

WORKBOOK

1.8

Journeying to the Underworld Greece

The myth of Persephone and Demeter as told in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter – plot, characters, the underworld itself, and what the text tells us about ancient Greek beliefs.

NAME

SET / FORM

TOPIC 1.8 · GREECE

What's in this booklet?

A guided study of the Homeric Hymn to Demeter – the prescribed text for Greece – broken into four narrative chunks, with analysis pages for each.

- A Key vocabulary** – the terms you must know.

- B Context** – the Homeric Hymns, oral tradition, and why this myth mattered.

- C Cast of characters** – the gods and the daughter at the heart of the story.

- D The text: lines 1–30** – entrapment and the abduction.

- E The text: lines 30–104** – Demeter searches and learns the truth.

- F The text: lines 301–390** – Demeter's rage, Zeus intervenes, the pomegranate.

- G The text: lines 390–474** – reunion, the bargain, and the seasons.

- H Portrayal of the underworld** – in the Hymn and in wider Greek belief.

- I Character study** – Demeter, Persephone, Hades, Zeus.

- J Themes & significance** – what the myth meant to the Greeks.

- K Topic check & exam practice** – ten questions plus exam-style questions.

AT A GLANCE

TOPIC

1.8 Greece

SPEC AREA

Myth & Religion

PRESCRIBED TEXT

Homeric Hymn to Demeter

LINES

2.1–104 & 2.301–474

SECTIONS

11 sections

FOUR SPEC AREAS

1. The myth and its plot

2. Portrayal of characters

3. Portrayal of the underworld

4. How the text reflects ancient culture

SECTION A

Key vocabulary

Eight terms central to the myth and to ancient Greek beliefs about the underworld. Learn the word, what it means, and what it refers to in practice.

epithet	A descriptive phrase repeated alongside a character's name in oral poetry (e.g. <i>Demeter with the lovely hair</i>).	oral tradition	The passing on of stories by word of mouth rather than in writing. Homeric poems began this way.
chthonic	Relating to the gods of the earth and the underworld — in contrast to the Olympian gods of the sky.	Erebus	A name for the dark region of the underworld, used repeatedly in the Hymn to describe where Persephone is taken.
Eleusis	The town where Demeter takes refuge during her grief; later the centre of the Eleusinian Mysteries.	pomegranate	The fruit whose seed Hades tricks Persephone into eating, binding her to the underworld for part of each year.
ambrosia & nectar	The food and drink of the immortal gods. Demeter refuses them during her mourning.	Olympus	The mountain home of the chief Greek gods. Demeter abandons it in her rage.

Exercise A.1 – Match the term

Match each term to its definition. Write the correct letter in the box.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> chthonic | A. A name for the dark region of the underworld. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> epithet | B. Relating to gods of the earth and the underworld. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Erebus | C. The town where Demeter takes refuge. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Eleusis | D. A repeated descriptive phrase used with a name. |

Exercise A.2 – Quick recall

- What is an *epithet*, and why was it used in oral poetry? [2]

- What does *chthonic* mean, and which of the gods in this story is chthonic? [2]

SECTION B

Context: the Homeric Hymns

Before reading the text itself, three things to understand: who wrote it, what kind of poem it is, and why the Greeks cared about this story.

What are the Homeric Hymns?

The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* is one of **thirty-three** short poems dedicated to the gods. They are called 'Homeric' because they share the style of Homer's great epics (the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*) — but whether Homer actually composed them is uncertain. Scholars date them to the **7th and 6th centuries BC**.

Oral tradition

Like all early Greek poetry, the Hymns belonged to an *oral tradition*: they were sung aloud to audiences across the Greek world before being written down. To help singers remember vast amounts of verse, poets used *epithets* — descriptive phrases repeated alongside characters' names. In the Hymn:

- Demeter is '*Demeter with the lovely hair*'
- Persephone is '*the daughter with the slender ankles*'
- Hades has many epithets: *Ruler of Many, Host of Many, God Who Receives So Many*
- Zeus is '*the loud-thunderer, far-seeing, Son of Cronos*'

Why this myth mattered

The Hymn does two things at once. On the surface, it explains **why the seasons exist**: when Persephone is in the underworld, Demeter mourns and crops do not grow. But it also explores a deeper question — the **relationship between gods and men**. The gods are powerful, but they depend on humans for sacrifices and offerings. If men stop worshipping them, the gods lose their honour.

KNOW THIS

- 33 Homeric Hymns in total
- Authorship attributed to Homer but uncertain
- Dated 7th–6th century BC
- Part of an oral tradition — sung aloud
- Use epithets to help singers remember

TWO MAIN THEMES

1. The relationship between the gods themselves.
2. The relationship between gods and humans — men depend on the gods, but the gods also need men.

SECTION C

Cast of characters

The Hymn moves between Olympus, the human world, and the underworld. Eight characters drive the story.

Demeter

'with the lovely hair'

Goddess of the harvest. Sister of Zeus, Hades and Poseidon. Mother of Persephone. Her grief becomes a famine that nearly destroys mankind.

Persephone

'the slender-ankled'

Daughter of Demeter and Zeus. Abducted by Hades. Tricked into eating the pomegranate seed, she becomes Queen of the Underworld for part of the year.

Hades

'Ruler of Many', 'Host of Many'

Brother of Zeus, Poseidon and Demeter. King of the Underworld. Abducts Persephone with Zeus's consent. Rarely called 'Hades' in the text itself.

Zeus

'loud-thundering', 'far-seeing'

King of the gods. Persephone's father. Arranges the marriage to Hades without consulting Demeter, then must intervene to resolve the crisis he caused.

Hermes

'Slayer of Argos'

Messenger of the gods. The only god (with Dionysus) who can travel freely between the worlds. Sent by Zeus to bring Persephone back from Hades.

Helios

God of the sun

Pulls the sun across the sky in his chariot. Because he sees everything from above, he is the one who finally tells Demeter that Zeus arranged the abduction.

Hecate

Goddess of magic, witchcraft, night

Heard Persephone's cries from her cave. Brings the news to Demeter and accompanies her in the search. Becomes Persephone's companion afterwards.

Rhea

Mother of the Olympians

Sent by Zeus to fetch Demeter back to Olympus once the bargain is agreed. Delivers the final terms: Persephone spends a third of the year below, two-thirds above.

WHY SO MANY EPITHETS?

Repeated descriptive phrases helped oral poets remember long passages. They also tell us what aspect of a god was being emphasised — Hades' many names all stress his role as the receiver and ruler of the dead.

SECTION D · THE PRESCRIBED TEXT

The text: lines 1–30 – entrapment and abduction

AS YOU READ, LOOK FOR...

- How the abduction is set up — whose plan was it?
- The description of the *flower* — what kind of language does the poet use?
- Persephone's reaction when Hades emerges
- Who hears her cries, and who doesn't

HOMERIC HYMN TO DEMETER, 2.1–30

YOUR NOTES

- 1 I begin to sing of beautiful-haired Demeter, holy goddess — of her and her delicate-ankled daughter whom Hades snatched away, her having been given to him by far-seeing Zeus the loud-thunderer. She was playing apart from Demeter, lady of the golden sword and glorious fruits, with the deep-bosomed daughters of Oceanus. They were gathering flowers in a soft meadow; roses and crocuses and beautiful violets, irises also and hyacinths, and the narcissus; which Earth made to grow at the will of Zeus and to please Hades, as a snare for the bloom-like girl.
- 10 A marvellous, radiant flower, it was a thing of wonder for both immortal gods and mortal men to see. From its root grew a hundred blooms, and it smelled most sweetly, so that all wide heaven above and the whole earth and the salty sea laughed for joy. The girl was amazed and reached out with both hands to take the lovely treat; but the earth with its wide roads opened up there in the Plain of Nysa, and the lord Hades, the Son of Cronos, he who has many names, with his immortal horses, sprang out upon her.
- 20 He seized her against her will on his golden chariot and carried her away as she wailed. Then she cried out shrilly with her voice, calling upon her father, the Son of Cronos, the highest and the best. But not one of the immortal gods, nor one of the mortal humans, heard her voice, nor even did the rich fruit-bearing olive-trees. Only the light-hearted daughter of Persaios, Hecate with the bright head-band, heard the girl from her cave, and also lord Helios, Hyperion's bright son. She was being taken against her will, at the suggestion of Zeus, by her father's brother with his immortal horses; Ruler of Many, Host of Many, Cronos' many-named son.

SECTION D · ANALYSIS

Analysis: entrapment and abduction

Use the text on the previous page to answer the questions below.

Exercise D.1 – Comprehension

1. Who arranged for Persephone to be given to Hades? [1]

2. Who was Persephone with when she was abducted? [1]

3. Give **two** details from the text describing the flower that lured Persephone. [2]

4. How does Hades emerge from the earth? [2]

5. Who hears Persephone's cries? [2]

6. Give **two** epithets used for Hades in this section. [2]

SECTION E · THE PRESCRIBED TEXT

The text: lines 33–58 – Demeter searches

AS YOU READ, LOOK FOR...

- Demeter's physical reactions when she hears Persephone's cry
- How long she searches before Hecate brings news
- What Demeter refuses to do during her grief
- What Hecate has, and has not, seen

HOMERIC HYMN TO DEMETER, 2.33–58

33 So long as both the earth and the starry sky could be seen by the goddess, and the strong-flowing, fish-filled sea, and the rays of the sun, she still hoped to see her dear mother and the tribe of the immortal gods. So during this time her great heart was soothed by hope, distressed as she was. ... The peaks of the mountains and depths of the sea rang with her immortal voice: and her revered mother heard her.

40 A sharp pain seized her heart. She tore off the veil from her divine flowing hair with her own dear hands, hurled her dark cloak down from both her shoulders, and sped off searching like a bird of prey over land and sea. But no one would tell her the truth. Not one of the gods, nor one of the mortal humans, nor one of the birds of omen, messengers of the truth, came to her.

49 Thereafter, for nine days the revered Demeter wandered over the earth, with blazing torches in her hands. In her grief not once did she take of ambrosia and nectar, sweet to drink, nor did she bathe her skin in water. But when the tenth bright dawn came upon her, Hecate came to her, with a torch in her hands. She came with a message, and told her story, saying this:

54 “Revered Demeter, bringer of the seasons, giver of splendid gifts, which one of the gods who dwell in heaven, or which one of the mortal humans seized Persephone and brought grief to your dear spirit? I heard the sounds, but did not see with my eyes who it was. I tell you everything truthfully and in haste.”

YOUR NOTES

SECTION E · CONTINUED

The text: lines 59–89 – Helios reveals the truth

AS YOU READ, LOOK FOR...

- How Demeter addresses Helios — what she asks of him
- What Helios reveals about who is responsible
- How Helios tries to console Demeter
- Whether Helios's consolation is likely to work

HOMERIC HYMN TO DEMETER, 2.59–89

YOUR NOTES

59 So spoke Hecate. She received no response from the daughter of beautiful-haired Rhea, instead she sped off with her, holding blazing torches in her hands. They came to Helios, the watchman of gods and men, stood in front of his horses and the divine goddess asked:

64 “Helios, respect me as a god to a goddess if ever with word or deed I have pleased your heart and spirit. The girl born to me, my sweet offspring, glorious in form — I heard her cries resounding through the barren air, as if she were suffering violence; though I did not see it with my own eyes. But you look down through the bright air on the whole world with your sunbeams. Tell me the truth about my dear child, if you have seen her, what god or mortal man has taken her from me by force, against her will, and gone away.”

74 So she spoke. The son of Hyperion answered with these words: “Daughter of beautiful haired Rhea, Lady Demeter, you shall know the truth; for I stand in great awe of you, and pity you as you grieve over your delicate-ankled daughter. No other of the immortal gods is to blame, only cloud-gathering Zeus who gave her to Hades, his own brother, to call his blushing bride. Into the murky darkness he carried her off with his horses, as she screamed wildly. But, goddess, stop your great lamentation, you must not uselessly hold onto terrible anger. It is not shameful to have, of all the immortals, Hades Ruler of Many as a son-in-law; your own brother and kin. And as for honour, he got his third when the world was divided in the beginning, and dwells with those whose ruler he was destined by lot to be.”

89 So saying, he called to his horses. At his rebuke they swiftly drew the speeding chariot, like birds of prey.

SECTION E · CONTINUED

The text: lines 90–104 – Demeter’s lament

AS YOU READ, LOOK FOR...

- How Demeter reacts to Helios’s words
- The decision she makes about Olympus
- The disguise she takes — and what it tells us
- Where she eventually ends up

HOMERIC HYMN TO DEMETER, 2.90–104

- 90 A more terrible, more dreadful grief came upon Demeter’s spirit. Therefore, in her anger at the son of Cronos of the dark clouds, she abandoned the assembly of the gods and high Olympus. She went among the cities and rich fields of men, for a long time disguising her form. Not one of the men who saw her, recognised her, nor did any of the deep-girded women. Until, one day, she came to the house of skilful Celeos, who was then ruler of fragrant Eleusis. She sat down near the road, her dear heart full of sorrow, at the well called Parthenion, from which the people of the city drew water.
- 100 She sat in the shade — an olive tree had grown overhead — looking like an old woman, born long ago, cut off from childbearing and the gifts of garland-loving Aphrodite. Such are the nursemaids of the children of law-giving kings, and housekeepers in echoing halls.

YOUR NOTES

SECTION E · ANALYSIS

Analysis: Demeter searches

Use the text on the previous three pages to answer the questions below.

Exercise E.1 – Comprehension

1. Give **two** things Demeter does when she hears Persephone's cry. [2]

2. How long does Demeter wander before Hecate brings her news? [1]

3. Give **two** things Demeter refuses to do during her grief. [2]

4. Who does Demeter go to with Hecate, and why? [2]

5. According to Helios, why was Hades a good match for Persephone? [2]

6. What does Demeter do after learning the truth from Helios? [2]

7. What disguise does Demeter take, and where does she end up? [2]

SECTION F · THE PRESCRIBED TEXT

The text: lines 301–319 – famine on the earth

AS YOU READ, LOOK FOR...

- The consequences of Demeter's grief for mankind
- Why Zeus is forced to intervene — and what he stands to lose
- Who Zeus sends first to summon Demeter
- Where Iris finds Demeter

HOMERIC HYMN TO DEMETER, 2.301–319

301 But when they had finished they rushed from their toil and each man went home. Golden-haired Demeter, however, sat there, staying far away from all the blessed immortals, reduced to yearning for her deep-bosomed daughter. She made the grimmest and most brutal year for men on the all-nourishing earth. No ground sent up seeds, for Lady Demeter kept them hidden. Many oxen dragged the bent ploughs over the fields in vain. Much white barley fell upon the ground to no purpose.

310 By means of painful famine, she would have destroyed the whole mortal race and deprived the glorious dwellers of Olympus the honour of gifts and sacrifices, if Zeus had not noticed and pondered upon this in his heart. First he sent golden-winged Iris to summon beautiful-haired Demeter who was so lovely in form. Zeus spoke, and she obeyed the dark-clouded son of Cronos, and ran across the divide between heaven and earth on swift feet. She approached the city of fragrant Eleusis, and found Demeter, dark-veiled, in her shrine, and addressed her with winged words:

YOUR NOTES

SECTION F · CONTINUED

The text: lines 320–334 – Demeter refuses

AS YOU READ, LOOK FOR...

- Iris's message from Zeus — what does she ask?
- How Demeter responds — persuaded or not?
- Who Zeus tries next — and what they offer
- Demeter's one condition for ending the famine

HOMERIC HYMN TO DEMETER, 2.320–334

320 'Demeter, father Zeus, whose wisdom never dies, orders you to come back to the family of everlasting gods. Go, and do not let my message from Zeus be useless.'

324 In this way she begged her: but Demeter's heart was not persuaded by her. Then the father sent in turn the blessed immortal gods: coming one after another they implored her and offered plentiful gifts of great beauty, as well as any honours she might want among the immortal gods. But none could persuade her heart nor her mind as she raged in her soul: she firmly refused these pleas. She asserted that she would never come up to fragrant Olympus, nor let the ground send up one seed, before she saw with her own eyes her fair-eyed girl.

YOUR NOTES

SECTION F · CONTINUED

The text: lines 335–357 – Hermes goes to Hades

AS YOU READ, LOOK FOR...

- Why Zeus chooses Hermes specifically for this task
- How Persephone is described in Hades's house
- What Hermes's appeal emphasises — men, or the gods?
- Hades's 'grim smile' — what does it suggest?

HOMERIC HYMN TO DEMETER, 2.335–357

335 When Zeus, wide-eyed and loud-thundering, heard this, he sent the slayer of Argus, with his staff of gold, to Erebus; so that Hades, having been persuaded by his words, would lead sacred Persephone out of the murky darkness below to the light among the gods; so that her mother could see her with her own eyes and end her rage. Hermes did not disobey, and hurriedly plunged into the depths of the earth, leaving behind the seat of Olympus.

342 He found him, the lord, inside the house sitting on a couch with his revered wife, who was there much against her will due to her longing for her mother — still she was far away, devising a wicked plan to avenge these deeds of the blessed gods. Standing close by them, the mighty slayer of Argus spoke:

347 'Dark-haired Hades, who rules those who have died, father Zeus ordered me to lead noble Persephone out of Erebus so that her mother can see her with her eyes and stop her terrible rage and anger against the gods. She is devising some great scheme to make the feeble tribe of earth-born men perish by hiding seeds below the ground, and thus bring an end to worship of the immortals.'

357 So he spoke. Hades, lord of the dead, smiled grimly, and did not disobey the command of Zeus the King.

YOUR NOTES

SECTION F · CONTINUED

The text: lines 360–385 – Hades’s promises and the pomegranate

AS YOU READ, LOOK FOR...

- What Hades promises Persephone if she stays kindly disposed
- What he says will happen to those who don’t worship her properly
- Persephone’s immediate reaction — what does it tell us?
- The secret act — and what Hades fears

HOMERIC HYMN TO DEMETER, 2.360–385

360 Swiftly he ordered skilful Persephone: ‘Go, Persephone, to your dark-veiled mother. Keep the spirit in your breast kindly; don’t be too angry for all you could be. I will not be a shameful husband to you amongst the immortals, being the brother of Zeus the Father. Here you will rule all that lives and moves, receiving the greatest honours amongst the immortals.’

367 ‘Those who do wrong and do not appease your power with sacrifices, reverently performing rites, and giving rich gifts, will have punishment for all their days.’

370 So he spoke, and skilful Persephone rejoiced, swiftly leaping up in delight. But he secretly gave her one seed of a honey-sweet pomegranate to eat, peering around him, for fear that she would stay for all her days elsewhere alongside dark-veiled and revered Demeter. Hades the Ruler of Many yoked his immortal horses before his golden chariot.

YOUR NOTES

SECTION F · ANALYSIS

Analysis: rage, intervention, the pomegranate

Use the text on the previous three pages to answer the questions below.

Exercise F.1 – Comprehension

1. What does Demeter do that nearly destroys the human race? [2]

2. Who does Zeus send first to ask Demeter to return? [1]

3. Give **two** reasons why Zeus needs to intervene. [2]

4. Who does Zeus send to Hades to bring Persephone back? [1]

5. Give **two** things Hades promises Persephone if she stays kindly disposed towards him. [2]

6. What does Hades say will happen to those who don't honour Persephone with sacrifices? [2]

7. Why does Hades give Persephone the pomegranate seed? [2]

SECTION G · THE PRESCRIBED TEXT

The text: lines 385–404 – reunion and the question

AS YOU READ, LOOK FOR...

- Persephone's first instinct on seeing her mother
- Demeter's sudden suspicion – what she fears
- The conditions of return – if she ate, if she didn't
- What Demeter wants Persephone to explain

HOMERIC HYMN TO DEMETER, 2.385–404

385 Swiftly they accomplished the long journey. Neither sea nor the water of rivers nor grassy mountain peaks slowed the speed of those immortal horses; they sliced through the thick air above them as they went. He halted them, where Demeter of the beautiful garlands was staying, in front of her fragrant shrine. On seeing them she eagerly darted forward, like a Maenad down a thickly forested mountainside.

387 Persephone on the other side, when she saw the beautiful eyes of her own mother, jumped out of the chariot and left the horses behind to run and throw herself onto her, hugging her tight. She, however, holding her dear child in her own arms, suddenly suspected some trick in her heart. Grimly stepping back, she restrained her affection, and spoke:

393 'Child, you didn't eat any food while you were down below, did you? Speak out, don't hide anything, so that we both know. For if you have not, you shall come back from hated Hades and live alongside me and your dark-clouded father, the son of Cronos, honoured by all the immortals. But if you did eat, you will go back again to the depths of the earth, to live for a third part of the seasons each year. The other two parts however, you shall live alongside me and the other immortals. Tell me how he snatched you to the murky darkness, and by what trick the strong lord, the Host of Many, deceived you.'

YOUR NOTES

SECTION G · CONTINUED

The text: lines 405–432 – Persephone’s reply

AS YOU READ, LOOK FOR...

- Persephone’s account of Hermes’s arrival
- How willing she says she was to eat the seed
- The contrast with the earlier description by the poet
- What this tells us about her relationship with Hades

HOMERIC HYMN TO DEMETER, 2.405–432

405 Then, most beautiful Persephone spoke in reply: ‘When luck-bringing Hermes, the swift messenger from his father the son of Cronos and the others in Heaven, came to me bidding me to come back from Erebus, so that you would see me with your eyes, and stop your dreaded rage and anger against the immortals, immediately I leaped up joyfully: but he secretly fed me the seed of a pomegranate, a honey-sweet food, and forced me to eat, though I was unwilling.’

YOUR NOTES

SECTION G · CONTINUED

The text: lines 433–459 – the bargain is set

AS YOU READ, LOOK FOR...

- What the embrace and Hecate's arrival add to the scene
- Zeus's final bargain – what does he promise Demeter?
- How the year is divided – and what this explains
- What happens at Rharus – and why this matters

HOMERIC HYMN TO DEMETER, 2.433–459

433 So then they spent the whole day with their souls united, tenderly embracing one another often which warmed heart and soul; ending the pain of their souls. They gave and received joy to each other. Hecate with her bright headband drew near them, and embraced the daughter of holy Demeter many times: from this time on the Lady became servant and friend to her.

441 All-seeing and loud-thundering Zeus sent a messenger to them, lovely-haired Rhea, to bring dark-veiled Demeter to join the family of the gods. He promised to give her whatever honours she chose for herself from the immortal gods. He nodded his agreement that as the years come around, the girl will spend a third of the year in the murky dark, but two thirds of it with her mother and the other immortals.

448 So he spoke and the goddess did not ignore the message of Zeus. Eagerly she shot down from the heights of Olympus and came to Rharus, previously a fertile and life-giving land but not life-giving at that time, rather it stood unused and without leaves: the white barley had been hidden as part of the plan of delicate-ankled Demeter. But afterwards there would soon be tall ears of corn rippling, and the fat furrows on the ground would be heavy with corn to be tied with bands into sheaves.

YOUR NOTES

SECTION G · CONTINUED

The text: lines 460–474 – the harvest restored**AS YOU READ, LOOK FOR...**

- What Rhea promises Demeter from Zeus
- How Rhea persuades Demeter to comply
- What Demeter does the moment she agrees
- The end of the Hymn — how it leaves the human world

HOMERIC HYMN TO DEMETER, 2.460–474

460 Then Rhea with her bright headband addressed Demeter in this way:

‘Come child, wide-eyed Zeus the loud-thunderer summons you to come and join the family of the gods. He promised to give you whatever honours you choose for yourself from the immortal gods... But come, my child, and obey; do not rage continuously at the son of Cronos who is dark with clouds. Right now, make the life-giving seeds grow tall for men.’

470 So she spoke. Queen Demeter did not disobey. At once she sent up seeds through the fertile ground: all the broad earth was heavy with flowers and leaves.

YOUR NOTES

SECTION G · ANALYSIS

Analysis: reunion and the bargain

Use the text on the previous two pages to answer the questions below.

Exercise G.1 – Comprehension

1. What does Demeter suspect immediately on seeing Persephone? [1]

2. According to Persephone, was she willing or unwilling to eat the pomegranate seed? [1]

3. What are the final terms of the bargain that Zeus agrees to? [2]

4. Who is sent to bring Demeter back to Olympus? [1]

5. Where does Demeter go after she leaves Olympus? [1]

6. How does the Hymn explain the seasons? [3]

7. What does Demeter do at the end of the Hymn? [2]

SECTION H

The underworld in the Hymn

One of the four spec areas for this topic is the portrayal of the underworld. Start with what the prescribed text itself shows us – every detail anchored in lines you have already read.

- **Reached through openings in the earth.** Hades emerges ‘through the wide roads’ of the earth in the Plain of Nysa. The earth opens to swallow Persephone in.
- **Called *Erebus*.** The poet uses this word repeatedly for the dark region of the underworld. It is also described as ‘the murky darkness below’ and ‘the depths of the earth’.
- **Hades travels in a golden chariot.** Drawn by ‘immortal horses’ that slice through the air faster than anything on earth could match.
- **It has a household.** Hades sits on a couch with his ‘revered wife’ Persephone. The realm has domestic life, not just the dead.
- **Persephone is there much against her will** – she longs for her mother. The underworld is not portrayed as a happy place to live.
- **Eating food there binds you.** The single pomegranate seed forces Persephone to return for a third of every year. This rule is treated as binding even on the gods.
- **Hades has authority over the dead.** Those who do not honour Persephone with sacrifices, rites and gifts will face ‘punishment for all their days’.
- **Olympian gods cannot freely enter.** Hermes has to be sent as a special messenger, ‘plunging into the depths of the earth’. The two realms are kept separate.
- **The dead themselves are barely described.** The Hymn focuses on its rulers, not the population – what ordinary souls do or look like is left for other Greek sources.

WHY THIS MATTERS

The Hymn gives us a vivid but partial picture of the underworld – it is dark, it is bound by rules, it has rulers and a household, but it is sealed off from Olympus. To fill in the geography – the rivers, the regions, the famous punishments – we need to look beyond the Hymn at wider Greek beliefs.

SECTION H · CONTINUED

The underworld in wider Greek belief

The Hymn doesn't describe the underworld's geography in detail. For that, we look to other Greek sources – especially Homer's *Odyssey* Book 11, where Odysseus visits the underworld himself.

THE FIVE RIVERS

- **Styx** – the river of hate, crossed by the dead
- **Acheron** – the river of woe
- **Cocytus** – the river of wailing
- **Phlegethon** – the river of fire
- **Lethe** – the river of forgetting

GUARDIANS

- **Charon** – the ferryman who takes souls across the Styx. He must be paid with a coin (which the Greeks placed in the mouth of the dead at burial).
- **Cerberus** – the three-headed dog who guards the entrance and prevents the dead from leaving.

THE THREE JUDGES

Minos, Rhadamanthys and **Aeacus** decided where each soul would go based on the life they had led.

THE THREE REGIONS

- **Elysium** – a paradise reserved for heroes and the righteous
- **Asphodel Meadows** – a neutral, grey place for ordinary souls
- **Tartarus** – the deepest pit, where the worst offenders are punished forever

FAMOUS PUNISHMENTS IN TARTARUS

- **Tantalus** – stands in water that always retreats, with fruit that pulls away when he reaches for it
- **Sisyphus** – rolls a boulder uphill, which falls back down each time he nears the top
- **Ixion** – bound to a fiery wheel that turns for eternity
- **Tityus** – pinned to the ground while vultures eat his liver, which grows back each day
- **The Danaids** – fifty sisters who must fill bottomless water jars

A USEFUL OVERLAP

Many of these figures appear in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 10 – the prescribed Roman text for this topic. When Orpheus sings in the underworld, 'Tantalus did not reach for the ever-retreating water: Ixion's wheel was stilled... the Belides left their water jars: and you, Sisyphus, perched there, on your rock.' Romans inherited the Greek underworld almost wholesale.

SECTION H · CONTINUED

Odysseus and Elpenor

The Greek tradition's most detailed picture of the underworld comes from another descent journey. Odysseus visits it in Book 11 of Homer's *Odyssey*, and one encounter there ties the underworld directly back to the importance of proper burial.

Why Odysseus goes

On his long journey home from Troy, Odysseus is told by the witch **Circe** that he must descend to the underworld to consult the ghost of the blind prophet **Teiresias**. Teiresias alone can tell him how to get back to Ithaca safely. Like Heracles before him, Odysseus enters the underworld as a living hero — a rare privilege.

What he finds

The dead come to Odysseus as 'shades' — faint, wispy outlines of the living people they once were. They cluster around the blood of his sacrifices, eager to drink. He meets:

- **His mother Anticleia**, who had died of grief in his absence
- **Famous dead heroes** from Troy: Agamemnon, Achilles, Ajax
- **Tantalus, Sisyphus and Tityus** — he sees them suffering their famous punishments
- **Heracles** — or rather his shade, since Heracles himself lives among the gods on Olympus

What Odysseus describes builds the picture of the Greek underworld we have already met: a dark, miserable place where the dead exist as shadows of their former selves. Achilles famously tells him he would rather be the lowest slave on earth than a king among the dead.

WHY ELPENOR MATTERS FOR BOTH TOPICS

Elpenor's speech shows that, in Greek belief, the unburied dead are stuck in a kind of limbo — unable to take their proper place in the underworld. This is exactly why burial mattered so much in Topic 1.7. The story of Elpenor links what the Greeks believed about *where the dead go* (Topic 1.8) with what they did for them *before they got there* (Topic 1.7).

ELPENOR — THE LINK TO BURIAL

Before reaching Teiresias, Odysseus meets the ghost of **Elpenor**, the youngest of his crew. Elpenor had got drunk on Circe's island, climbed onto the roof to sleep, fallen and died — and in the rush to leave, Odysseus and the crew had left without burying him.

WHAT ELPENOR BEGS FOR

- To be properly buried with his armour
- To have a tomb marker on the shore
- For his oar to be planted as a memorial