

Wisdom of Zeus

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The Mediterranean deity *Zeus* is a stalwart character of ancient Greek literature, credited with a variety of roles, including 'father of gods and of men,' 'king of the immortals,' 'cloud gatherer,' 'counsellor,' and 'thunderer.' A comparative exploration of Mideast and European languages offers cultural insights into the meaning of the name *Zeus*.

Zeus is a principal player in the most celebrated masterpieces of ancient Greek literature.¹ As creator of mortals and immortals he is supreme ruler of the supra-terrestrial sky world as well as the earth below; his intervention in both these environments permeates the plotlines of these old dramas.²

Does the association of *Zeus* with the formation of human and divine life indicate that his name is philologically linked with the Greek *zō*, which carries the sense of 'life' (human, divine, animal, and plant)? Phonetically and semantically this interpretation seems logical. However, the name *Zeus* also occurs in Greek as *Deus* (*z* and *d* are common phonetic correspondences). The name has been linked with the Sanskrit *Dyaus* 'sky,' 'heaven,' 'day.'³

More insight into the name is gained by extending philological analysis to the languages of the Mideast. Cyrus Gordon, in a comparative study of Mediterranean and Mideast cultures, argued for the recognition of a much closer association than is immediately apparent by drawing attention to a number of similarities of custom described in Mediterranean and Mideast literatures. Gordon further argued that Cretan Linear A was actually Mideastern.⁴ In view of

these cultural affinities, it is certainly possible there may be philological links between *Zeus* and one or more Mideast names.

Phonetically, the Sumerian *Zu* 'wisdom, knowledge' is an attractive cognate, especially since the vocative case of *Zeus* is *Ze*. *Zu* occurs in Mideast literature of the second and first millennia BCE as the embodiment of a powerful bird-shaped deity. In stirring verse drama *Zu* takes control of the celestial and earthly worlds by seizing records which detail the operation of cosmic phenomena, particularly the sun, moon and stars, as well as time and the weather. This was, of course, vital knowledge in ancient times.⁵

There are two important points here of cultural linkage between the Mideast and Mediterranean cultures. First, an association between intellectual attributes or processes and birds is also found in Greek literature. In the *Odyssey* (7:36) Phaeacian ships are described as "swift as if bird or thought," and an incident recounted in the *Iliad* (8:247) involves Zeus sending out "an eagle, best of omen bearing birds."

Second, there is an intriguing correlation between the role of the Mideast *Zu* in cosmic activity and that of Mediterranean *Zeus*, who is portrayed as the sender of thunder, lightning, meteors, hail, rain, and snow.⁶ Furthermore, according to Greek tradition, *Zeus* is the son of *Kronos* 'time.'⁷ Thus, if the Greek name *Zeus* is equivalent to the Sumerian name *Zu* 'wisdom,' 'knowledge,' then the *Zeus-Kronos* tradition reflects the recognition that wisdom and knowledge are products of time (in other words acquired with age).

The identification of Mediterranean *Zeus* with Mideast *Zu* is further strengthened by the association of *Zeus* with the frequent descriptors *mētieta* 'counsellor' and *mēdea* 'counsel,' which depict *Zeus* as a dispenser of wisdom and knowledge.⁸ *Mē*, the first element of both of these descriptors, occurs in Sumerian with the sense 'counsel,' often in the context of advice obtained through oracular or divine sources. Both *Mētieta* and *Mēdea* may be cognate with the Sumerian *Mete* 'counsel bringer' (*t* and *d* are common phonetic correspondences).

Yet further insight into the name *Zeus* is provided by Greek dialect variants of the name.⁹ The forms *Zēn* and *Zan* are remarkably like the Sumerian *Zuen* and Assyro-Babylonian *Sin* 'Zu Lord,' a

name for the moon. So is the Mediterranean Zeus actually an embodiment of the moon? The Greek deity Apollōn is a manifestation of the sun, which would leave the complimentary cosmic phenomenon available for Zeus.¹⁰

The philological history of *Zeus* extends even beyond the ancient Mediterranean and Mideast. *Zu* is an element in Latin *suasio* 'advice,' reflected in French *su*, the past participle of the verb 'know.' (Sibilant sounds show much inter-language variability). Additionally Sumerian *izu* 'possessor of wisdom/knowledge' suggests Arabic *wsi*, German *weise*, and English *wise* and *wizard*, all of which are connected with wisdom and knowledge.

These philological links by no means exhaust exploration of the name *Zeus*, but they are sufficient to show that this Mediterranean deity left a mark on European and Mideast culture not only through literature but also through language.

NOTES

1. Notably Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Hesiod's *Theogony*.
2. A descriptor regularly attached to the name *Zeus* is *theōn pater ēde kai andrōn* 'father of gods and also of men.' See for example lines 47 and 468 of Hesiod's *Theogony*.
3. For a summary of this linkage see the Greek lexicon of Liddell and Scott.
4. Discussed in *The Common Background of Greek and Hebrew Civilisations and Evidence for the Minoan Language*.
5. English translations of this Mideast literature appear in Pritchard, Ed.
6. See especially the graphic descriptions in the *Iliad* 4:75-77, 10:4-8, and *Theogony* 689-709.
7. For a summary of the ancient literary sources which describe the origins of Zeus see Graves.
8. See for example *Iliad* 1:175 and *Theogony* 549.
9. For a summary of dialectal variants of *Zeus* see Liddell and Scott.
10. For an explanation of the name *Apollōn*, see Partington.

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