Myths and Legends: Perseus, renowned hero of ancient Greece

By E.M. Berens, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.20.16
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Greek mythology evolved thousands of years ago. There was a need to explain natural events, disasters and events in history. Myths were created about gods and goddesses who had supernatural powers, human traits and human emotions. These ideas were passed down in beliefs and stories.

An Oracle's Deadly Prophecy

Perseus, one of the most legendary heroes of antiquity, was the son of Zeus and Danae. Zeus was the king of the gods, and Danae was the daughter of Acrisius, the mythical king of Argos, a city in Greece.

An oracle had warned Acrisius that a son of Danae would be the cause of his death. To keep her from having children, he kept her imprisoned in a tower. Zeus, however, descended through the roof of the tower in the form of a shower of gold, and the lovely Danae became his bride.
For four years Acrisius remained unaware of this union. One evening, as he passed by Danae’s chamber, he heard the cry of a young child coming from within, which led to the discovery of his daughter’s marriage with Zeus. Enraged at this, Acrisius ordered the mother and child to be placed in a chest and thrown into the sea.

But it was not the will of Zeus that they should die. He told Poseidon, the god of the sea, to calm the troubled waters, and caused the chest to float safely to the island of Seriphus. Dictys, brother of Polydectes, king of the island, was fishing on the seashore when he saw the chest on the beach. Pitying Danae and her child, he took them to the palace of the king, where they were treated with the greatest kindness.

Polydectes eventually fell in love with Danae, and gave Perseus an education fitting for a hero. He encouraged his stepson to distinguish himself by performing some great and heroic deed. After some thought it was decided that Perseus would win the greatest fame by slaying the Medusa. The Medusa was one of the Gorgons, whose hair was made of venomous snakes.

**Perseus Proves Himself Worthy**

To do this, Perseus needed a pair of winged sandals, a magic bag and the helmet of Hades, which made its wearer invisible. Once he was given these by the gods and goddesses, he flew to the home of the Gorgons, who were fast asleep. Perseus had been warned that whoever looked upon these weird sisters would be turned into stone. He stood before the sleepers with his face turned away, and caught their reflection on his bright metal shield. Then, guided by the goddess Athena, he cut off the head of the Medusa, which he placed in his bag. He moved quickly to escape the two surviving sisters, who were eager to avenge the death of their sister.

His invisible helmet and winged sandals served him well. The helmet hid him from the view of the Gorgons, while the sandals carried him quickly over land and sea, far beyond their reach. Perseus traveled until he arrived at Ethiopia, the kingdom of King Cepheus. Here he found the country inundated with floods, towns and villages destroyed and everywhere signs of ruin. Poseidon had devastated the country with a terrible flood, which brought with it a huge monster that devoured all that came in its way.

**A Human Sacrifice Is Needed**

In their distress the unfortunate Ethiopians went to the oracle of Jupiter-Ammon. The oracle told them that only by sacrificing the king’s daughter Andromeda to the monster could the country and people be saved.

Cepheus, who loved his child, at first refused to listen to this dreadful proposal. But eventually, overcome by the prayers of his people, the heartbroken father gave up his child. Andromeda was chained to a rock on the seashore to serve as prey for the monster.
When he learned of this, Perseus proposed to Cepheus to slay the monster, on condition that Andromeda should become his bride. The king gladly agreed, and Perseus raced to the rock to breathe words of hope and comfort to the trembling maiden. Then he put on the helmet of Hades, flew into the air and awaited the approach of the monster.

Soon the sea opened and the head of the gigantic beast appeared above the waves. Perseus suddenly darted down and held the head of the Medusa before the eyes of the monster. The beast's hideous body was gradually transformed into a huge black rock. Perseus rescued the maiden and delivered her to her happy parents, and the two were soon wed.

**There Is No Cheating Death**

Together Perseus and Andromeda returned to the island Seriphus, where a joyful meeting took place between Danae and her son. Perseus then sent a messenger to his grandfather, telling him that he planned to return to Argos. But Acrisius, fearing the prediction of the oracle would come true, fled to the city of Larissa. Anxious to get the old king to return to Argos, Perseus followed him there, and a strange death occurred. While taking part in some games, Perseus was throwing a discus. He accidentally struck his grandfather with the discus, and thereby was the innocent cause of his death after all.

After the funeral of Acrisius, Perseus returned to Argos, and later founded the cities of Mycenae and Midea.

He presented the head of the Medusa to his divine protector Athena, who placed it in the center of her shield.

Many great heroes were descended from Perseus and Andromeda, including Heracles, their great-grandson. The Romans called him Hercules.

*From "The Myths and Legends of Ancient Greece and Rome" by E.M. Berens.*
Quiz

1. What is the MOST important reason why King Cepheus let Perseus marry his daughter?
   (A) because his country was devastated by terrible floods
   (B) because the oracle of Jupiter-Ammon told him to
   (C) because Perseus offered to kill the monster
   (D) because Perseus could hide her with the helmet of Hades

2. Acrisius would be MOST likely to agree with which of the following statements?
   (A) Zeus treated his daughter Danae with the kindness she deserved.
   (B) Danae and her son posed a threat to his life in Argos.
   (C) Perseus would make a powerful and strong heir to his crown.
   (D) Zeus should have been honest about his intentions with Danae.

3. Read the sentence from the section "Perseus Proves Himself Worthy."
   He moved quickly to escape the two surviving sisters, who were eager to avenge the death of their sister.
   Which option is the BEST definition of the word "avenge" as used in the sentence above?
   (A) to fight to protect
   (B) to retaliate for
   (C) to grieve for
   (D) to watch horrified

4. Read the sentence from the section "A Human Sacrifice Is Needed."
   The beast's hideous body was gradually transformed into a huge black rock.
   Which two words would BEST replace "hideous" and "gradually" in the sentence?
   (A) disgusting; slowly
   (B) gigantic; constantly
   (C) powerful; accidentally
   (D) delicate; immediately
Answer Key

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