

Why is mercury called

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The closest planet to the Sun, Mercury has been known to humans since time immemorial.

The ancient Babylonians called it Napu, after a Babylonian god, but Mercury owes its modern name to the ancient Greeks and Romans.

Because from Earth Mercury can appear as a morning or evening star, the ancient Greeks originally gave it two names, calling it Apollo when it was visible in the morning and Hermes when it was visible in the evening, both names referencing Greek gods.

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But by about 350 BC they'd realised their error (these morning and evening objects were the same planet) and settled on the single name Hermes.

Hermes, in Greek mythology, was the messenger of the gods, so this must have seemed an appropriate moniker for what is by far the fastest planet in the sky, Mercury orbiting the Sun in a mere 88 days.

Hermes' opposite number in Roman mythology was the god Mercurius, and so as the Greek civilisation slowly ceded influence to the Roman one, the planet became known as Mercurius.

In fact, the Romans named all of the five then-known planets after their deities - see also Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn.

Like Hermes, Mercurius was the messenger of the gods but he was also the god of trade and commerce, which is why his name shares a root with the Latin words merx (goods or merchandise), mercari (to trade) and merces (wages).

Mercurius was later Anglicised to Mercury, giving the planet the name it has today - which in turn inspired the name given to mercury, the metallic element.

Mercury (the metal) was known to the ancient Greeks as "hydrargyos" ("water-silver"), which was Romanized to "hydrargyrum", from which name mercury's chemical symbol Hg is derived.

For similar reasons - it's a similar colour to silver, but flows around like water - metal mercury was originally known in English as "quicksilver".

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