Myths and Legends: Perseus, a famous hero of ancient Greece

By E.M. Berens, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.20.16

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 special powers and human feelings. These ideas were passed down in beliefs and stories.

A Warning Of Death

Perseus was one of the most legendary Greek heroes. His father was Zeus, the king of the gods. His mother was Danae, the daughter of the mythical king Acrisius, who ruled the city of Argos, in Greece.

Acrisius had been warned that a son of Danae would cause his death. To keep her from having children, he locked Danae inside a tower. However, Zeus descended through the roof of the tower, and the lovely Danae became his wife.
For four years this remained a secret. One evening, Acrisius passed by Danae’s room and heard a young child crying inside. This led to his discovery of his daughter’s marriage to Zeus. Enraged, 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, helping the chest float safely to the island of Seriphus. There a man took Danae and her child to the palace of the king, where they were treated with great kindness.

Polydectes, the king of the island, eventually fell in love with Danae. He gave Perseus an education fitting for a hero. Later, he encouraged his stepson to win fame by performing a great deed. After some thought they decided that Perseus should try to kill the Medusa. The Medusa was one of the Gorgons, whose hair was made of venomous snakes.

**A Hero’s Journey**

Perseus acquired a pair of winged sandals from the gods and goddesses so that he could fly, a magic bag and the helmet of Hades, which made its wearer invisible. Then he flew to the home of the Gorgons, who were fast asleep. Perseus had been warned that whoever looked directly at them would be turned into stone. He stood before the sleepers with his face turned away, and caught their reflection on his shield. Guided by the goddess Athena, he finally cut off the head of the Medusa. He placed it in his bag.
His winged sandals carried him quickly over land and sea, away from the other Gorgons. Perseus traveled until he reached Ethiopia, the kingdom of King Cepheus. The towns and villages there had been destroyed. Poseidon had attacked the country with a terrible flood, which brought with it a huge monster.

**Defeating The Beast**

In their distress the unfortunate Ethiopians went to the oracle of Jupiter-Ammon. The oracle was a holy place where they could talk with the gods. The oracle told them that only by sacrificing the king's daughter Andromeda to the monster could the country be saved.

Cepheus loved his child, and at first refused to listen to this idea. Only after hearing the prayers of his people did the heartbroken father finally give 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 had an idea. He told Cepheus that he would kill the monster if he could marry Andromeda. The king gladly agreed, and Perseus raced to the rock to whisper words of hope to the 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 huge beast appeared above the waves. Perseus flew down and held the head of the Medusa before the eyes of the monster. The beast's ugly body was slowly transformed into a huge black rock. Perseus rescued the maiden and delivered her to her happy parents, and the two were soon married.

**The Family Tree Of Hercules**

Together Perseus and Andromeda returned to the island Seriphus. A joyful meeting took place there between Danae and her son.

Perseus presented the head of the Medusa to his protector, the goddess Athena. She placed it in the center of her shield.

Many great heroes were descended from Perseus and Andromeda, including the famous Heracles. The Romans called him Hercules.

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