Midas

Definition

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**[](http://www.ancient.eu.com/image/1063/)**

Midas was a mythical king of [**Phrygia**](http://www.ancient.eu.com/phrygia/) who was famous for his ability to change anything that he touched into solid [**gold**](http://www.ancient.eu.com/gold/). He was also famous for a more unfortunate trait, his donkey ears. These he gained as punishment for judging [**Pan**](http://www.ancient.eu.com/Pan/) the better musician than [**Apollo**](http://www.ancient.eu.com/apollo/).

In [**Greek**](http://www.ancient.eu.com/greek/) [**mythology**](http://www.ancient.eu.com/mythology/) [**Midas**](http://www.ancient.eu.com/midas/), wandering one day in his garden, came across the wise satyr Silenus (or Silenos) who was rather the worse for wear after a night’s out drinking. In other versions of the myth Midas actually drugged the pool from which the satyr drank and thereby captured him so that he could learn from his wisdom. This scene was popular on Greek [**pottery**](http://www.ancient.eu.com/pottery/) from c. 560 BCE. Midas, nevertheless, gave the satyr food and drink to restore his spirits and returned him to his great companion, [**Dionysos**](http://www.ancient.eu.com/Dionysos/), the god of wine. In return for this kind treatment the god granted Midas a wish. The king, already famous for his wealth, chose to be given the magical ability to turn any object he touched into solid gold.

On his way home to his palace, Midas immediately put his new skill to the test and was delighted to see how he could change branches, stones and even bits of soil into fantastic nuggets of shining gold. Even flowers and fruit, when touched by the king, turned instantly into gold. The full consequences of this gift soon became evident however, when Midas tried to mount his horse and it too turned into the lifeless metal. On returning to his palace, the golden robes of the king brushed the pillars of the doorway as he went through and they too instantly became gold. Then the situation took a more ominous turn when calling for dinner the King attempted to wash his hands in a bowl of water. Alas, as soon as his fingers entered the water it also changed to gold and on starting to eat, even the tasty delicacies changed into gold once put into his mouth. Terribly hungry and thirsty, even sleep brought no respite as his usually soft bed became cold and hard and sleep was impossible. Midas now became sick of the sight of the gold which surrounded him and he sought out Dionysos to reverse the gift that had so quickly become a curse.

Fortunately, Dionysos was willing to give poor Midas a helping hand and he directed the king to the source of the river Pactolus in [**Lydia**](http://www.ancient.eu.com/lydia/). If Midas washed in the waters he would lose his golden touch. After much arduous travel, Midas found the spring and immediately leapt in, washing away his curse. This myth also explained the actual presence of gold dust in the river bed of the Pactolus

Midas was to have another encounter with a deity and this time he was even less fortunate. The pastoral god Pan, inventor of the syrinx or [**panpipes**](http://www.ancient.eu.com/Panpipes/) made of reeds, boastfully set himself up against the [**lyre**](http://www.ancient.eu.com/Lyre/)-playing abilities of the great god Apollo and challenged him to a musical contest. When Midas judged Pan to be the better musician, Apollo in his rage gave the king the ears of an ass. Understandably ashamed of his new features, Midas hid away in his palace and from then on always wore a turban so that only his barber knew the truth. Sworn and bullied into silence, the barber could not hold onto his secret for long and one day he relieved his burden by digging a hole into the ground and whispering into it ‘Midas has ass’s ears’. From that very spot though, grew a handful of reeds and whenever the wind blew they would forever sing softly the refrain ‘Midas has ass’s ears’.

It is possible that the mythical figure of Midas was based on a real king of Phrygia in the 8th century BCE known as Mita. Mita or Midas made offerings to [**Delphi**](http://www.ancient.eu.com/delphi/), the first foreign monarch to do so. A skeleton discovered in the [**tomb**](http://www.ancient.eu.com/tomb/) mounds outside [**Gordium**](http://www.ancient.eu.com/Gordium/), the Phrygian capital, has been tentatively attributed to Mita by some scholars.

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| **Midas**  The Midas touch, or the gift of profiting from whatever one undertakes, is named for a legendary king of Phrygia. Midas was granted the power to transmute whatever he touched into gold. |  | http://www.mythweb.com/today/media/buttons.gif |
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|  | The Myth of Midas  Midas was a king of Phrygia, a region nowadays part of Turkey. One day some of his farmhands brought him a satyr they had caught napping in the vineyard. This creature, part man, part goat, still groggy and much the worse for wear, had been thoroughly trussed up to keep him from escaping. Midas immediately recognized Silenus, right-hand satyr to the god Dionysus, and ordered him set free.  Silenus explained that he and his master had just returned from the East where they had been engaged in spreading the cultivation of the grape. Dionysus had brought back a tiger or two, an ever-expanding flock of followers and one very drunken satyr. Silenus had conked out in Midas's vineyard to sleep it off. Now he was grateful to the king for treating him with dignity, and so was Dionysus. The god was so pleased, in fact, that he offered to grant whatever Midas should wish for.  Now, you didn't get to rule a kingdom in those days without a pretty active grasp of what makes for a successful economy. Midas didn't have to think twice. As the simplest plan for the constant replenishment of the royal treasury, he asked that everything he touch be turned to gold.  Arching a godly eyebrow, Dionysus went so far as to ask if Midas were sure. To which the king instantly replied, "Sure I'm sure." So Dionysus waved his pinebranch sceptre and conferred the boon.  And Midas rushed back home to try it out. Tentatively at first, he laid a trembling fingertip upon a bowl of fruit and then a stool and then a wooly lambkin. And when each of these had been transmuted in a trice into purest gold, the king began to caper about like the lambkin before its transformation.  "Just look at this!" he crowed, turning his chariot into a glittering mass of priceless-though-worthless transportation. "Look what daddy can do!" he cried, taking his young daughter by the hand to lead her into the garden for a lesson in making dewy nature gleam with a monotonous but more valuable sheen.  Encountering unexpected resistance, he swung about to see why his daughter was being such a slug. Whereupon his eyes encountered, where late his child had been, a life-size golden statue that might have been entitled "Innocence Surprised".  "Uh oh," said Midas, and from that point on the uh-oh's multiplied. He couldn't touch any useful object without it losing in utility what it gained in monetary value, nor any food without it shedding all nutritional potency on its leaden way down his gullet.  In short, Midas came to understand why Dionysus had looked askance when asked to grant the favor. Fortunately, the god was a good sport about it. He allowed Midas to wash away his magic touch in the river Pactolus, which ever after enjoyed renown for its shimmering deposits of gold. |

**Discussion Questions – Answer all questions in complete sentences.**

1. Why did Dionysus reward Midas?
2. Describe Midas as one of the following and give details that support:
   1. Thoughtful
   2. Stingy
   3. Kind and fair
   4. Wicked and cruel
3. Why did Midas let the satyr go?
4. What was not turned into gold?
5. In the end, what did Midas ask Dionysus to do?
6. What did Midas wish for when Dionysus granted him one more wish?
7. In your own words, what does the “Midas Touch” mean?
8. What lesson does Midas learn?
9. Enter this story in your reading log.