, felt “out of place”, that is, uncomfortable in a closed environment.

It is also noteworthy that the names of Terminus and Tiermes recall Turms, the Etruscan god who corresponds to Hermes², and even the Tummo, or “inner fire”, the ancient meditation technique practiced by Tibetan Buddhist monks: here is another point of contact with the primitive undivided Indo-European world.

In short, even if in the Roman world the correspondent of Hermes is Mercury, who in fact retains many of his attributions, in reality it is probable that in a remote prehistory his true *alter ego* in the original dimension of god of fire was Terminus, whose original nature, however, has gradually faded over the centuries. On the other hand, even Hermes over time has lost his true nature, whose memory has remained only in his *Hymn* which can be considered a “fossil” dating back to the dawn of time.

The last appearance of Hermes as a heavenly messenger is found in Dante’s *Inferno*. In fact, the portrait that Homer makes of him in the episode of the fifth book of the *Odyssey* (in which Hermes goes to the island of the goddess Calypso to communicate to her the injunction, by Zeus, to leave Ulysses free to return to Ithaca) has inspired the mysterious character “from heaven” who in the 9th canto of the *Inferno* allows Dante and Virgil to enter the city of the damned, as we have shown in another work dedicated to the great poet on the 700th anniversary of his death (Vinci and Maiuri 2021b).

Returning to Hermes, the hitherto unclear meaning³ of the caduceus traditionally attributed to him – a stick with two wings at the top, around which two snakes coil – is explained immediately in the light of what has just been said: remembering how Hermes produced fire – “he took a beautiful laurel branch and turned it into a pomegranate one,/ holding it in his hands, and the hot smoke rose up” (*Hymn. Herm.* 108–109) – it is evident that the caduceus is the wooden branch, used by many archaic cultures, which, if rotated in both directions in a hole made in a wooden table, lights the flame by rubbing. In this interpretation, the two snakes

²His name would be a cast of the Greek Ἑρμῆς, with the initial tau to be understood as an article, since often in archaic Greek the theonym provided for it (Clackson 2017).

³A strange group of funerary reliefs in Roman Dalmatia shows new details, from the classical iconography of the god: instead of a money bag, there is a second rod in the other hand too. From an anthropological point of view the two rods make him at the same time a messenger of the gods and a magician, perfectly capable of waking the dead (Lulić 2019).

represent the double rotary motion, clockwise and counterclockwise, with which the stick is alternately whirled between the palms of the hands until the fire ignites (as for the “wings”, they are a vivid representation of the “hot smoke” arising when the fire is lit).

It must also be said that the symbol of Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine (Panagiotidou 2016), consisting of a stick around which one snake coils, is similar to the caduceus, but it is not identical. Assuming also in this case a rotary ophidic motion, but always in the same sense, because the snake is one, it can be assumed that this alludes to the trepanation of the skull, a surgical practice, and sometimes also a ritual, already in ancient times – we speak of the Neolithic, if not even the Mesolithic – widespread in various parts of the world (Bertonazzi 2018).

Conclusion

This original dimension of Hermes as a god of fire – clearly indicated in the Homeric hymn dedicated to him and corroborated by his otherwise incomprehensible relationship with Hestia – on the one hand makes it possible to explain all his multiple attributions, on the other hand can be traced back to the primitive Indo-European civilization, which confirms his great antiquity. The methodology used in this contribution therefore consists in a new critical examination of the sources, and in particular of the *Hymn to Hermes*, which places due emphasis on some aspects to which sector studies had not yet paid the right attention. The comparative reading of these testimonies with elements typical of other cultures favors a broader and transversal approach to the question as a whole, both on a diachronic level and in the search for historical-religious and anthropological consonances.

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