

## **King Tantalus**

**By Barbara Mackay**

The myth of Tantalus is one of the most ancient legends of Greece. It was probably an old story in the early seventh century BC when Homer described Odysseus' visit to the Underworld in *THE ODYSSEY* and it was used freely by poets throughout the Archaic Age. Tantalus may have been a real king, a wealthy ruler of either Lydia or Phrygia in Asia Minor; he was the father of Pelops, who gave his name to a major region of Greece, the Peloponnese. But Tantalus was no ordinary human being he: was Zeus' favorite, perhaps even his son.

Unlike all other mortals, Tantalus was fortunate enough to be included in Zeus' exclusive for-deities-only banquets on Mount Olympus. At one Olympian feast he listened to the chatty, boisterous gods discussing their affairs, then went back to earth and told their secrets to mankind. In a similar versions of his crime, Tantalus attended such a celebration, stole of the ambrosia and nectar that gave the gods their endless lives, the tried to share the heavenly food and drink with other mortals in order to give mankind immortality.

In a final version on the banquet theme the kind invited the Olympian goddesses and gods to dine at his home. To test their wisdom, he killed his son Pelops and added pieces of his flesh to a stew, then waited to see who noticed. All of one deity realized what Tantalus had done. Only Demeter, who was mourning the loss of her daughter, absentmindedly ate, nibbling a bit of Pelops' shoulder. Horrified when she realized what she had done, Demeter replaced the shoulder with an ivory one after Pelops was restored to life.

Tantalus was also accused of larceny and dishonesty. Pandareus once stole Zeus' beloved golden dog and gave it to Tantalus, asking him to guard it. When Zeus discovered the theft, Tantalus refused to give the mastiff back, claiming he knew nothing about the animal. Hermes, messenger of the gods, was sent to examine the problem, the dog was found and Zeus crushed Tantalus under a mountain, ruining his kingdom forever.

Zeus punished Tantalus further by hurling him into Tartarus, a terrifying place in the deepest region of the world, a prison of darkness, mists, howling winds and thick bronze walls. There Tantalus stands, trapped in the pool of water under the inaccessible fruit. Over his head a huge rock is delicately balanced, poised to fall at any moment.

Tantalus has been seen as a friend of humanity for wanting to give us eternal life. He has been called the symbol of modern man, unable to attain what he most desires. He has been viewed as a representation of overweening human pride and identified as the originator of an endless familial curse. To those who favor the historical view, Tantalus' invitation to Olympus marks the transfer of his cult from Asia Minor to Greece.

But the Tantalus story may be read on many levels and can support countless interpretations. The fact that Tantalus' name has been used to identify everything from monkeys, moths, and mountains to a particle accelerator, vocal music and a P.H.A. (potentially hazardous asteroid), proves not only the broad appeal of the particular legend, but also the enduring power of myth. Tantalus is, as Ben Johnson said of Shakespeare, "not of an age, but for all time."

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