

# HYPERBOREA

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## Where was Hyperborea, and who were the Hyperboreans?

In Greek mythology, according to tradition, the **Hyperboreans** were a mythical people who lived in the hills of Greece. Their land, called **Hyperborea** or **Hyperboria** ('beyond the Boreas (North Wind)'), was perfect, with the Sun shining twenty-four hours a day.

The Greeks thought that Boreas, the god of the North Wind, lived in Thrace, and consequently, Hyperborea was an unspecified nation in the northern parts of Eurasia. Alone among the Twelve Olympians (the principle gods), Apollo was venerated among the Hyperboreans - he spent his winters amongst them. For their part, the Hyperboreans sent mysterious gifts, packed in straw that came first to Dodona and were then passed from person to person until they came to Apollo's temple on Delos (Pausanias). Theseus and Perseus also visited the Hyperboreans.

In Greek maps, from the time of Alexander the Great (356 BC-323 BC), Hyperborea, which is shown variously as a peninsula or island, is located beyond France and has a greater latitudinal than longitudinal extent. Apparently, Hyperborea is a combined notion of present day Britain and Norway/Sweden. Other descriptions place Hyperborea in the general area of the Ural Mountains.

Hyperborea was one of several *terrae incognitae* (unknown territory) to the Greeks and Romans, where Pliny and Herodotus, as well as Virgil and Cicero, reported that people lived to the age of one-thousand years and who enjoyed lives of complete happiness. According to Herodotus (4.13), the Hyperboreans lived beyond the Arimaspians and were visited by Aristeas, who is said to have written a hexameter poem (now lost) dealing with them. Hesiod mentioned the Hyperboreans, Herodotus reported, 'and Homer also in the *Epigoni*, if that be really a work of his'. Also, the sun was supposed to rise and set only once a year in Hyperborei. Large quantities of gold were here, guarded by griffins.

As with other similar legends, some details can be reconciled with modern knowledge. Above the Arctic Circle, from the time of the vernal equinox to the time of the autumnal equinox, the sun can shine for twenty-four hours a day. At the North Pole, the Sun rises and sets only once a year - possibly leading to the erroneous conclusion that a 'day' for such persons is a year long, and therefore that living a thousand days (approx. 2.7 years) would be the same as living a thousand years.

## Abaris, Leto and Ilithyia are Hyperboreans

**Abaris the Hyperborean** (*Abaris Hyperboreos*) was a legendary sage, healer and priest of Apollo known to the ancient Greeks. He was supposed to have learned his skills in his homeland of Hyperborea, which he fled during a plague.

**Leto** (Lato in Dorian Greek, the 'hidden one') is a daughter of the Titans Coeus and Phoebe, and in the Olympian scheme of things, Zeus is the father of her twins, Apollo and Artemis. And this appears to be her one active mythic role - the vessel to carry the twins, Apollo and

Artemis. Once Apollo and Artemis were grown, Leto withdrew, to remain a dim, benevolent matronly figure upon Olympus, dark and mild, her part already played.

**Ilithyia**, or more usually **Eileithyia**, was the Cretan goddess whom Greek mythology adapted as the goddess of childbirth and midwiving, and whom the relentlessly patrilineal Hesiod even described as a daughter of Zeus and Hera.

## Final

The term 'Hyperborean' sees some contemporary use to refer to any who live in a cold climate. For instance, under the Library of Congress classification system, the letter subclass PM includes 'Hyperborean Languages', which refers to all the linguistically unrelated languages of peoples living in Arctic regions, such as the Inuit.

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