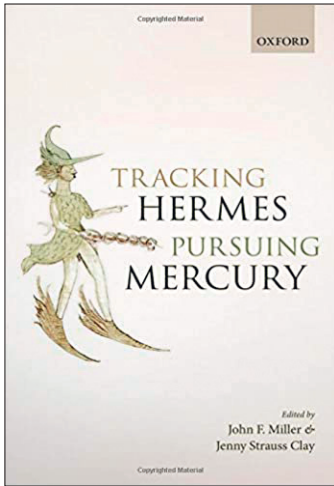


## TRACKING HERMES, PURSUING MERCURY




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MILLER, JOHN F. and STRAUSS CLAY, JENNY (eds.) (2019). *Tracking Hermes, Pursuing Mercury*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 416 pp., 90,17€ [ISBN 978-0-1987-7734-2].

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THIS TWENTY-CHAPTER VOLUME HAS BEEN COMPILED from the papers presented at an interdisciplinary symposium held at the University of Virginia, USA in 2014 to discuss Hermes/Mercury in both his ancient and modern contexts. Its contents are divided into nine thematic sections and preceded by an introduction crafted by the editors. It also includes a four-page list of the figures discussed in various chapters, an eight-page list of abbreviations, a 13-page *Index Locorum* and a six-page general index.

As might be expected, the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* receives the most attention in the literary studies of the contributors, but these are complimented by individual chapters focused primarily on epic or comedy. Similarly, with Roman Mercury, Horace's *Ode* and its relationship with Alcaeus' early Hermes Hymn draw the attention of several contributors as does Virgil's *Aeneid*. Visual evidence of the god is the focus of six chapters, ranging from inscriptions and votives to pottery, reliefs and statuary.

More specifically, Part 1 contains three chapters dedicated to the study of Hermes' relations with three key members of his family: his mother, his son, and his father. The first, by A. Shapiro, considers the significance of the appearance of Maia in the company of her son, depicted on five vases dating from 570 to 500 BCE. Shapiro notes that by being depicted in the company of her Olympian son, Maia's standing amongst her fellow divinities is elevated. Continuing the visual study of Hermes, C.M. Lafferière examines Athenian reliefs of the god in company with both his son (Pan) and the Nymphs in an effort to discern what she refers to as their "visual theology" (33). In the process she offers a well-structured case to explain the Attic associations of Hermes and Pan with the Nymphs through reference to the *Homeric Hymn to Pan*. This first section concludes with an insightful study by J. Larson in which she examines the similarities between the activities undertaken by Hermes and Herakles prior to their acceptance by Zeus into his Olympian family. This analysis allows her to put forward the hypothesis that an earlier, but now lost, poem – possibly a *Homeric Hymn to Herakles* – may have served as the model for our extant *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*. In particular Larson draws attention to parallel activities in which each figure engaged in their individual quest for inclusion: each had to demonstrate his own particular usefulness to the chief god by engaging their elder brother, Apollo, in a contest and each was credited with establishing a cult of the twelve gods.

The following five sections each contain two chapters; Part 2 is focused on Hermes as "trickster". J.S. Clay's contribution rehearses the similarities between Hermes and Odysseus, exemplified in their shared epithet, *πολύτροπος*, as they emerge from Homeric epic, especially the *Odyssey*. In this she adds some new details to earlier observations on their shared features. Moving into a different poetic genre, A. Capra and C. Nobili make a convincing case for crediting Hermes with the invention of iambus, a poetic form especially at home in sympotic settings. With this established, they go on to show why Hermes can be seen as a particularly appropriate patron of both genre and setting. In the process they offer an informed discussion of Hipponax's engagement with his patron god in his own iambic poetry.

A natural transition from the tricky and humorous aspects of Hermes and iambus occurs as the focus for the third section moves to the Comic. S. Beta explores the possibility that a handful of comic fragments contain evidence of "speaking herms" and the likely significance of such a figure on the comic stage. While a plausible case is made, it did not strike this reader as wholly convincing. Similarly, although E.K. Moodie's presentation of Hermes/Mercury as patron deity of comedy has merit, to argue that this god "understands" comic conventions is to neglect the fact that, as characters in a play, their words are scripted by the playwright. Moreover, while com-

edy's lowly representation of Hermes/Mercury is generally accepted, the non-scripted evidence to which Moodie appeals in support of her thesis is rather strained (p. 116).

The Erotic aspects of the god become the focus in Part 4 in a section that also marks the beginning of a shift from Greek Hermes to Roman Mercury. In the first chapter J. Farrell's contribution offers a survey of all of the sexual attractions and "hook-ups" with which the god is involved in extant Greek and Roman literature up to and including the late *The Marriage of Mercury and Philology* by Martianus Capella. What Farrell draws to our attention is the fact that, unlike his father, or brother, Apollo, Hermes himself is seldom represented as sexually active. In contrast the sexually aggressive inferences that can be drawn from the ithyphallic Herm, Hermes more often serves as an aid or facilitator to the other gods' affairs with mortal and semi-divine females, than he does an active partner in sexual encounters of his own. This is not say that there are no tales of him, sometimes violently, raping a female who catches his eye, as is the case with Lara in Ovid (*Fast.* II 617-638); rather it is to note that there are far fewer of such instances in the extant literature than there are for other male gods. M.C. Myers' chapter deals with Ovid's engagement with "the Hermes hymn tradition" specifically in his version of the contest between Cupid and Apollo in the *Metamorphoses*. After discussing the similarities between Hermes and Cupid to be found in *Amores* I 1, Myers' presents two short comparative studies involving the Cupid and Apollo incident and an earlier Greek text (Alcaeus' Hermes Hymn) and the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*. There follows a third comparison of *Fasti* V and *Met.* I-II in an examination of the god's relationship with the mischievous god of love, Cupid. Although the study contains a number of fresh observations, it attempts to cover too much ground in its thirteen pages of discussion.

In Part 5 the focus shifts from the god's eroticism to his role a mediator. Here the Latin texts are fully to the fore, first with S.J. Harrison's consideration of Mercury and the mercurial in Horace, which, as the title indicates, reveals the closeness of the poet's self-identification with both the erotic and (despite the noticeable absence of mercantile Mercury in the *Odes*) the commercial Mercury and his offspring's Faunus' mythic-poetic persona. His discussion is complimented by S. Casali's study of Mercury as an intertextual figure in Vergil. Based on his analysis of the three appearance of Mercury in the poet's *Aeneid*, in which the god performs his Homeric role as boundary-crossing messenger of the Olympians, Casali sees a parallel between the god's boundary-crossing ability and intertextuality. He then proceeds to examine

Virgil's engagement with Homer's and Apollonius' Hermes, revealing just how familiar Virgil was with his Greek forerunners' representation of the god.<sup>1</sup>

Staying with Roman Mercury, the two chapters in Part 6 focus on the Roman god's close association with trade. D.E. MacRae directs his reader's attention to the images of Mercury found in the Pompeian ruins often at or near the entrances to local shops in order to reveal just how closely retail enterprises associated financial success with the favour of the god. In particular, his observations that the placement of the god's image at shop door served to encourage the god to prosper the shop owner seems a reasonable conclusion to be drawn from the evidence discussed. Retaining a particularly Roman focus, T. Biggs' contribution considers the importance of Mercury to Rome and to maritime warfare, as inferred by comments made by Horace (*C. II* 7, 13-16), Polybius (*Histories* XXIX 27, 6-8) and the earlier (now lost) epic poem by Naevius concerning the Punic Wars. He reveals how Mercury's epic persona at the time of the First Punic War was quite plausibly far less mercantile and far more militaristic than it came to be by the early 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. BCE. The argument, though speculative, is well-made and likely to spur further studies. Given its merits, it is unfortunate that Biggs does not appear to have been familiar with Blakely's work or her contribution to the volume nor with Buchet and de Souza's edited volume dealing with the ancient world and the sea.

In Part 7 the focus shifts to the god's place in the religious life of the Greeks and Romans, in which each of the three chapters return to the focus to Hermes. H. Collard's discussion considers what the depiction of herms on vases was meant to signify and reaches a two-fold conclusion: such depictions serve to remind the viewer of Hermes' standing as the divine mediator as well as functioning as an iconic sign of the possibility of ritual interaction between the human and the divine. The second study by J. Wallensten, which considers the votive dedications to Hermes and their dedicators, contains much of interest and is clearly part of a significantly larger study. It is unfortunate that more space was not allotted to fuller discussions of the evidence given that, although the fourteen-page list containing the dedicator, receiving gods, location of find and production date is impressive, and certainly does reveal the extent in time and space of Hermes' worship, it is only of limited use to the non-specialist reader. Rounding out the discussion of Hermes in religion and cult is S. Blakely's excellent study of the god's worship on Samothrace in relation to Kyllene, ithyphallicism and seafaring.

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1. Some errors in alphabetic ordering occur in Casali's bibliography.

From the island of Samothrace, attention turns to the land of Egypt and the influences of Hermes and Thoth on each other in Part 8. L.M. Bortolani provides the first of the two studies presented here by directing our attention to a particular “Hymn to Hermes” found in three versions within the Greek magical papyri (*PGM*) and in doing so she tackles a fraught issue of the relationship of Thoth to Hermes in Egypt. A. Vergados sets forth an insightful analysis and decidedly plausible explanation for the celebratory occasion at which the fragmentary *POxy XVII 2034 To the Fig* was performed.

The volume concludes with two broader views of the god in which one will encounter several instances of untranslated Greek (and some Latin). In the first, N. Reggiani presents a series of instances drawn from Hermes’ Homeric Hymn which she interprets as indicative of the god’s concerns with “justice and proportional distribution”.<sup>2</sup> The final chapter is that of H. Versnel’s, in which he traces the rise in Hermes’ divine standing and increasing esteem amongst his worshippers along three different paths: by becoming a deity to whom mortals confessed misbehaviour and from whom they sought forgiveness and restoration; through an increased interest in communication with the underworld; and, simply as one benefiting from a general trend of exaggeration in praise hymns for the gods.

If there is cause for critique, it would include the following: 1) some chapters are more accessible than others for the reader who lacks one or both of the ancient languages, insofar as not all quotations from ancient texts are provided with a translation; 2) somewhat overlooked as a source are the appearances and discussions of Hermes in several of Plato’s dialogues and the later philosophers; and 3) on only a few occasions do authors make reference to relevant material contained in the studies of their fellow authors’ contributions.<sup>3</sup> Even if presenters lacked access to each other’s discussions, the editors might have added the cross references as footnotes and sought the contributors’ approval at the pre-proof stage.

Despite these concerns, each of the chapters has something to offer the reader interested in seeing Hermes/Mercury through a different lens. It is certainly a volume that should be part of every library’s collection and would prove a worthwhile investment for those with a particular interest in this deity, whether in his Greek or Roman form.

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2. Unfortunately, the case made is not a new one, as the relationship between Hermes, justice and proportional distribution first appeared in a 2004 Exeter PhD and subsequently in a 2018 volume in Routledge’s *Gods and Heroes* series.

3. Versnel’s chapter contains one of the very few cross-references to another argument in this collection.