

# ORPHEUS

## THE POET



Orpheus was a legendary musician, poet and prophet from Thrace. His enchanting music could charm people, animals, monsters and even stones. Some say that his mother was Calliope, the Muse of epic poetry, and his father was either the Thracian king Oeagrus, or the god of poetry and music, Apollo himself. Orpheus is an important figure in Ancient Greek myth and appears in several major stories, including the legend of the Argo.

Before joining the Argonauts, Orpheus had been married to a maiden named Eurydice. When Eurydice was killed by a snakebite, Orpheus journeyed to the Underworld to persuade Persephone, wife of Hades (god of the Underworld), to let his wife come back to earth. In order to persuade her, Orpheus used his lyre to play a beautiful song, so sad that the souls of the dead wept to hear it. Persephone was won over, and gave Orpheus permission to take Eurydice back, on the condition that Orpheus should not look behind him until both Eurydice and himself were back under the sun. Thus Orpheus led his beloved wife up the steep slope back to the land of the living. As soon as he set foot in sunlight, Orpheus was eager to make sure Eurydice was still following, forgetting Persephone's orders not to look behind him. Suddenly, Eurydice was swallowed up once more back into the underworld, never to be seen again. Orpheus is said never to have loved again, which is why he always appears as a lone figure in other myths, including that of the Argonauts.

Although Orpheus did not have superhuman strength, he was called to join the Argonauts because of his amazing musical talents. This was partly due to a prophecy given to Jason by the wise centaur Chiron, which foretold that the Argonauts' quest would fail if they did not have the help of Orpheus. And the musician did indeed prove very useful on the voyage, using his lyre to save the Argonauts from all sorts of dangers.

In one famous episode, Orpheus charmed the Sirens with his lyre. The Sirens were three women who were half-bird, half-human and lived on an island. They would sing enchanting songs to sailors as they passed, luring them to their deaths on the jagged rocks surrounding the island. All who heard the songs were doomed to drown. But Orpheus managed to save the Argonauts from this cruel fate. As soon as the Argo approached the Sirens' island, Orpheus began to play his lyre and sing, drowning out the sound of the Sirens' song and saving the crew from a shipwreck. One Argonaut called Boutes was still seduced by the Sirens' song and jumped overboard, under the spell of the singing monsters. But he was saved by Aphrodite and taken to the shores of Cape Lilybaeum.