



## Summary :

A deity of the Hyperborean Thracian tribes, associated with the afterlife. He is said to have been a student and slave of Pythagoras. He preached happiness in the afterlife and was worshiped as a god even during his lifetime. He became equated with other Geto-Dacian gods like Sabazios and Gebeleizis.

## Other Names

Salmoxis, Gebeleizis

## Main Role

Gaeto-Dacian deity

## 1. Etymology

In all likelihood the name derives from the Thracian word *zalmos*, meaning 'skin'. As the Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry mentions, when he was born, the hide of a bear was sewn onto his skin to cover him.<sup>1</sup> Another approach attributes this name to the north Thracian city of Salmydessus,<sup>2</sup> while a third theory traces it to the Thracian word *zamol*, meaning 'earth'.

## 2. Life - Worship

[Herodotus](#), who recounts the Geto-Dacian myth of the Hyperborean [Thracian tribes](#),<sup>3</sup> reports that Zalmoxis (or Salmoxis as he is called by the historian) was a deity of an ambiguous nature. The Geto-Dacian populations of northern Thrace (modern Romania) considered those dead who met Zalmoxis after passing away to be fortunate. In order to convey their requests to and wishes to him, every four years the Getae drew lots to select a messenger who was then thrown on the heads of three fixed spears. If the man succumbed to his wounds, the Getae interpreted this as a sign of Zalmoxis' goodwill; if he survived he was accused and another messenger was selected.

According to another version, mentioned by Herodotus and echoing the beliefs of the Pontic Greeks, Zalmoxis lived on the island of [Samos](#) and was the slave and disciple of [Pythagoras](#), who had instructed him in his metaphysical theories as well as in hierurgy.<sup>4</sup> Following his manumission he travelled to many places and became accustomed with the Ionic way of thinking and Ionic culture, amassing great wealth. Upon returning to his poor and backward country he built a large mansion where he offered dinners to his distinguished compatriots. During those dinners Zalmoxis taught them about an afterlife in a place where the faithful enjoyed eternal bliss. Upon completing this instruction he disappeared in a subterranean chamber which he had constructed himself. He lived there for three years, while his compatriots mourned him as dead. When in the fourth year Zalmoxis appeared before them alive, the Thracians were convinced his teachings were true. He then convinced the king to appoint him co-ruler so that he can interpret for him the signs of the gods, but he finally was himself worshipped as a god. Having renounced worldly affairs he moved into a cavernous and impassable place, where he rarely came into contact only with the king and his court. Mt Kogaionon, where Zalmoxis lived, came to be considered holy, and it was called sacred.

According to [Strabo](#),<sup>5</sup> Zalmoxis was respected by the king of the Getae as well as by simple people, for he had the power to interpret the ambiguous signs of the gods. The worship of Zalmoxis was perhaps the basic form of religious expression of the Geto-Dacian populations. Many parallels have been drawn between certain of its aspects and later [Mithraistic](#) and Christian traditions; the deity controlled the natural world and imparted eternal life on the believers.

It is possible that Zalmoxis is the later god Sabazios (Thracian equivalent of Dionysus or Zeus), while Mnaseas of Patrae<sup>6</sup> identified him with Cronus. Later Zalmoxis was merged with Gebeleizis,<sup>7</sup> the Getan god of lightning and the horizon.



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1. Porph., *Pyth.* 14.
  2. Hdt. 4.93.
  3. Hdt. 4.94-96.
  4. Porph., *Pyth.* 16.
  5. Strabo 7, 228-229.
  6. *FHG*, "Μνασέου Πατρέως αποσπ. 23 παρά Φωτ. Μυριόβ."
  7. Hdt. 4.94.4
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	Zalmoxis <a href="http://soltdm.com/langtdm/thes/z/zalmoxis.1.htm">http://soltdm.com/langtdm/thes/z/zalmoxis.1.htm</a>
	Zalmoxis <a href="http://mircea-eliade.com/from-primitives-to-zen/036.html">http://mircea-eliade.com/from-primitives-to-zen/036.html</a>

#### Sources

Hdt. 4.93-96.

Strabo VII, 228-229