CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY UNBOUND



Jessica Mellenthin and Susan O. Shapiro

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1.1: Agamemnon and Iphigenia

Agamemnon was the King of Mycenae [see Argos on map] and brother to Menelaus, the King of Sparta [map]. (Together the brothers are called the Atreidae, meaning “the sons of Atreus”.) When Menelaus’ wife, Helen, was abducted by the Trojan Prince, Paris, the Atreidae sought out their Greek allies to sail to Troy and bring Helen back; they also planned to punish the Trojans for stealing Helen of Sparta and violating Xenia (see Xenia). All the Greek allies were planning to meet at Aulis. The process of gathering their forces took a few years because the kingdoms were spread out and unconnected. Finally, the greatest Greek warriors gathered at Aulis and were ready to cross the sea to attack Troy [see Ilium/Troia on map]. However, the wind kept blowing against them, preventing them from sailing out towards Troy. This kept up for weeks, long enough for the troops to get restless and consider going home. The seer Calchas was among the group and he told Agamemnon that he had angered the goddess Artemis and the wind would not allow them to make their voyage until Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter, Iphigenia, to the goddess. Sources differ on why exactly Artemis was so angry with Agamemnon. Some say he boasted that he could hunt better than the goddess, while others say that he had not done anything; she just was angry at him.



The Sacrifice of Iphigeneia by François Perrier (1632-1633) in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Dijon, France

With the campaign in trouble and the Atreidae’s reputations at stake, Agamemnon chose to sacrifice his daughter. He sent Odysseus and Diomedes to his wife, Clytemnestra (who happened to be Helen’s sister), to tell her that he had arranged a marriage between their daughter, Iphigenia, and the hero Achilles and Achilles wished to marry her before he went off to fight. Agamemnon told this lie because he suspected that if he told his wife the real reason why he wanted Iphigenia to come to Aulis, that Clytemnestra would not go along with the plan. But Clytemnestra suspected nothing; she prepared her daughter for marriage and sent her off to Aulis. Once there, Agamemnon sacrificed his own daughter (though some sources contend that Artemis replaced her with a deer at the last second and whisked the girl off to live as her priestess among the Taurians). This action earned Agamemnon the undying hatred of his wife.



A fresco of the sacrifice of Iphigenia from Pompeii in the National Archaeological Museum in Naples

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1.2: Aphrodite

Roman name: Venus

Epithets: Cypris (Lady of Cyprus), Cythereia (Lady of Cythera, an island off the southern coast of the Peloponnese), Paphian (Lady of Paphos, a town on Crete), Urania (Daughter of Uranus), Smile-loving goddess, Goddess of smiles and deceit

Symbols: doves

Goddess of erotic love and beauty



The Birth of Venus in the Casa della Venere in Conchiglia in Pompeii

Two Stories on the Birth of Aphrodite

Aphrodite has two origins. Hesiod says that Aphrodite came from the frothy mix of sea foam and Uranus' genitals when Cronus dismembered his father [see Origins]. She washed ashore either at the city of Paphos on Cyprus (accounting for her epithets Cypris and Paphian) or on the island Cythera (thus the epithet Cythereia). Paphos was also the site of Aphrodite's main temple on Cyprus. Homer calls Aphrodite the daughter of Zeus and Dione, who was either a Titan or one of the daughters of Oceanus. The name, Dione, is also the feminine form of Zeus' name.



Aphrodite rising from the sea with the help of her attendants on the Ludovisi Throne in the Palazzo Altemps in Rome

Aphrodite's Unhappy Marriage

Aphrodite was married to the blacksmith god, Hephaestus, but the two never had any children. This is not to say Aphrodite never had children, in fact she had several children from her long-standing affair with the war god, Ares. Together they had Harmonia (who was married to the Theban King, Cadmus), Eros (known as Cupid in Latin), Phobus (Panic), and Deimus (Fear). Hephaestus was not happy when he learned of this affair and trapped the lovers in a net [see Hephaestus].

Aphrodite and Adonis

Aphrodite also had notable mortal lovers, including Adonis and Anchises. Adonis was a handsome young man and Aphrodite fell deeply in love with him. Persephone was also in love with Adonis, so they went to Zeus to decide which one would have the youth's love [see Persephone]. Zeus split the time into three parts. He gave one to each goddess and one to Adonis himself to decide where to spend it. Adonis chose to spend his portion of the year with Aphrodite. The deal did not last long though, because Adonis was quite fond of hunting. On a boar hunt, he was gored by the animal and died. Aphrodite was distraught and she induced an anemone to grow from Adonis' blood.

Aphrodite and Anchises

Anchises was a young Trojan nobleman who tended to herds on Mount Ida. Zeus was angry at Aphrodite for making the gods, especially himself, fall in love with mortals and make fools of themselves pursuing them, so he caused Aphrodite to fall madly in love with Anchises. After she consummated her love for Anchises, Aphrodite made him promise never to tell anyone they slept together, on pain of a thunderbolt from Zeus. (This story is told in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*.) But apparently, Anchises could not keep his promise. The next time we see Anchises, in the *Aeneid*, he is lame from having been struck by Zeus' thunderbolt. Anchises clearly did not die from this punishment, but he seems to have been crippled for the rest of his life. The product of their union was Aeneas, whom Aphrodite saved multiple times from death during the Trojan War.

Aphrodite's Anger

Like other gods, Aphrodite would punish anyone, mortal or god, for slights against her. Theseus' son Hippolytus became a devotee of the virgin goddess, Artemis, and thus shunned the pleasures of the flesh. This angered Aphrodite, who felt that Hippolytus did not worship her sufficiently. To get back at Hippolytus, she caused his death by making his step-mother, Phaedra, fall in love with him [see Theseus]. She also punished Eos (the goddess of the dawn) for having an affair with Ares by making her fall in love with mortal after mortal.

In a story not seen until the Roman period, Venus hounded the beautiful girl, Psyche, just for being beautiful. Psyche (whose name means "soul" in Greek) was so beautiful that the people around her worshipped her instead of Venus. Psyche did not ask for this worship, but Venus wanted to punish her anyway. Venus sent her son Cupid to shoot Psyche with his arrows and make her fall in

love with some hideous beast instead. This didn't go according to plan though, and Cupid fell in love with Psyche himself. Cupid hid Psyche in his palace, not telling her who he was, until she learned his identity through a trick. In his anger at being tricked, Cupid threw her out of his house. Psyche wandered around Greece until she came to a temple of Venus and submitted herself to Venus' wrath. Venus gave her several impossible tasks, like sorting a large pile of grain in one night or bringing back a jar of water from the Styx. Venus gave her these tasks hoping she would fail, but the world helped Psyche along the way. Some ants helped her sort the grain and an eagle took the jar and filled it with water from the Styx for her. After Psyche had successfully completed these and other impossible tasks, Cupid forgave her for her deceit. He brought Psyche to Jupiter who put an end to the enmity between Psyche and Venus and allowed the two to marry. This story is told in *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius.

The Origin of Aphrodite

Aphrodite originally began as a fertility goddess and had close connections with other Near Eastern fertility goddesses such as Astarte, Cybele, and Ishtar. At one point, these may all have been the same goddess. Aphrodite's main centers of worship were on Cyprus, an island that served as a crossroads between Greece and the Near East, and in Near Eastern sites. Her eastern origins may explain why she favored the Trojans during the Trojan War.

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1.3: Apollo

Roman name: Apollo

Epithets: Pythian (for killing the Python), Lycian (unknown, may be connected to Lycia), Far-Shooter (for his archery skills), Delian (for his birth myth), Phoebus (Shining One), Delphinius (God of the Dolphins)

Symbols: lyre, bow and arrow, laurel/myrtle/bay tree, crow/raven, omphalos, dolphin, tripod

God of youth, music, prophecy, archery, and medicine (both disease and healing). The Romans conflated him with the Greek god of the sun, Helius.



The Apollo Belvedere in the Vatican Museum

The Birth of Apollo

Apollo was one of the two children born to Zeus and the goddess, Leto. When Leto was pregnant with Apollo and Artemis, she was looking for a place to give birth, but no place was willing to allow her to give birth on their territory. There was a rumor that Apollo was going to be a wild and terrible divinity, and no place wanted to take the risk that Apollo might harm his birthplace after he was born. But Leto finally convinced the small island of Delos to allow her to give birth there, by promising that Apollo would have a great temple there.

But even though Leto wanted to give birth on Delos, at first she wasn't able to do so. This was because Hera, who was jealous of Zeus' affair with Leto, kept Eileithyia, the goddess of childbirth, away from the island. Because no birth could take place unless Eileithyia was present, this was one way that Hera could at least temporarily prevent the children of her rivals from being born. Hera would later play a similar trick with Heracles [see Heracles]. In the case of Apollo and Artemis, Iris (who was a rainbow, and was one of the gods' messengers) was dispatched to bring Eileithyia and according to the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, as soon as she stepped onto the island, Apollo and Artemis were born.

Apollo and Artemis

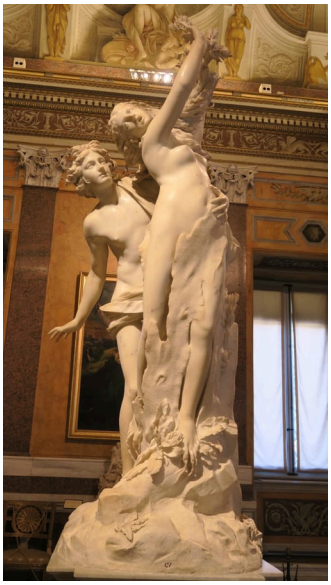
Apollo and his sister often avenged their mother for the wrongs done to her. The twins killed the giant Tityus because he had attempted to rape Leto. The twins also took vengeance on Niobe, who had seven sons and seven daughters. Niobe boasted that she had born more and greater children than Leto. Angered at Niobe's hubris (arrogance, excessive pride, and the desire to challenge the gods) Apollo and Artemis shot Niobe's children with arrows until they were all dead. Niobe wept uncontrollably until she turned into a stone which still spouts tears.

Both Apollo and his sister were excellent archers and the bow and arrow were important symbols for both. Plagues and unexplained deaths were attributed to Apollo or Artemis shooting the victims with arrows (the beginning of the *Iliad* is a good example of this). The lyre was most associated with Apollo as the god of music,

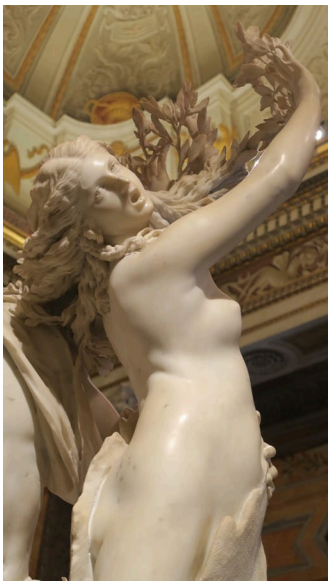
however, it was created by the god Hermes [see Hermes].

Apollo's Unhappy Love Affairs

Apollo was unlucky in a number of his love affairs; in fact, he seems never to have been happy in love. He fell in love with Cassandra, the daughter of Priam, king of Troy, and in order to win her consent, he offered her the gift of prophesy. But after she was given the gift, Cassandra changed her mind and refused his advances. A god cannot take back a gift once it has been given, so Apollo could not prevent Cassandra from correctly predicting the future, so he cursed her so that she would never be believed, despite the fact that she was always correct. Another time Apollo pursued the nymph, Daphne, but she fled from him, calling upon the gods to save her. The gods transformed Daphne into a laurel tree and Apollo, being disheartened, vowed that the laurel would be his special plant forever. Another notable love of Apollo was Hyacinth, a Spartan boy. Hyacinth was killed accidentally by a discus which Apollo threw toward him in a game. From the blood of the boy, the god made a flower grow and named it hyacinth, after the boy. The flower is red and has white markings that resemble the letters AI, which sound like the Greek mourning cry. (How would you categorize this myth?)



Apollo and Daphne by Bernini in the Galleria Borghese in Rome



Close up of Daphne's face

Apollo bedded the mortal Coronis, but she then decided to take a mortal lover. Apollo was informed of her betrayal by a crow, which he changed from its previous white color to black. (This explains why all crows are now black.) Coronis was pregnant at with Apollo's child when she decided to sleep with the mortal, so Apollo killed them both, but he rescued the child from her womb. The child, Asclepius, was raised by the good centaur Chiron [see Centaurs], from whom he learned how to heal. Asclepius became so good at healing that he started to bring the dead back to life. This angered Zeus, so he killed Asclepius with his thunderbolt. Apollo was furious, so he killed the Cyclopes who made the thunderbolts as retaliation. Zeus wanted to imprison Apollo in Tartarus as punishment, but Leto intervened on her son's behalf and convinced Zeus to force Apollo to live as a mortal for a year. Asclepius was deified and became a god of medicine and healing. The caduceus, Asclepius' special staff, became a symbol of healing.



A kylix depicting Apollo with his symbols in the Delphi Museum

Apollo in the Trojan War

In the Trojan War, Apollo was on the side of the Trojans. The reason for this is unclear, although his epithet, Lycian, may mean "from Lycia" (in what is now southern Turkey).

The Origin of Apollo

It is unclear where the god Apollo came from. He was not originally a god of the Mycenaeans (the Greek-speaking peoples who migrated into the Greek peninsula sometime around 1900 BC), nor was he one of the pre-Hellenic gods of the indigenous people. His mother and sister were both Asiatic goddesses, but there is no clear connection between them in origin. Again, his epithet, Lycian, may point to a Near Eastern connection.

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1.4: Ares

Roman name: Mars

God of war



The Ludovisi Ares with Eros in the Palazzo Altemps in Rome

Ares was the son of Zeus and Hera, but because of his bloodthirstiness, not many of the gods cared much for him, except Aphrodite. Ares and Aphrodite had a long-standing affair [see Aphrodite]. Ares had four children with her as well as many children with Thracian women [map]. He was the father of several of the Argonauts and of the Amazon Queen, Penthesileia.

Ares was worshiped mostly in areas outside of Greece and thus had barbaric connotations (in Greek, the word "barbaros" [βάρβαρος] means "foreign"). Thrace and Scythia were centers for his worship and in myth he was largely associated with the Amazons and Colchians [map]. The belt Heracles stole from the Amazon Queen Hippolyte had been given to her by Ares [see 12 Labors of Heracles]. The grove in which the Golden Fleece rested was sacred to Ares.

Despite his bloodthirstiness, Ares was often beaten by others. Athena wounded him gravely while fighting at Troy. Heracles managed to take him down four times while fighting at Pylus. The giants Otus and Ephialtes trapped him in a pot and he was stuck there for over a year until Hermes rescued him.

The Greeks were not fond of Ares because he was so bloodthirsty. In fact, Zeus tells Ares, "To me, you are the most hateful of the gods who hold Olympus, because quarreling is always dear to you, and war and battles" (*Iliad* 5.890-91). Zeus' outburst is particularly striking because Ares was his own son. On the other hand, Mars was always a favorite god of the Romans. Mars was the protector of Rome and he was their patron god similar to the way Athena was for the Athenians. Mars was also especially important to the Romans because he was not only their war god but also an agricultural god.



Mars Resting by Diego Velázquez (1640); in the Prado Museum in Madrid

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1.5: Artemis

Roman name: Diana

Epithets: Potnia Therōn (Mistress of Wild Beasts)

Symbols: bow and arrow, quiver, hunting dogs, deer and other animals, fawn skin

Goddess of hunt, wild animals (especially baby animals), childbirth. The Romans conflated Diana with the Greek goddess of the moon, Selene (just as they identified Apollo with Helius, the Greek god of the sun).

Birth of Artemis

Artemis was the twin sister to Apollo and was the daughter of Zeus and Leto [see Apollo]. Both Apollo and Artemis took revenge against anyone who attempted to harm their mother. Apollo and Artemis slew the giant Tityus and killed the children of the mortal woman Niobe [see Apollo].



Apollo and Diana Punishing Niobe by Killing her Children by Abraham Bloemaert (1591) found in the National Gallery of Denmark in Copenhagen

Artemis' Cruelty: Callisto, Actaeon, Agamemnon, Orion

Artemis, like many other deities, was known for her cruel behavior, but Artemis seems to have been one of the cruelest and most vengeful of the deities. In some cases, she would become angry and punish human beings even if (at least in their own minds) they had done nothing wrong. Artemis was a virgin goddess, and she was accompanied by nymphs, who also were expected to remain virgins. If any of these nymphs slipped up and lost their virginity, Artemis treated them very harshly. One such attendant was Callisto, whom Zeus raped. Afterwards, Artemis changed Callisto into a bear for breaking her vow of chastity. In another example, the hunter Acteon, was out hunting and accidentally stumbled upon the goddess bathing. She turned Acteon into a deer and allowed him to be torn apart by his own hunting dogs. When Agamemnon, the Mycenaean king, angered her, Artemis demanded that he sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to her before he was able to sail for Troy [see Agamemnon and Iphigneia]. Despite the fact that Agamemnon did as she commanded, Artemis' sympathies in the Trojan War were always with the Trojans. In some versions of the myth of Orion, his death, too, was caused by Artemis' anger. He either challenged her, tried to rape her or one of her attendants, or he had an affair with Eos, the goddess of dawn; in any case Artemis shot him. But after his death he was placed in the sky to become the constellation, Orion.



The Death of Actaeon by Titian (between 1559 and 1575) in the National Gallery in London



Diana and Actaeon by Titian (between 1556 and 1559) in the Scottish National Gallery in Edinburgh

Artemis' Origins

Artemis seems to have originally been a goddess of wild beasts from the Near East. She was similar to the goddess Potnia Therōn (Lady of Wild Animals), with whom she later became identified. She also has strong connections to the Gorgon, Medusa. Many of the important figures among her retinue of nymphs are believed to be local goddesses who were similar in function to Artemis.



Potnia Theron with a gorgon's head on a plate in the British Museum



A plate depicting Potnia Theron with a woman's head in the Mykonos Museum

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1.6: Athena

Roman name: Minerva

Epithets: Pallas (Maiden), Tritogeneia (unknown meaning), Promachus (One who fights for her city), Ergane (Artisan/worker), Owl-eyed, Polias (Protector of the city), Parthenios (Virgin), Gray-eyed

Symbols: owl, Nike, olive tree, aegis, snake

Functions: Goddess of just wars, wisdom, and crafts; Patroness of Athens; Helper of heroes

The Birth of Athena

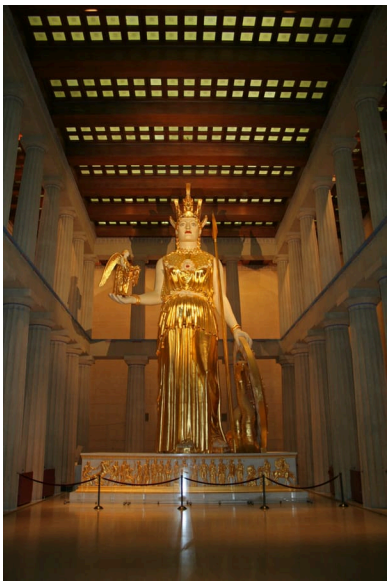
Athena was the daughter of Zeus and his first wife Metis. Gaia told Zeus that Metis would first bear a daughter then a son who would overthrow his father. Zeus, like his father and grandfather before him, wanted to avoid this fate, so when Metis became pregnant, he swallowed his wife whole [see Zeus]. After a few months, Zeus developed a splitting headache and asked Hephaestus (or in some versions, the Titan Prometheus) to help him relieve the pressure. Hephaestus took up his axe and split open Zeus' head and out jumped Athena, fully dressed in armor. Another tradition has it that Athena was born near a river called Triton, an etymological aetiological myth that was created to explain her epithet Tritogeneia.



The birth of Athena on a pyxis in the Louvre

Athena as the Protector of Heroes

Athena was particularly fond of courageous youths and helped many heroes in their quests. When Perseus was sent to kill the Gorgon, Medusa, Athena provided the sword and shiny shield needed to slay the Gorgon without looking at her. She gave the hero Bellerophon the golden bridle he needed to ride the winged horse, Pegasus; by riding on Pegasus' back, Bellerophon was able to kill the monster, Chimera. The Argonauts were saved from the Clashing Rocks by Athena's help [see Argonauts]. Odysseus, however, because of his cunning, was one of Athena's favorite mortals. Odysseus' return home after the Trojan War was only possible because of Athena's machinations. Her intervention also helps him survive the Greater Ajax's wrath in Sophocles' *Ajax*. Whenever Odysseus is depicted in a myth, Athena is never far away.



The statue of Athena in the Nashville Parthenon is based upon the ancient statue in the Athens Parthenon made from ivory and gold.

Athena and Arachne

Athena, like the other gods, was quick to punish mortals who thought they were equal to the gods. One such mortal was the weaver, Arachne. Arachne boasted that her weaving was as good as Athena's. Athena was angry and challenged Arachne to a contest of weaving. Athena wove a tapestry depicting mortals who challenged the gods and were punished. Arachne answered with a tapestry depicting the scandalous behavior of the Olympians. It was obvious that Arachne's skill was equal to Athena's, and Athena was livid so she beat the girl mercilessly. Arachne chose to hang herself to end her suffering, but Athena was not yet done with her and turned Arachne into a spider, giving the tiny animal its name in Greek (arachne, ἀράχνη) and its practice of weaving webs.

Athena as the Protector of Athens

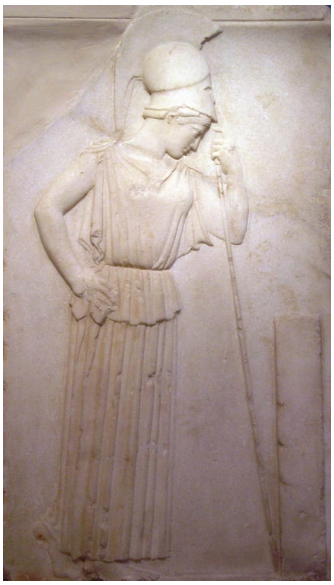
The city of Athens was named after Athena because she was the Athenians' protector and benefactor, but she had earned that right by winning a competition with Poseidon for patronage over the city. Differing versions say that either Zeus (and possibly other gods) judged the contest or that it was a committee of Athenian kings. Either way, each divinity was asked to provide a gift for the city and the judges would decide who had given the better gift. Poseidon struck a rock with his trident and out came a spring of saltwater, but Athena grew an olive tree. The judges decided that the olive was more useful than the spring and awarded Athena the city. When Athena was not living on Olympus, she often lived in the Parthenon, the temple to her on the Acropolis in Athens. Thus, when Orestes came to Athena to judge whether he should be punished for the murder of his mother, Clytemnestra, he came to her in Athens. Athena used this opportunity to establish the Areopagus council as the official court in Athens [see Oresteia].



The Parthenon on the Acropolis of Athens



The west pediment of the Nashville Parthenon



Athena mourning a fallen Athenian soldier on a grave stele now located in the Acropolis Museum

Athena's Virginity

Like the other virgin goddesses (Artemis and Hestia), Athena sometimes had to work to preserve her virginity against the advances of other immortals. One such instance was when Hephaestus attempted to rape her. She managed to break away from him before he could violate her, but his semen fell to the ground. A child was born from the mixing of the semen and the earth, and he was named Erichthonius. Athena took the child and raised him in her temple and he eventually became one of the earliest Kings of Athens.

The Aegis

Athena held the unique favor of her father and was allowed to use his aegis [see Aegis]. More often than not, it is Athena, not Zeus, who is depicted with the aegis. Athena is usually shown with the severed head of Medusa either on her aegis or her shield. Perseus gave her Medusa's head in gratitude for her aid in helping him kill the Gorgon.



A statue of Athena in the Naples Museum

Athena and the Lesser Ajax

Because of Paris' decision in the beauty contest between Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite, Athena sided with the Greeks when the Trojan War broke out [see Intro to Iliad]. This did not stop her from brutally punishing the Lesser Ajax for an atrocity he committed during the sack of Troy. (The Lesser Ajax was so called to distinguish him from the more famous warrior who was also named Ajax. The more famous Ajax was known as the Greater Ajax.) As the Greeks were sacking Troy, raping and pillaging as they went, Cassandra, a daughter of Priam, sought protection in Athena's temple. When a person seeks the protection of a god or goddess in that deity's temple, that person becomes sacred and should not be harmed. But Ajax pulled Cassandra away from the statue of Athena, which she was clutching. He then raped Cassandra in Athena's temple, enraging the goddess with his sacrilege and desecration of her temple. She enlisted the help of Poseidon to destroy him. On his way home, Ajax's ships crashed onto rocks, but Ajax survived, shouting to the heavens, "not even the gods can kill me!" This boast infuriated Poseidon, who split the rock Ajax was clutching, causing him to fall into the sea and drown (Homer, *Odyssey*, 4.499-511).

The Origin of Athena

Athena may possibly have originated as a warrior goddess of the Mycenaeans, an early Greek-speaking people based in the Peloponnese. She is associated with snakes, but it is not clear what is the significance of the snake to Athena.



Statue of Athena from the depiction of the Gigantomachy from the Old Athena Temple on the Acropolis, now in the Acropolis Museum

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1.7: Caduceus

The caduceus (kerykeion in Greek) was herald's staff with two snakes wound around it. It was carried by Hermes to signify his role as messenger and as guide for souls to the Underworld. Hermes can sometimes use the caduceus as a way to channel the power he has, such as waking or putting mortals to sleep [Homer, *Iliad*, 24.343-345]. It should be carefully distinguished from the rod of Asclepius, which had only one snake, which Asclepius used in healing.

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1.8: Centaurs

Half-man, half-horse creatures

Centaurs (sometimes called hippocentaurs) were creatures with the torso and head of a man and the body of a horse. As befits their part-beast, part-human status, they had trouble controlling their passions. Also, they had a strong taste for wine but could not hold their liquor. At the wedding of the Lapith, Peirithoüs, they all got very drunk and abducted all the women present, including the bride. The Lapiths fought back, along with Peirithoüs' good friend, Theseus, and most of the centaurs were killed or banished. There were, however, a few civilized centaurs, such as Pholus, who helped Heracles in his battle against the centaurs [see the 12 Labors of Heracles], and the immortal Chiron, who served as the teacher and mentor of several heroes, such as Jason, Asclepius, and Achilles.

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1.9: Chthonian Deities

All Greek deities can be divided into two types: the Olympians, who were thought of as living on Mount Olympus, or somewhere in the heavens, and the Chthonians, who were thought of as living below the earth. Their name comes from *chthōn* (χθών), which is the Greek word for “earth” or “ground”. In order to sacrifice to one of the Olympian gods, an animal would be ritually slaughtered and the less edible pieces would be burned on an altar so the smoke could waft up to the Olympians and nourish them. In a sacrifice to one of the Chthonians, on the other hand, a pit would be dug in the ground and an animal would be slaughtered (without any burning) in such a way that the blood would pour into the pit. Libations (such as milk or wine) could also be poured into the pit to give the gods sustenance. For a good example of chthonian sacrifice, see *Odyssey* Book 10 lines 515-530 (in the Greek) or *Odyssey* Book 11 lines 23-37 (in the Greek).

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1.10: Demeter

Roman name: Ceres

Epithets: Chthonian (with daughter Persephone; refers to their status as goddesses associated with the earth, χθών [chthōn] being a Greek word for earth/land)

Symbols: wheat, grain

Functions: Goddess of agriculture and grain

Demeter and Persephone

Demeter was a daughter of Cronus and Rhea and was swallowed by her father (along with the rest of Cronus and Rhea's children) shortly after her birth. [See Origins] After Zeus rescued his older siblings from their father, Demeter had an affair with her brother Zeus which resulted in a daughter, Persephone. Hades fell deeply in love with Persephone, and the following story about them is told in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. Zeus gave his consent for Hades to marry his daughter, but because he believed that Demeter would not approve of the match, he told Hades to abduct Persephone and take her to his realm in the Underworld. With the aid of Gaia (Mother Earth, who is also known as Ge), Hades did just that.

Persephone was out gathering flowers with other young nymphs and goddesses, and she spotted an unusual and beautiful narcissus flower, blooming with the help of Gaia in a particular spot where a trap had been set by Zeus and Hades. When Persephone went to pluck the flower, the earth split open and out came Hades in his chariot. He snatched up the girl, and took her down to his kingdom beneath the earth.

For nine days Demeter searched far and wide for her daughter, but no one knew what had happened to Persephone until Demeter happened upon Hecate, a moon goddess who had heard the abduction but could not say who had taken Persephone. Together, Hecate and Demeter continued to search for Persephone until they came upon Helius, the sun god. Helius, who sees everything, told the goddesses the information they wished to know, that Zeus had allowed Persephone to be taken by Hades. Helius encouraged Demeter to accept the situation, but instead she grew so angry that she refused to go back to Olympus [see Olympus Mons on map].



The Rape of Proserpina by Bernini in the Galleria Borghese in Rome.



Close up of Bernini's *Rape of Proserpina*

Demeter in Eleusis

Demeter wandered the earth in the likeness of an old woman named Dos until she came upon the city of Eleusis. There, at the town well, she met the daughters of the king, who offered to help her find work as a nurse. (They did not recognize her as a goddess because of her disguise.) In fact, they said that their mother, Metaneira, had just given birth to a baby boy, and that she would probably welcome Dos into her home as a nurse.

So Demeter, disguised as Dos, became the nurse for the son of the king, Demophon. As a way of thanking the family for their kindness, Demeter began a process that would make the boy immortal. She gave him ambrosia to eat (ambrosia is the food of the gods) and every night she would place him in the fire to burn away his mortal parts. One night, Metaneira, the child's mother, visited the nursery to see how the old woman was doing with the boy and found him in the fire. She screamed in alarm, but this angered Demeter, who (being a goddess) did not like her actions questioned. Demeter took Demophon out of the fire (informing Metaneira that her son would have become immortal) and then she revealed her divinity to the queen. Demeter now revealed herself in her true form; she became young and beautiful, and the house was filled with a brilliant light. The Eleusinians were distraught at having angered a goddess, and they wanted to propitiate her. Demeter instructed the Eleusinians to build a temple to her, which they did, and she established her mystery cult in the city. But Demeter took up her abode in her new temple, and she refused to return to Olympus.

Persephone and the Seasons

Still without her daughter, Demeter was so angry at Zeus that she stayed in her temple in Eleusis and would not join the other gods on Olympus. Furthermore, she caused a drought on the earth which lasted for an entire year, and nearly killed all the mortals. Zeus realized that if all the mortals died there would be no one to sacrifice to the gods, so he sent Hermes to persuade Hades to let Persephone return to her mother. Hades agreed to allow Persephone to return, but before she left, he tricked her into eating a seed from a pomegranate. Demeter was ecstatic to reunite with her daughter, but her spirits fell when she learned that Persephone had eaten during her time in the Underworld. There seems to have been a rule that if someone eats anything in Hades, even something as small as a pomegranate seed, they can never leave. A bargain was struck, however, between the god of the Underworld and the goddess of grain: for two thirds of the year (spring, summer, and early fall), Persephone would live with her mother and the plants would grow, but for the remaining third (late fall and winter), she would live with her husband below the earth and all the plants would die (*Homeric Hymn to Demeter*). This, of course, is the origin of the seasons (a natural aitiological myth).

Triptolemus

In some versions of the story, after Demeter's time in Eleusis, the goddess lent her chariot to a young man from the city, Triptolemus, so he could spread knowledge of her gifts, the planting and harvesting of crops, especially wheat. She aided him when foreign kings did not take kindly to the gifts and she helped him gain the throne of Eleusis. In return he began the tradition

of the festival to Demeter called the Thesmophoria. This was a festival celebrated by women all over Greece and was the second most prominent rite for Demeter, after the Eleusinian Mysteries.



Demeter and Kore (Persephone) with Triptolemus on a relief in the museum at Eleusis

The Origin of Demeter

Demeter was probably an indigenous pre-Hellenic goddess of fertility. Her name means “Mother Da,” which may or may not mean “Mother Earth”. She is closely connected with her daughter and is worshipped in the manner of chthonian deities. [See Chthonian Deities]

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1.11: Dionysus

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1.12: Bacchus

Roman name: Bacchus, Liber Pater (Free Father)

Epithets: Twice-Born, Bromios (Thunderer)

Symbols: thyrsus (staff carried by maenads), maenads/bacchae/bacchants (female followers), vines, satyrs, wine, drinking cup, bull, panther, snakes

Function: God of wine and drunkenness

The Birth of Dionysus

Dionysus was the son of Zeus and the mortal woman Semele, who was the daughter of Cadmus, King of Thebes [see Thebae on map]. When Hera learned that Semele was pregnant with her husband's child, she disguised herself as Semele's nurse and convinced the girl she should demand that Zeus show himself to her as he did to his wife, but first she should make him swear to meet any demand she might make. Semele did so and Zeus was forced to comply. Unfortunately, it seems that Zeus showed himself to Hera in the form of a lightning bolt. So, Semele was struck by Zeus' lightning and died in a blaze. Hermes rescued the unborn baby from Semele's womb and the child was sewn into Zeus' thigh where he stayed for the rest of the pregnancy. When he was ready to be born, Dionysus was delivered from his father's thigh, which explains Dionysus' epithet, Twice-Born. Hermes spirited the boy away to live with his aunt, Ino (one of his mother's sisters). Ino and her husband, Athamas, raised Dionysus as a girl to try to hide him from Hera's wrath, but Hera was not fooled and caused Ino to go mad. After several mishaps, Ino jumped into the sea, where she became the goddess, Leucothea.

Dionysus and the Tyrrhenian Pirates

When Dionysus was still a young boy, he found himself in need of passage to the island of Naxos [map]. He asked some Tyrrhenian (Etruscan) pirates for a ride and the pirates agreed, but they actually planned to kidnap him, believing that he was the son of a wealthy family who would pay a hefty ransom for their child. While at sea, the crew tried to tie him up, but the bonds fell away of their own accord. At this point the helmsman recognized that this was no ordinary boy and tried to prevent any harm coming to Dionysus, but the captain ignored the helmsman's warning and told the sailors to hold on to the boy. Suddenly, wine began to flow all over the ship; vines began to grow from the sails and ivy began to twine around the mast. Then Dionysus turned into a lion and a bear appeared on the deck. The lion seized the captain and began to tear him apart, and the sailors jumped into the sea, turning into dolphins. Dionysus, now back in human form, prevented the helmsman from following his comrades into the sea and told him that his aid would be rewarded and no harm would come to him.



Dionysus and the Tyrrhenian pirates on a kylix in the Staatliche Antikensammlungen in Munich

Dionysus and Phrygia

Hera still hated Dionysus and she drove him mad, causing him to run away and wander around the world until he came to Phrygia (in what is now central Turkey). Here he met Cybele, a Phrygian mother goddess whose worship had been accepted by the Greeks. Cybele cured him of his madness and Dionysus established his cult and rites of worship. Dionysus' rites were similar to those of Cybele, and they involved drinking, wild dancing, playing the tambourine, and a feeling of ecstasy, or divine possession. ("Ecstasy" is from a Greek word, meaning "to stand outside oneself.") Dionysus also gained a group of female followers, called maenads (or bacchae or bacchants), who followed him around, singing, dancing, drinking, and playing the tambourine. Maenads (their name means "mad women") are usually shown in a state of ecstasy. Dionysus is also usually accompanied by satyrs. Satyrs are men with goat's legs, horse's tails, and a vigorous appetite for wine and sex. They are often shown with huge erections. Dionysus then set his sights on establishing his worship in his homeland, so he traveled back to Greece.



A dancing maenad found in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City

God or Mortal?

Dionysus' status as a god was always an issue. There is an informal rule that, if you have one divine parent and one human parent, then you are a human (usually a hero) and not a god. Examples include Achilles, Theseus, Helen of Troy, Sarpedon, Aeneas, and many others. But there were two exceptions to this rule. Heracles (Hercules), who became a god and was taken up to Mt. Olympus upon his death, and Dionysus. Dionysus insisted that he was always a god (maybe because he was born from Zeus' thigh), and stories like the Tyrrhenian Pirates (told above) seem to confirm this. But no one believed him because his mother was a mortal. So, when Dionysus traveled back to Greece to establish his rites, he had trouble convincing people that he really was a god.

Resistance Myths

There are several Resistance Myths connected with Dionysus. Resistance Myths are stories about men or women who try to resist the worship of a particular god or goddess. In these Resistance Myths, the attempt of the mortal to resist the god's worship always ends badly: the god or goddess destroys the resisting human and succeeds in establishing his or her worship. There are a number of Resistance Myths attached to Dionysus, more than for any other god or goddess. Mortals resisted Dionysus' worship partly because they did not believe he was a god, and partly because his worship involved drinking, drunkenness, open sexual expression, and the loss of one's reason or self-control.



A maenad and an ithyphallic satyr on a kylix in the Staatliche Antikensammlungen in Munich

The most famous Resistance Myth connected with Dionysus occurred in his city of origin, Thebes, with his cousin Pentheus. After Semele died, her sisters, most notably Agave, spread the rumor that Semele had lied about the paternity of her child and Zeus had punished her for it with his thunderbolt. As a result, no one in Thebes believed that Dionysus was divine. The years passed and, because Cadmus, the king of Thebes, had only daughters, when he decided to retire, he gave the throne to Agave's son, Pentheus. He was a very young man, perhaps only about twenty or twenty-one when he became King of Thebes. Dionysus came to Thebes to introduce his worship to his homeland, but Pentheus forbade any of the Theban women to worship him. Pentheus probably did this because he did not believe Dionysus was a god, but he also seems to have been a straight and narrow kind of guy, who was disgusted by Dionysus' rituals. A third reason may have been that Pentheus felt that this was a good opportunity to establish his authority. At any rate, Pentheus did not allow the women of Thebes to worship Dionysus. Dionysus, however, caused all the women of Thebes to go mad and run away from home. They all left their fathers and husbands and ran away to Mount Cithaeron, where they became maenads, singing, dancing, drinking wine, and worshipping Dionysus. Pentheus was upset at this behavior and tried to imprison Dionysus, who had disguised himself as a priest of Dionysus. The god easily escaped from prison, of course, and he took a terrible revenge upon Pentheus, which is depicted in Euripides' play, *The Bacchae*.



Agave and Ino tearing apart Pentheus on a lekanis found in the Louvre

Midas

Dionysus extensively traveled around the world. While he was traveling to India, one of his older satyrs, Silenus (when referred to in the plural, *sileni*, they are a group of older and prophetic satyrs, and Silenus is usually considered their leader), wandered away from the group and (as he was a little drunk) he fell into a deep sleep. While he was sleeping, he was captured by a group of Phrygians, who sent Silenus to their king, Midas. Midas cared for Silenus until Dionysus came to collect him. Dionysus was grateful and offered Midas any wish he desired as thanks. Midas asked for the ability to turn anything he touched into gold and being unable to dissuade Midas from this wish, Dionysus granted it. Midas was initially thrilled, but before too long it became apparent that he could not eat or drink because anything he tried to place in his mouth turned to gold. Midas begged Dionysus to take the gift back, but once a god gives a gift, it cannot be taken back. However, Dionysus was able to help Midas and told Midas to bathe in Pactolus river and his gift would transfer to the river (this myth explains why there is so much gold in the river).

Dionysus and Ariadne

When Ariadne was abandoned by Theseus on Naxos, Dionysus found her there and married her [see Theseus]. She gave birth to several sons and Hesiod says that Zeus granted her immortality so she could live with her husband. Some scholars believe that Ariadne originated as a Cretan goddess who was downgraded to a mortal when the Greeks appropriated the story.



Bacchus and Ariadne by Titian (1520-1523) in the National Gallery in London

The Origin of Dionysus

Scholars are divided on the origins of Dionysus. He seems to be a Mycenaean god because his name is found in a Mycenaean inscription, but his myths and rites (called orgia) are very eastern. His rituals involved intoxication and a loss of control of the body (called ecstasy, with ec- meaning “out” and -stasy meaning “stand”; together they mean “to stand outside of oneself and allow Dionysus to possess the body”) and his sacrifices were performed by tearing the animal limb from limb (this process is called “sparagmos”). Sometimes Dionysus’ worshippers would eat the sacrificial victim raw (this is called “homophagia”). These strange rituals made the Greek traditionalists uneasy because they had that foreign flair and flew in the face of the Greek ideals of self-control and moderation (sophrosyne).

At some point the theater was connected to Dionysus, but it is unclear how that relationship began. In Athens, the City Dionysia, a festival to Dionysus, became the premier competition for playwrights to show off their work and for Athens to show off their cultural achievements to travelers coming through the city. Dionysus may have been connected through his ability to alter perception, much like theater did, and the addition of the art form to the festival made the proceedings more Greek in nature.



A maenad performing ritual “sparagmos” on a vase found in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris

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1.13: Hades

Roman name: Pluto, Dis (wealth), Orcus

Epithets: Aïdoneus (the Unseen One), All-Receiver, Pluto (wealth)

Symbols: scepter, grain (fertility), rooster (fertility), Cerberus

Functions: God of the Underworld and the dead



A krater depicting Hades and Persephone in the Antikensammlungen Museum in Munich

Hades was one of the children of Cronus and Rhea whom their father swallowed. After being rescued by his brother Zeus and helping Zeus gain control of the cosmos [see Origins], the three brothers Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades, all drew lots to decide who would rule over various parts of the world [See Zeus]. Hades became the ruler of the underworld. Hades was married to his niece, Persephone, whom he abducted [See Demeter].



A kylix depicting Persephone and Hades in the British Museum

There are very few myths about Hades, other than the story of how he abducted and married Persephone. After the kerfuffle created by this incident had subsided, Hades and Persephone seem to have settled down to a rather ordinary married life as King and Queen of the Dead.



Hades depicted as the Egyptian god Serapis with Cerberus and Persephone depicted as the goddess Isis in the Museum in Heraklion, Crete

The name of the Underworld is sometimes referred to as Erebus (Ἔρεβος), which means “darkness” in Greek, but it is more frequently called the House of Hades. In practice, however, the name, “House of Hades,” is usually shortened to just “Hades.” For this reason, the term “Hades” refers to both the name of the god and the name of the place over which he rules. Different authors describe Hades (the Underworld) differently, but there are several common features. The three-headed dog, Cerberus, acts as a guard dog who prevents dead souls from escaping as well as preventing live people from getting in. There are several rivers in Hades, including the Styx (Στύξ, meaning “hateful”), the river that the gods swear by and the Acheron (Ἀχέρων; meaning “woeful”). Later authors added the river Lethe (Λήθη, meaning “forgetfulness”), which causes the souls who drink from it to forget their past lives; see Plato, *Republic* 10.621 a-d and Vergil, *Aeneid* 6.714-715.

For most people, the Underworld was a hollow existence where their souls slowly lost consciousness and continued on as shells of their former selves. (For an extended portrayal of the souls in Hades, see Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 11.) The Islands of the Blessed, however, sometimes called Elysium or the Elysian Fields, was a place where a select group of souls lived in bliss. They kept their former personalities as well as their consciousness, and they continued to pursue the activities that had brought them pleasure while they were alive. Homer says that Elysium is reserved for the close relatives of the gods (Homer, *Odyssey*, 4.561-569) while later authors, like Pindar (*Olympians* 2.68-78), suggest that a virtuous life would allow a soul to spend eternity in Elysium.

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1.14: Hephaestus

Roman name: Vulcan, Mulciber

God of the forge

Hephaestus was sometimes considered the son of both Zeus and Hera, though other accounts say that Hera gave birth to Hephaestus parthenogenically, in response to Zeus giving birth to Athena by himself. In some versions of his birth, Hephaestus was born lame, Hera was less than pleased and threw him off Mount Olympus [see Olympus Mons on map]. Hephaestus and he landed in the sea where he was cared for by the sea goddesses, Thetis and Eurynome, while he grew. He soon proved to be a master craftsman and he built a beautiful throne for his mother that trapped her when she sat in it. Numerous gods tried to convince Hephaestus to release Hera, but he refused until Dionysus came and got Hephaestus really drunk. This aid rendered to her is often cited as the reason Hera put aside her hatred of Dionysus [see Dionysus].

According to another version of his birth myth, Hephaestus was born perfectly healthy, but when he intervened on behalf of his mother in a dispute between his parents, Hera and Zeus, Zeus flung Hephaestus off Mount Olympus. Hephaestus fell for a full day until he crash-landed on the island of Lemnos. The Lemnians took care of him as best they could, but the god was left crippled. Hephaestus was grateful to the Lemnians and established his workshop on the island. The Romans claimed that Vulcan's forge was located beneath Mount Aetna on the island of Sicily. When the volcano on Mount Aetna erupted, the Romans said that Vulcan was working in his forge.

Hephaestus was married to Aphrodite, but theirs was not a happy marriage. Aphrodite had a long-standing affair with the war god, Ares. Whenever Hephaestus would leave home, Aphrodite and Ares would jump into bed. When the sun god, Helius, informed Hephaestus of what his wife did while he was away, Hephaestus came up with a plan to catch the two in the act. He built a golden net which was so fine that it was invisible and set it up above his bed. He then told his wife that he was taking a trip to Lemnos to visit his forge and hid. Soon, Aphrodite and Ares were in the bed together and the net fell upon them, trapping them right where they were. Hephaestus came in with all the other Olympians to jeer at the lovers, who were caught *in flagrante delicto* (in a blazing crime).



Venus and Mars Surprised by a Net by Costantino Cedini in the Palazzo Emo Capodilista in Padua, Italy

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1.15: Hera

Roman name: Juno

Epithets: Cow-eyed, Eileithyia

Symbols: cow, peacock, scepter

Functions: Goddess of marriage; Consort to Zeus

The Birth of Hera

Hera was a daughter of Cronus and Rhea and, like her siblings (except Zeus), she was swallowed by her father, only to be rescued by her youngest brother, Zeus [see Origins]. She married Zeus and became Queen of the Gods. Together, they had three children: Ares, Hebe (goddess of youth), and Eileithyia (goddess of childbirth). Some versions say that Hephaestus is also her son by Zeus, but more commonly she gave birth to Hephaestus independently because she was angry at Zeus for giving birth to Athena on his own [see Hephaestus]. According to the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, however, Hera actually gave birth to the monster Typhoeus as a way to get back at Zeus for giving birth to Athena.



Hera and Prometheus on a kylix in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris

Hera's Character

Hera's character is defined by her wrath. Despite being the goddess of marriage, she was unable to prevent her husband from constantly taking up new lovers. She could not punish him, so she would punish the lovers and the children produced from these affairs. She tried to prevent Leto from giving birth [see Apollo], she tricked Semele into her death [see Dionysus], and she doggedly tortured Heracles throughout his life [see Heracles]. Because Dionysus and Heracles eventually became immortals, Hera had to make peace with them, but it did not come easily [see Dionysus and Heracles]. Zeus once seduced and abducted a girl by the name of Aegina and he took her to the island of Oenone. Hera threw a snake into the source of water for the entire island, poisoning and killing most of the island to get revenge on one girl. When Zeus fell in love with her priestess, Io, and turned the maiden into a cow, Hera was furious with the girl. After Hermes killed Argus, who was keeping watch over Io [see Hermes], Hera made Io wander the world as a cow until she came to Egypt. She was transformed back into her human form and bore a son. Hera arranged for the child to be kidnapped. With the help of Zeus, mother and child were eventually reunited and settled in Egypt where Io eventually became the Egyptian goddess Isis (this is only what the Greeks believed, the Egyptians had worshiped Isis long before Greek culture began).



Juno and Argus by Peter Paul Rubens from 1610 in the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne

The goddess' wrath was not exclusive to Zeus' lovers. She helped the Argonauts over the course of their adventure so she could punish Pelias for his impiety. She blinded the seer, Teiresias, because he sided with Zeus in an argument they asked him to solve. She sent the Sphinx to Thebes to punish the king, Laïus, for abducting Chrysippus, the son of Pelops. The Greeks had Hera's support in the Trojan War because she was still angry over Paris' decision to award Aphrodite the Apple of Discord [see Intro to Iliad].

Hera's Origin

Hera most likely originated as a Pre-Hellenic goddess of fertility, which runs into her role as a goddess of all the stages of life for a woman: girl, new bride, and old woman. She is often conflated with her daughter, Eileithyia, as a goddess of childbirth, as is her Roman counterpart, Juno, with the Roman goddess of childbirth, Lucina. Hera had the unique ability to become a virgin again every year by bathing in a spring called the Canathus.

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1.16: Heracles

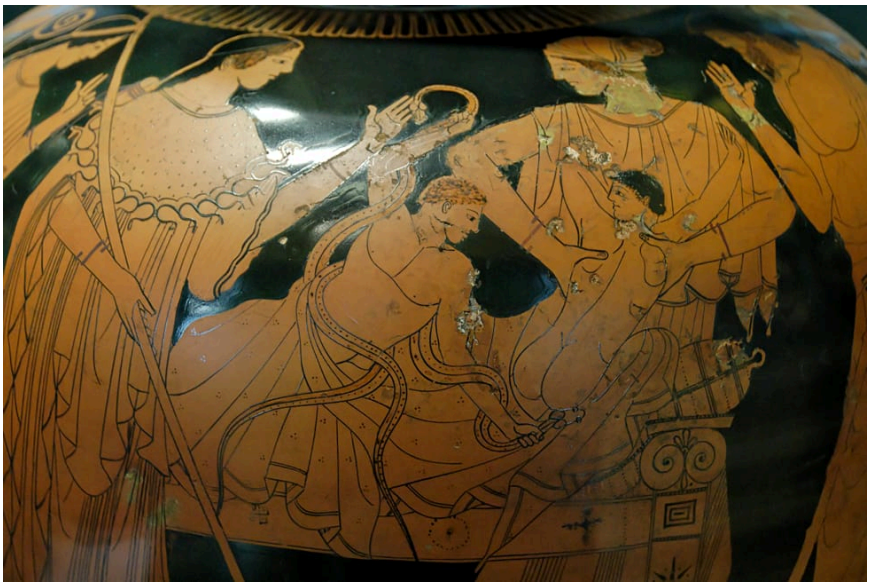
Roman name: Hercules

Son of Zeus; mortal hero and eventually a god

The Birth of Heracles

Heracles was the son of Zeus and a mortal woman named Alcmene. Alcmene was married to Amphitryon, the heir to the throne of Tiryns. But Alcmene refused to consummate her marriage until Amphitryon had avenged the murder of her brothers, who had been killed by the Taphian Pirates. So before even sleeping with his wife, Amphitryon traveled to the Taphian Islands (off the western coast of Greece, near Ithaca) and he stayed there for several weeks, until he had killed all of the Taphian Pirates. On the night before Amphitryon returned from his journey, Zeus came to Alcmene in the form and shape of her husband. He told her that he had just come home from killing the pirates. Alcmene was overjoyed, and gladly allowed him into her bed. The next day when the real Amphitryon returned home, he wondered why she did not give him a hero's welcome. After speaking with his wife, he discovered the truth: Alcmene had spent the previous night with someone else. Amphitryon did not believe Alcmene's story, that the man she had been with had looked and sounded exactly like him, but the seer Teiresias told him that the interloper had been Zeus himself and that Alcmene's story was true. Now Amphitryon believed her and they finally consummated their marriage.

When Hera discovered that Alcmene was pregnant with Zeus' child, she was very unhappy, needless to say. When Alcmene went into labor, Hera sent Eileithyia to prevent the birth from taking place. Eileithyia sat outside the delivery room crossing her fingers and legs which halted the delivery. (No birth can take place unless Eileithyia is physically present and allows the birth to proceed.) Alcmene, who was pregnant with twin boys, was in a bad state and was close to breathing her last breath when her nurse, Galanthis, came up with a trick to break Eileithyia's spell. She shouted that the baby had already come. Eileithyia, in confusion as to how this could have happened, jumped up and broke her spell, allowing Alcmene to deliver two baby boys. In her anger at being tricked, Eileithyia turned Galanthis into a weasel. The two babies were named Iphicles and Heracles. But the parents did not know which one of their sons was Zeus' child and which one was the child of Amphitryon.



Heracles killing the snakes in his cradle on a stamnos in the Louvre

Heracles' Early Adventures

Hera did not leave Heracles alone for long. When he was about eighteen months old, she sent two snakes to kill both Iphicles and Heracles while they were sleeping in their crib. While Iphicles screamed in terror and cowered in the corner, Heracles grabbed hold of the snakes and strangled one in each hand. Any doubt as to which was the son of Zeus and which the son of Amphitryon

was solved by this event.



The Infant Heracules Strangling Serpents in his Cradle by Joshua Reynolds (1788), in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia

As he grew, Heracles learned many important skills from great teachers, but he had a short temper and did not realize his own strength. When his music teacher, Linus (who was the brother of Orpheus), reprimanded him for not practicing enough, Heracles took his chair and smashed it over Linus' head, killing him instantly. Amphitryon decided to send Heracles to live at his country estate to protect his family.



Heracles killing his music teacher, Linus, on a cup in the Antikensammlungen Museum in Munich

By the time Heracles was seventeen, he had grown to be a tall and strong youth. Around the same time, a lion was roaming in the area of Mount Cithaeron and was terrorizing the countryside. Thespius, the king of the area, asked Heracles to come and stay with him and help his men kill the lion. Thespius also happened to have fifty daughters. For fifty days Heracles went out to find the lion, and each night Thespius sent a different daughter in to sleep with Heracles, though Heracles thought it was the same daughter each night. After the fifty days, Heracles had killed the lion and all of Thespius' fifty daughters were pregnant.

Hera Sends Madness

Heracles stayed in the area of Thebes [see Thebae on map] long enough to distinguish himself in a war the Thebans were fighting against a people called the Minyans. The king of Thebes was so happy to have had Heracles' help that he offered his daughter, Megara, to Heracles as a wife. Megara and Heracles married and had two sons. They lived for a few years in peace, but Hera was still out to torment Heracles, so she sent madness to drive him mad. In his madness, Heracles killed his wife and children. When he regained his sanity, Heracles was devastated and decided to go to the Oracle at Delphi [map] to ask Apollo how he could be purified for this murder. The Pythia told him that he must go to Tiryns and perform twelve labors for the ruler, Eurystheus. If he could complete all twelve labors successfully, he would not only be purified of the murders, but he would achieve immortality. (The rule is that if a hero has one mortal parent, he or she is mortal. So Heracles was born a mortal, and this was his opportunity to achieve immortality.) Heracles did manage to successfully complete his twelve labors [see 12 Labors of Heracles].

The Death of Iphitus

After these twelve labors, Heracles set out, looking for a new wife with whom he could start over. Eurytus of Oechalia, who had taught Heracles how to shoot a bow and arrow, was looking for a husband for his daughter, Iole. Eurytus had set up the condition that whoever could beat him in an archery contest would win Iole, and Heracles won easily.

However, Eurytus knew about the misfortunes Heracles had had with Megara and refused to give Iole to Heracles. Heracles was furious, but at this point there was nothing he could do. At the same time this was happening, some of Eurytus' mares went missing (sources vary on whether Heracles had anything to do with the disappearance). Eurytus' son, Iphitus, who believed Heracles was innocent, went with Heracles to find the mares. The two eventually ended up in Tiryns at Heracles' house. After they located the mares, the two friends were drinking on the roof of Heracles' house. What happened after that is not clear, but somehow they got into an argument and Heracles ended up throwing Iphitus from the roof. Heracles was stricken with a disease as punishment for his crime. When he consulted the Delphic Oracle, the Pythia told Heracles that he had to sell himself as a slave for three years for whatever price Iphitus' sons established.

Omphale

Heracles did as the Pythia said and he was sold to Omphale, the Queen and ruler of Lydia, who had inherited power from her late husband. The kingdom of Lydia had some enemies and now that Omphale had control of the kingdom, those enemies took the opportunity to cause problems. Heracles used his strength and fortitude to solve these problems for Omphale, who was incredibly grateful. She freed Heracles and the disease left him.

Deïaneira

After many years, and many adventures, Heracles found himself in Calydon, where he fell in love with King Oeneus' daughter, Deïaneira. Heracles had a rival for her hand though in Acheloüs, a local river god. The two fought until Heracles managed to break off one of the god's horns, which caused the god to yield. Heracles and Deïaneira married, but they were not able to live happily very long. Heracles, still not aware of his strength, killed Oeneus' cupbearer when he gave the boy a quick blow as punishment for some offense. Oeneus forgave his son-in-law, but Heracles, in his guilt, insisted that he go into exile for his crime. Heracles left Calydon with Deïaneira in tow.

At some point in their trip, Heracles and Deïaneira came to a very deep and very large lake. Heracles could easily swim across the lake, but Deïaneira could not and Heracles could not carry her while swimming across. Just at that time, the centaur Nessus approached the newlyweds and he offered to ferry Deïaneira across the river. Heracles gratefully agreed to let Nessus swim across the river carrying Deïaneira on his back. Half way across the lake, however, Nessus began to rape Deïaneira. Heracles heard her screams and shot off one of his arrows dipped in the Hydra's blood. Of course, the arrow hit its mark and, as Nessus knew, Hydra's blood was a deadly poison. But Nessus decided to get back at Heracles, even though he would not live to see his revenge. As he lay dying, Nessus told Deïaneira that if she took some of his blood and wiped it on a robe for Heracles to wear, it would act as a love potion. Of course, this was a lie. Deïaneira was aware of her husband's wandering affections, so she collected some of Nessus' blood and kept it in case she ever had need of it. She had no idea that the deadly Hydra poison was also a part of her "love potion".



Heracles fighting the centaur Nessus on a nestoris found in the Louvre

The Death and Apotheosis of Heracles

Deïaneira was justified in her suspicions of her husband, although it did not happen right away. But many years later, Heracles decided to get revenge on Eurytus, who had refused to give Heracles his daughter, Iole, in marriage. Heracles killed Eurytus and his sons in battle and brought Iole back home to be his concubine. Deïaneira knew about her husband's many affairs, but she did not want to live in the same house with a younger rival, so she decided to put Nessus' plan into action. She smeared Nessus' blood on a beautiful new robe and gave it to her husband when he returned home, bringing Iole with him. Heracles put on the handsome robe to give a thanksgiving offering to Zeus for a successful return home, but as soon as he put on the robe, his skin immediately caught fire. When Heracles tried to take off the robe, parts of his skin came off with it, and Heracles (now with parts of his skin missing) continued to burn. Realizing the terrible mistake she had made, Deïaneira took her own life. But Heracles was in agony; he could not take off the robe (because it was sticking to his skin), but he could not put out the fire, and Heracles was burning so slowly that it seemed to be taking forever for him to die. Heracles decided to end his life as soon as possible.

He took his son Hyllus up into the mountains and asked him to build a funeral pyre Hyllus agreed to build the pyre, but he refused to light it because he could not bear to end his father's life. A passing shepherd and his son, Philoctetes, agreed to light the pyre and so Heracles gave his famous bow and arrows to Philoctetes.

The fire burned away Heracles' mortal flesh Heracles became immortal. He was taken up to Olympus to live with the other gods and he married his half-sister, Hebe. And Hera finally put aside her anger against him. It seems that Heracles could only find peace after his death.

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1.17: Hermes

Roman name: Mercury

Epithets: Argeïphontes (Killer of Argus), Psychopompos (Guide of Souls), Hermes the Helper

Symbols: caduceus (kerykeon), winged sandals, petasos (traveling hat)

Functions: God of travelers, traders, thieves, herds, and heralds; also a messenger to the gods



Hermes carrying a ram on an olpe found in the Louvre

The Birth of Hermes and the Theft of Apollo's Cattle

Hermes was the son of Zeus and Maia, a nymph who lived on Mount Cyllene. Hermes was very mischievous, and within hours of his birth, Hermes was already getting himself into trouble. When he was only one day old, he left his mother's cave to see the world and ran into a tortoise, which he killed and then fashioned into an instrument, inventing the lyre. Later that day, he slipped out again and made his way to Pieria, the place the gods used to pasture their cattle, and stole fifty of Apollo's cattle, taking great care to confuse anyone trying to track them by forcing the cattle to walk backwards. He also made sandals for himself by tying twigs to the bottoms of his feet in order to hide his footprints. Hermes drove the cattle far away, and hid them in a cave not far from the river Alpheios, in the Peloponnese [map]. Hermes then decided to sacrifice two of the cattle to the gods. He rubbed two sticks together, thus inventing both fire-sticks and fire. He slaughtered two of the cattle and sacrificed the meat to the gods, not keeping any for himself. He then hid the evidence of his crime by burning the carcasses of the animals and throwing his make-shift sandals in a river. By this time, it was evening. Hermes hurried home, wrapped himself in his swaddling clothes, and slipped back into his cradle, feigning innocence.



A Muse playing a lyre, the instrument invented by Hermes, found in the Staatliche Antikensammlungen in Munich

The next morning, Apollo noticed that some of his cattle were missing and came looking for them. Despite Hermes' efforts to hide his crime, Apollo managed to discover the fate of his cattle and came to confront his younger half-brother. Apollo threatened to throw Hermes into Tartarus and imprison him there if he didn't give back the cattle, but Hermes replied, "I was born yesterday! How could I possibly steal anyone's cattle? I don't even know what cattle are!" The two were unable to settle their dispute, so they took their case to their father. Zeus was amused by Hermes' insistence that he was innocent, but decreed that the infant return the cattle to Apollo. Hermes showed Apollo where he had hidden the cattle, but before Apollo could take them away, Hermes picked up the lyre he had created and began to play. The music so enraptured Apollo that he begged Hermes to give it to him. Hermes then suggested a deal: in exchange for the instrument, Apollo would trade his cattle and the position of divine herdsman. Apollo agreed. Zeus confirmed the pact between the two half-brothers, and decreed that Hermes would become the messenger of the gods (Homeric Hymn to Hermes). Hermes also became a trickster god and the god of thieves, as well as the god of travelers and traders and a helper to men. He also carried the caduceus or herald's wand (a gift from Apollo), as a sign of his position. And he invented the panpipes (several reeds or hollow bamboo sticks of different lengths, tied together with string), so he would have his own instrument to play.



The caduceus of Hermes has been appropriated by the Medical Corps as their symbol.

Hermes as Guide of Dead Souls

As an extension of his role as protector of travelers, one of Hermes' jobs was to lead the dead souls down to Hades. He would take the souls to the river Styx where Charon, the ferryman, would take the souls of the dead to the other side, as long as they had been buried properly with a coin placed under the tongue as a payment for Charon. Hermes is often depicted in art as leading away a dead person's soul. One example is the famous relief sculpture in the Naples Museum of Hermes leading Eurydice back into Hades, just after, Orpheus has looked back at her on their way out of the Underworld [see Orpheus].

Hermes the Helper

Hermes earned his epithet "the helper" many times over by aiding both gods and mortals. Zeus often employed him not only in sending messages but in performing tasks the father of gods and men was not able to do himself. One such instance was with Io, a mortal woman Zeus amorously pursued. Io was a priestess to Hera who caught Zeus' eye and so Zeus sent her dreams commanding her to join him in the fields where her father kept his flocks. Eventually, she came to the meadow, but when she realized what Zeus wanted, she ran away, and Zeus pursued her. Hera, eager to catch her husband in the act, had been observing him and came down from Olympus to confront her husband. Zeus quickly turned Io into a cow to hide his promiscuity from his wife. Hera, who knew the cow was really a girl, asked her husband if he would give her the beautiful cow as a present and he had to acquiesce in order not to give away his trick. Hera placed Io in a grove, guarded by Argus Panoptes (meaning "all-eyes"), a hundred-eyed monster.



Mercury and Argus by Peter Paul Rubens (1635-1638) in the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister in Dresden

Zeus sent the god of thieves to bring him Io, but not even Hermes could steal her away because Argus was able to make his eyes sleep in shifts so he could constantly watch the girl. Hermes decided to disguise himself as a goatherd. He sat down by Argus and gently played his panpipes until all of Argus' eyes had closed in sleep. Once he had done this, Hermes took up his sword and cut off the head of the monster, earning his name Argeïphontes.



Mercury and Argus by Peter Paul Rubens (1636-1638) in the Prado Museum in Madrid

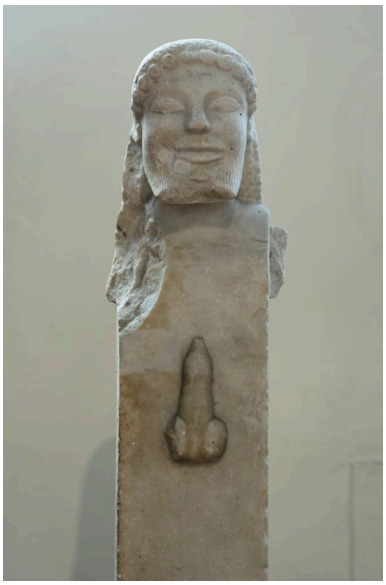
Hermes helped his father another time by rescuing his unborn half-brother Dionysus from womb of his mother, Semele, as she perished in flames [see Dionysus]. Zeus was not the only beneficiary of Hermes' help, mortals were also guided by Hermes. He showed Odysseus how to overcome the dangerous witch, Circe, [Homer, *Odyssey*, 11?]; he helped Priam, King of Troy, travel safely into the Greek camp during the Trojan War to plead with Achilles for the body of his son, Hector [Homer, *Iliad*, ?]; and he, along with Athena, gave the hero Perseus all the equipment he needed to slay the Gorgon, Medusa.

Pan

Hermes had many children, one of which was Pan, a god born with horns and goat's legs. Pan was also said to have invented the panpipes, which he frequently played. Pan was able to inflict fear, or "panic" (which comes from the god's name), in the hearts of mortals with just a shout.

Herms

Since he was the protector of travelers, statues, called herms, of Hermes' head and a phallus on a stone pillar were placed along roads, at cross roads, and in courtyards and town squares for good luck. These statues were taken very seriously, since they were representations of the god; harm to them could have disastrous consequences. According to Thucydides, just before the Athenians started on their ill-fated Sicilian Expedition, someone smashed the faces of almost all of the herms throughout the city, a bad portent for the fate of the expedition and an ominous foreshadowing for when the expedition ultimately failed (Thucydides 6.27).



An ithyphallic herm in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens

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1.18: Hestia

Roman name: Vesta

Function: Goddess of the hearth

Hestia was the oldest child of Cronus and Rhea, thus she was the first to be swallowed by Cronus and last to come back out when Zeus rescued his siblings [see Origins]. She is both anthropomorphic (i.e., she is a goddess with a human form) but she is also the physical manifestation of, the actual hearth in every home, temple, and city. In fact, her name (Ἑστία) is also the Greek word for the hearth. Hestia was a virgin goddess who does not appear in many myths. She was highly honored, usually receiving the first offering at sacrifices, but she had few cult activities that were specially dedicated to her. However, to the Romans, Vesta was one of the most important deities. The priestesses of Vesta, called the Vestal Virgins, tended to the city hearth, keeping the goddess' flame burning.

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1.19: Historical Myths

See Three Types of Myth

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1.20: Jason

Functions: Hero and leader of the Argonauts

The Birth of Jason

Jason was the son of Aeson, the rightful king of Iolcus. Before Jason was born, his uncle, Pelias, took the throne from Aeson. Aeson and his wife still lived in Iolcus, but they lived with the constant threat of death over them. After Jason was born, in order to protect him from the wrath of his uncle, Aeson sent his son to the nearby Mount Pelion to be raised by the centaur [see Centaurs], Chiron.

For years, Pelias lived in fear of a man with one sandal, because he had been told by the Delphic Oracle that he was fated to be killed by a man who was wearing only one sandal. When Jason turned twenty-one, he decided to reclaim the throne and returned to Iolcus to confront his uncle. In order to get there, he had to cross a river, and on the bank sat an old woman asking to be carried across. Jason did not know that the woman was Hera in disguise, testing the young man to see if he was worthy to help her in destroying Pelias, who had scorned her many times. In the process of carrying the goddess through the water, Jason lost one of his sandals and continued the rest of the way wearing only one.

How Jason was Sent to Bring Back the Golden Fleece

Once the youth came to Iolcus, news of the man with one sandal quickly reached Pelias. He met with the young man, who revealed his identity and stated his intention to regain his father's throne. Pelias was afraid to kill Jason outright, so he asked him what he would do with a man who was destined to kill him. Jason responded saying that he would ask the man to retrieve the Golden Fleece. (The Golden Fleece came from a magical golden ram who had saved the youth Phrixus from death by carrying him to the land of Colchis. Once they had arrived in Colchis, the ram told Phrixus to sacrifice him and hang the fleece in a grove sacred to Ares, where it was guarded by a dragon.) Upon hearing Jason's answer, Pelias asked his nephew to fetch the Fleece from Colchis. Another version states that Pelias was kind to his nephew and told him that the oracle at Delphi had told him that the dishonored spirit of Phrixus, needed to be returned home to Thessaly along with the Fleece to appease the underworld gods [Pindar]. In either case, Jason agreed to go to Colchis and bring back the Golden Fleece, and he organized an expedition which included some of the greatest heroes in Greece at the time [See Argonauts].

Jason and Medea

The Argonauts returned to Iolcus with the Golden Fleece, bringing with them Jason's new wife, the Colchian princess, Medea (who was also a witch). Jason suspected that his uncle would not hand over the kingship, so the group stayed outside the city while trying to figure out what to do. Medea came up with a plan to rid them of the problem. Using her magic, she disguised herself as an old woman and went to the palace, claiming to be a priestess of Artemis who had come to rejuvenate the king. When she transformed from an old woman into her real, youthful form, Pelias agreed to allow her to bring back his youth. Medea told his daughters that they needed to cut their father into pieces and boil him in her cauldron, along with some magical herbs, in order for the process to work. The girls were naturally skeptical, but Medea convinced them by performing the procedure on a ram. When a little lamb leaped from the cauldron, they agreed to cut their father into pieces. Of course, when the daughters of Pelias tried this, their rejuvenated father did not spring out of the cauldron. Medea probably "forgot" to put the right herbs into the cauldron; in any case, Peleus was dead.

Pelias' son, Acastus, who was one of the Argonauts, became king at his father's death and exiled Jason and Medea for the brutal killing of his father. The king of Corinth, Creon, offered them a home in his kingdom on account of the fame the expedition of the Argo had brought to Jason. There they lived peacefully for about ten years, and they had two sons. Eventually though, Jason grew tired of living with a barbarian witch who brought him no social standing and Creon offered his daughter, named either Glauce or Creusa, in marriage to the hero. Jason divorced Medea and married the princess.

Medea was devastated and most of all angry at the betrayal. After all, she had helped Jason steal the Golden Fleece, she had helped him sail safely back to Greece, and she had helped him punish Peleus for seizing the throne; she had also born him two sons, to perpetuate his line. But Medea was not about to suffer in silence; she hatched a plan to hurt Jason in every way possible. She sent her sons to deliver wedding gifts for the princess: a tiara and a beautiful dress. As soon as the princess put them on, however, they burst into flames. Her father, hearing her screams, ran to help, but once he had touched her he could not pull away, and he burned alive alongside his daughter. Medea's sons, because they were accessories to the murders, were in danger as well.

Some versions say the Corinthians killed the boys and later the spirits of the children punished the city for their murder, but the more prominent version, popularized by Euripides, has Medea herself killing the children to take revenge on their father. Medea, who was the granddaughter of Helius, the sun, asked for and received her grandfather's chariot (drawn by four winged horses) to help her escape. Medea flew to Athens in Helius' chariot and went to live with King Aegeus [see Theseus]. Some accounts say that Jason took his own life, but the more popular story is that, many years after these events, he was sitting under the rotting ruins of the Argo, the ship that had made him so famous, when a beam from the ship fell and struck him on the head, killing him.

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1.21: Map



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1.22: Miasma

Miasma (μίασμα) means “stain, defilement” or “the stain of guilt” in Greek. It is usually translated as “pollution” in English, although there is no concept in English that precisely corresponds to miasma. Miasma is a god-sent disease that is caused by a murder that has not been atoned for (with proper purification rituals). A miasma can fall upon an entire city when one man in that city is guilty of a murder and has not atoned for it. A miasma can infect everyone on board a ship if one man on that ship is guilty of murder.

Miasma can spread like a disease, and it seems to be the objectification of guilt. In other words, the guilt is understood as a kind of disease that can spread to everyone who comes in contact with the guilty person. The concept of germs was not developed until the 1880s, but the effects of contagion were clearly visible from very early time. The Greeks seem to have believed that the cause of contagious disease was guilt for an unexpiated crime. The only way to stop the spread of the disease was to find the guilty party, and have that person atone for their crime by paying a penalty (usually a fine or banishment), and undergoing an expiation ritual (frequently a sacrifice of a suckling pig). You could classify miasma as a psychological myth (since it is the manifestation of the emotion of guilt) or you could understand it as a natural aitiological myth, since it explains the natural phenomenon of contagious disease.

When *Oedipus the King* begins, the city of Thebes is infected with a miasma: a disease has fallen on the crops, the cattle are dying, a plague is raging through the land, and all the children are stillborn. The Oracle at Delphi proclaims that the miasma is caused by the unexpiated murder of Laius, the previous king. Apollo declares that the murderer is still living in Thebes and that he must be found and punished (either by banishment or death) in order for the miasma to come to an end.

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1.23: Origins

The First Generation of Gods

There are several different versions of how the world began in Classical mythology, but the version most recognized is found in Hesiod's *Theogony* (theo- meaning "god" and -gony meaning "origin/birth"). Hesiod says that the first being to exist was Chaos, a dark and murky void who becomes the progenitor of the gloomy and negative aspects of the universe, such as Nyx (Night), Thanatos (Death), and the Moerae (the Fates. Sometimes, however, the Fates are said to be the daughters of Zeus and Themis). Next came Gaia (Earth; sometimes called Gē), Tartarus (the lowest part of the Underworld), and Eros (Erotic Love). Gaia alone gave birth to Uranus (Ouranos or Οὐρανός, meaning "sky/heavens"), Urea (Ourea, or Mountains), and Pontus (Sea). Now that Eros existed, future births could proceed with the aid of erotic love. Gaia and Uranus married and had three sets of children: the twelve Titans (including Cronus and Rhea), the three Cyclopes (meaning "circle-eyed," because each one had only one big eye in the middle of his forehead), and the three Hundred-Handers (so named because each one had a hundred hands; they also had fifty heads).

The Second Generation of Gods: The Titans



The Mutilation of Uranus by Saturn by Cristofano Gherardi in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence

Uranus disliked his children, particularly the monstrous Cyclopes and Hundred-Handers, so he prevented them from being born by blocking up Gaia's many wombs (caves). This was painful for Gaia and she became angry at her husband; also, she wanted her children to see the light of day. She asked her children to help her overthrow their father and one volunteered, the Titan, Cronus. Gaia made a sickle out of adamant (a mythical metal that was extremely hard) and gave it to her son, telling him to lie in wait for his father. In the evening, Uranus came down from the sky to sleep with his wife and Cronus used the opportunity to cut off his father's genitals. He threw the genitals into the sea, and the goddess, Aphrodite, was born from the mixture of semen and sea-foam that formed around them [see Aphrodite]. As they fell, some bloody drops dripped onto the ground, impregnating Gaia with the Erinyes (known as the Furies in Latin) and the Gigantes, or Giants.



The sickle was used for harvesting grain.

Cronus replaced his father as ruler of the universe, and soon his subordinates were chafing under his rule. He imprisoned his brothers, the Cyclopes and the Hundred-Handers, in Tartarus, the deepest and darkest place in the universe. Gaia and Uranus, who, now without his genitals, was able to live in peace with his progeny, warned Cronus that one of his children was destined to overthrow him. Cronus, hoping to avoid this fate, swallowed each of his children (Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Hades, and Poseidon) in turn as soon as his wife and sister, Rhea, gave birth to them. Rhea was upset that she was not able to spend time with her children, so when became pregnant with another child, she made a plan with the help of her parents, Gaia and Uranus. When Rhea gave birth to her youngest child, Zeus, she replaced the infant with a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes and gave it to Cronus to swallow. Meanwhile Gaia hid Zeus in a cave on Crete [see Creta on map]. Zeus stayed there for a year, suckled by the goat Amalthea, until he was mature enough to confront his father (the gods grow up quickly). On the advice of Gaia, Zeus gave his father an emetic which caused him to regurgitate his other children. Cronus also vomited up the stone he had swallowed, and Zeus placed it in Delphi, where it became the navel-stone of the earth. Together, the sons and daughters began a war against their father, which is referred to as Titanomachy, or the Battle of the Gods and the Titans.



The Omphalos, or the navel stone of the earth, in the Archaeological Museum of Delphi

The Battle of the Gods and the Titans

The Battle of the Gods and the Titans lasted for ten years, and for a long time both sides were evenly matched. But eventually Zeus turned the tide of battle to his advantage by releasing his uncles, the Cyclopes and the Hundred-Handers, from Tartarus. The Cyclopes forged the thunderbolts (what we would call lightning bolts) for Zeus and the Hundred-handers threw huge rocks from their three hundred hands. The sea roared and the whole earth shook with the battle, and the sky echoed in response. Zeus threw so many thunderbolts that the whole world caught on fire, and finally the Titans were defeated.



Atlas with the Farnese Globe in the Naples Archaeological Museum

After Zeus finally won, he threw the Titans into Tartarus except for Atlas, who was the son of the Titan, Iapetus. Atlas was ordered to hold up the sky so it did not fall onto the earth. Atlas' brothers, Prometheus (Forethought) and Epimetheus (Afterthought) had fought on Zeus' side, so they were not punished. The Cyclopes became Zeus' personal team of metallurgists; they were the ones who forged his thunderbolts. The Hundred-Handers were given the task of guarding the gates to Tartarus.



The sculpture of Atlas at Rockefeller Center

The Third Generation of Gods: The Olympians

The three sons of Cronus divided the universe into three kingdoms, one for each to rule, and drew lots to determine who would rule which part. Zeus became the Ruler of the Heavens and King of the Gods, Poseidon held dominion over the seas and waterways,

and Hades ruled the Underworld as King of the Dead. Gaia became angry with the Olympians for their treatment of her children, the Titans, so she joined with Tartarus and bore Typhoeus (sometimes called Typhon), a monster described differently by each author, though Hesiod describes him as having a hundred dragon heads growing from his shoulders. Typhoeus breathed fire from his dragon heads and caused the entire world to shake; he wanted to take power in Zeus' place. Zeus came down from Olympus to meet the monster head on, beating him down and hurling many thunderbolts at him. Once again, the earth, sea, and sky were engulfed in flames and the entire world was shaken. Zeus finally defeated the monster and threw him into Tartarus, where he became the source of typhoon winds. Some authors say that he was buried under Mt. Etna, in Sicily, where he became a volcano.

Analysis

The story of how Zeus came to rule over gods and men is certainly a violent one, and it has several important themes. One theme is the establishment of the rule of the Olympian gods (who sometimes symbolize justice, law, and order) over the Titans (who sometimes symbolize brute force) and the Gaia-Uranus generation (who symbolize the unbridled forces of nature). This theme is sometimes referred to as "from chaos to cosmos," since cosmos (kosmos, κοσμός) means "the ordered universe" in Greek. Another, more troubling theme, is the conflict between the generations, as each father tries to suppress the rule of his sons.

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1.24: Orpheus



Hermes taking Eurydice back to the Underworld on a relief in the Naples Archaeological Museum

Orpheus, said to be the son of Apollo and Calliope, lived in Thrace in Northwest Greece, and was the best lyre player in the world. Some say that Apollo was the one who taught him to play. Orpheus played and sang so beautifully that he enchanted everyone who heard him. Even animals stopped to listen to him and stones and trees moved closer to hear him sing.

Orpheus fell in love with a beautiful nymph (or nature spirit) named Eurydice, and he won her heart by his singing. They were married in an open-air ceremony on a hillside. In the late afternoon after the wedding, a former admirer of Eurydice's began to pursue her. She became frightened and ran away without looking where she was going. In her fright, she stepped on a snake, which bit her. The snake turned out to be poisonous, and Eurydice died almost immediately.

Orpheus grieved constantly for Eurydice. He would sit and sing songs of mourning all day, every day, and weep as he sang. The animals and even the trees and grasses tried to comfort him, but it was no use. Every reason for living seemed to have gone away when Eurydice died. At last Orpheus decided to go into Hades and try to find her.

Orpheus found the cave that led to Hades and slowly descended into the Underworld. He sang to Cerberus and charmed him until the three-headed dog allowed him to enter. Orpheus played for Hades and Persephone and sang them a song about the beginning of the world and the origin of gods and men. Then he sang about the joys of love and the sadness that comes with love's loss. Orpheus' singing charmed even the hearts of Hades and Persephone, rulers of the dead. They allowed him to bring his dear Eurydice back to life on one condition: he could not turn back and look at her until they reached the upper world.

Orpheus agreed and turned to go, hoping that Eurydice was following him. But the journey to the upper world was long and difficult, and Orpheus desperately longed to see if Eurydice was really behind him. Orpheus resisted this impulse until the opening of the cave was in sight, just ahead; then he could no longer resist. Orpheus turned back, just for an instant, to see if Eurydice was really there. But that instant was his undoing. As he looked back, he saw Hermes leading her back down to Hades, even as she stretched out her arms to him in her heart-aching sorrow.

Orpheus was inconsolable over his loss of Eurydice for the second and final time. He sang constantly of his love for her and refused to look at any other women. Also, he became a devoted worshipper of Apollo, the sun god. It was his custom to go up to the top of a mountain every morning in order to greet the sun. This made Dionysus very angry. Dionysus was at that time winning the region of Thrace over to his own worship, celebrated at night with frenzied music and dancing. Dionysus resented Orpheus and began to complain to his Maenads about Orpheus' neglect. The Maenads already hated Orpheus because he refused their advances, so one day, in a Dionysiac frenzy, they attacked Orpheus and tore him limb from limb.

The Muses gathered up some parts of his body and buried them, but Orpheus' head and his lyre fell into the River Hebros. From

there they floated to the island of Lesbos, off the coast of Asia, the head still singing as it went. The Lesbians took the head and the lyre and treated them with great respect. They dedicated the lyre to Apollo and it was kept for many years in Apollo's temple there. Some say that the Lesbians buried Orpheus' head nearby; other says that they kept it, too, in Apollo's temple, where it not only continued to sing, but also gave oracles and prophesied the future.

After many years a religion grew up, said to have been inspired by Orpheus. Orphic religion told of a life after death. It hinted that the soul did not die with the body, but went on a journey to another world. Those who had lived good lives and had purified themselves of all evil, lived permanently in a beautiful place, sometimes called the Elysian Fields. There the sun always shone and the souls enjoyed an ageless and deathless existence. Those who had lived sinful lives remained in Hades, suffering dreadful tortures. Those whose lives had been partly good and partly evil were given a glimpse of the Elysian Fields, but were forced to be reincarnated into new bodies and return to this life once more.

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1.25: Persephone

Roman name: Proserpina

Epithets: Chthonian (with mother Demeter), Kore (Maiden)

Symbols: pomegranate (fertility symbol), torch, crown

Functions: Goddess of the dead and fertility



Hades and Persephone with all their symbols on a terracotta pinax in the Cleveland Museum of Art

Persephone was the daughter of Zeus and Demeter. She was married to Hades, ruler of the underworld, who abducted her and took her as his bride. After Demeter discovered what had happened, Demeter and Hades struck a deal. Persephone would spend two thirds of the year with her mother, during which crops would grow, and the rest of the year she would live with her husband, during which the earth would die [See Demeter]. This is a natural aetiological myth that explains the origin of the seasons: Persephone is with Demeter during the spring, summer, and fall, but during the winter, when Persephone is in Hades with her husband, it is winter on the earth and the crops do not grow.

Persephone is always depicted as happy in her role as Queen of the Dead despite the violent nature of her capture, which raises some interesting questions about how marriage was perceived in ancient Greece.

Persephone does not have a large role in myth. One notable exception is one of the versions of the myth of Aphrodite and Adonis. Aphrodite was smitten by the beauty of the young and handsome Adonis and gave him to Persephone for safe keeping, but Persephone was also smitten. The Queen of the Dead refused to give Adonis back, and Aphrodite went to Zeus to help settle the quarrel. Zeus declared that the boy should spend a third of the year with Persephone, a third with Aphrodite, and a third as he pleased, which he chose to spend with Aphrodite. This mirrors the deal brokered for Persephone's time and similarly, Adonis became associated with death and rebirth in the Adonia festival. [See Aphrodite]



Proserpine by Rossetti (1874) in the Tate Gallery of Modern Art in London

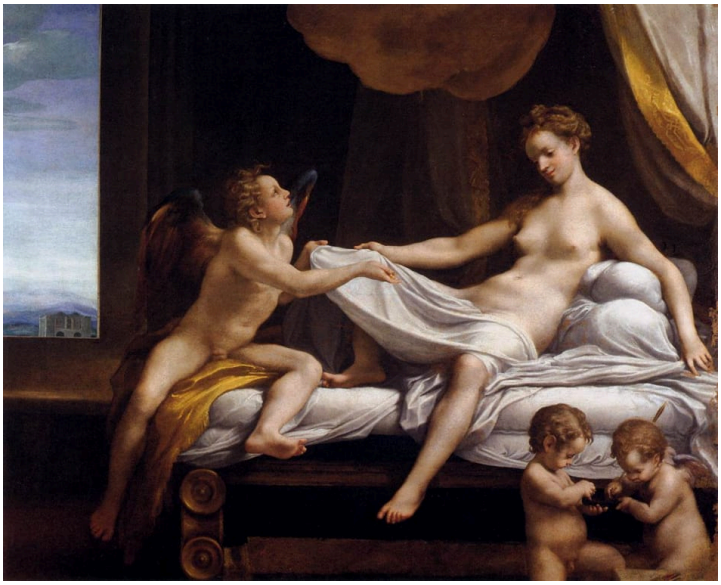
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1.26: Perseus

Perseus is the only Greek hero (that I am aware of) who does NOT fit the Story Pattern of the Greek Hero (see the Story Pattern of the Greek Hero). To be sure, Perseus does fit parts of the pattern: he certainly has an unusual birth, and he does go on a Heroic Journey in which he accomplishes Heroic Tests. But Perseus does not accomplish any Early Tests (that I know of), and, most importantly, Perseus is the only one of all the Greek heroes who has a happy life after he has accomplished his heroic journey and who does NOT have an unhappy death. I guess you could say that Perseus is the exception that proves the rule.

I. Unusual Birth:

Acrisius, the king of Argos [see map], had a daughter, but no sons, so he consulted the Delphic Oracle to see how he could get an heir to the throne. But the oracle he received made him forget the reason why he had consulted the Oracle in the first place. The Delphic Oracle said: "Your daughter's son will kill you."



Danaë by Correggio (1530) in the Galleria Borghese in Rome

Of course, Acrisius wanted to do everything he could to prevent this. So he put his daughter, Danaë, in a bronze prison, and he would not let any man near her. But Zeus fell in love with her, and he visited her in the form of a shower of golden rain. Nine months later, Danaë gave birth to Perseus.



Danaë and Zeus disguised as a shower of gold on a krater in the Louvre

Acrisius put them both in a wooden chest and put them out to sea. But the chest floated safely to the island of Seriphos, where it was found by Dictys, the brother of the king. Dictys took both mother and child into his home, and treated them like members of his family. Perseus received a good upbringing in Dictys' care.

All went well for many years, until Polydectes, Dictys' brother and the king of Seriphos, fell in love with Danaë and wanted to marry her. Danaë refused, and Perseus, who was now a young man, defended his mother, so Polydectes decided to find a way to get rid of Perseus.

II. Early Tests:

Apparently none.

III. & IV. Heroic Journey & Tests:

1. Polydectes told everyone that he was planning to marry Hippodameia, the daughter of the wealthy King Oinomaos of Pisa, and he asked all the men in his kingdom to contribute something toward the substantial bride price that he would have to pay. When asked for a contribution, Perseus said (a bit dramatically) that he would begrudge Polydectes nothing, and that he would even give him the Gorgon's head. But Polydectes held the youth to his promise. So Perseus set out to retrieve the head of the Gorgon, Medusa. Of course, Polydectes had no intention of marrying Hippodameia, and he was well aware of the problematic nature of Perseus' quest.

There were actually three Gorgon sisters, but the other two Gorgons were immortal. Since Medusa was the only Gorgon who was capable of being killed, it was her head that Perseus was going to seek. But there was one, huge problem: anyone who looked at Medusa would instantly be turned into stone. So how could anyone kill her without dying before he could complete the mission? Fortunately for Perseus, however, Athena already hated Medusa (for the reason why, see Poseidon), so Athena decided to help Perseus kill her.



Perseus killing Medusa and Pegasus being born from her head on a lekythos in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City

First, Athena helped Perseus find the Graeae. The Graeae were three old sisters, who shared a single eye between them. The Graeae did not want to help Perseus, but he managed to steal their eye as they were passing it from one to another; Perseus refused to give back the eye until they helped him, so they agreed. The Graeae told Perseus about some nymphs and where to find them. And when Perseus found the nymphs, they gave him three important gifts: winged sandals, which would allow him to fly through the air; a cap of darkness, which would make him invisible; and a special metallic pouch for Medusa's head.



Perseus by Cellini (1554) found under the Loggia dei Lanzi in Florence

Athena also told Perseus not to look at Medusa directly while killing her with his sword, but to look at Medusa's reflection in his shield, to avoid being turned into stone. Perseus was able to avoid the two, immortal Gorgons because he was wearing the cap of invisibility; he flew down to the Gorgons without being seen, and, looking carefully at his shield, he cut off Medusa's head and placed it in his pouch. Much later (after his adventures were over) Perseus gave Medusa's head to Athena, and Athena put on the aegis (or, in some versions, on her shield).



Perseus with the Head of Medusa by Antonio Canova from 1804-1806 found in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City

2. As Perseus was flying home on his winged sandals, Perseus passed by Ethiopia (or in some versions, Phoenicia) and he saw a beautiful girl, Andromeda, who was the princess of the land, chained to a rocky cliff and about to be devoured by a sea-serpent. Perseus immediately fell in love with her. Using his sword and winged sandals, Perseus killed the sea-serpent (in some versions, he turns the monster to stone by showing it Medusa's head). And, of course, he marries Andromeda.



Perseus rescuing Andromeda from the sea-serpent on an amphora found in the Altes Museum in Berlin

V. Happy Later Life:

Unlike the other Greek heroes, Perseus does not have an unhappy later life and a terrible death. On the contrary, Perseus seems to be the only Greek hero who lives happily ever after.

Perseus returned to Seriphus, where he found that Polydectes was about to marry his mother, although she still did not want to go through with the marriage. As he entered the hall where Polydectes and his friends were having a feast to celebrate his upcoming marriage, Perseus pulled Medusa's head out of its bag, turning the King and all his friends into stone. Perseus now had no more use for Medusa's head, so he gratefully gave it to Athena, and he sailed home to Argos with Andromeda and Danaë.

Acrisius received them kindly, and Perseus did not resent his grandfather for all the trouble he had caused him and his mother. But not long afterward, when he was competing at an athletic contest, Perseus threw a discus and he accidentally hit Acrisius, killing him instantly. He did not feel comfortable ruling his grandfather's kingdom, after having killed him, so he and Andromeda moved away, and Perseus founded the kingdom of Mycenae. And Perseus and Andromeda lived happily ever after!

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1.27: Poseidon

Roman name: Neptune

Epithets: Enosichthon (Earth-Shaker), Hippios (the Horse God)

Symbols: trident, horse, bull

God of the sea, salt and fresh water springs, earthquakes, and horses

Poseidon's Birth Myth

Poseidon was the son of Cronus and Rhea. Most stories relate that he was swallowed by his father like all his older siblings [see Origins], and was rescued by Zeus along with his other siblings. After the Olympians overthrew their Titan parents, the three Olympian brothers, Zeus, Hades, and Poseidon, drew lots to divvy up the realms. Poseidon was allotted domain over the seas, but he always remained immensely jealous of Zeus' position of King of the Gods. He once convinced Hera and Athena to join him in a rebellion against Zeus, whom they managed to imprison in chains until Thetis brought Briareüs, the chief of the Hundred-Handers, to release him (Homer, *Iliad*, 1.396-405).

Poseidon's Patronage

The gods often competed with each other to win patronage over areas in Greece. Poseidon vied with several of his fellow gods for several areas, and Poseidon did not often fare well in these contests. He and Helius (god of the sun) both wanted Corinth [see Corinthus on map] and could not agree, so they took their dispute to Briareüs, who divided the area between the two, giving the citadel to Helius and the isthmus to Poseidon. Hera and Poseidon fought passionately over Argos [map], and when the three river gods who were given the task of judging the dispute found in favor of Hera, Poseidon flooded the city and dried up the rivers in anger. Athena and Poseidon argued over possession of Troezen and Zeus ruled that they share possession of the city. The most famous of Poseidon's contests for power is over Athens [see Athenae on map], where he competed unsuccessfully with Athena [see Athena].



Athena and Poseidon competing for patronage of Athens on an amphora in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris

Family Life

Poseidon was married to Amphitrite, a daughter of Oceanus and Tethys, and they had a few children, most notably Triton, but like his brother Zeus, Poseidon had a tendency to pursue extramarital affairs. The cyclops Polyphemus (who figures in the *Odyssey*)

was his son by the sea nymph, Thoösa, and he fathered the hunter Orion [see Artemis] with Euryale, the daughter of Minos. Poseidon seduced Tyro (the mother of Aeson and the grandmother of the hero, Jason) in the form of a river and became the father of Pelias [see Jason] and Neleus, who, in turn, became the father of Nestor (who figures in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*). Theseus was also a son of Poseidon [see Theseus]. Unlike Hera [see Hera], Amphitrite does not seem to have cared much that her husband often looked for love outside of marriage. In fact, in one version of Theseus' journey to Crete [see Theseus], when Theseus arrived in Crete, Minos questioned his paternity, and Theseus questioned Minos'. So, each one had to prove to the other that he was the son of a god. Minos prayed to his father Zeus for a sign and received thunder and lightning. Theseus jumped into the sea and Amphitrite gave him her tiara to prove his connection to her husband.

Poseidon's Affairs

It seems strange that a sea god should be connected to horses, but Poseidon has several myths establishing him as a god of horses. While Demeter was wandering the earth looking for Persephone [see Demeter], Poseidon decided to pursue her. Demeter, trying to avoid her brother, turned into a mare, but Poseidon responded by turning into a stallion and having his way with her anyway. The product of this union was the divine horse, Arion. On another occasion, Poseidon seduced the gorgeous maiden, Medusa, in one of Athena's temples. Naturally, the virgin goddess was enraged that her temple was so defiled. Athena retaliated by transforming Medusa into a hideous monster with snakes for hair who would turn anyone who looked at her into stone. Later, when Perseus cut off Medusa's head, the winged horse Pegasus sprang out from her neck, the product of Medusa and Poseidon's tryst. Pegasus was later tamed by another of Poseidon's sons, Bellerophon. Peleus, the father of Achilles, was given the immortal horses, Xanthus and Balius, at his wedding by Poseidon. The god was also a friend to the centaurs and helped hide them from Heracles when he waged war on them [see 12 Labors of Heracles].



Caravaggio's *Medusa* (1597) in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence

Posiedon's Role in the Trojan War

During the Trojan War, Poseidon sided with the Greeks at least in part because he was still angry with Troy for the treatment he had received at the hands of Laomedon, the father of King Priam. Apollo and Poseidon were contracted by Laomedon to build walls around the city. The two gods agreed to perform this manual labor either because they wanted to test him or because Zeus had decreed, as punishment for a rebellion of which they had both been a part, that they work for Laomedon for a year. In any case, at the end of the year, Laomedon would not pay them and even threatened to sell them as slaves. Apollo responded by sending a plague and Poseidon sent a sea monster to terrorize them. Apollo, apparently, did not hold a grudge, since he always favored the Trojans, but Poseidon sided with the Greeks in the Trojan War. Despite favoring the Greeks, however, Poseidon, like Athena, was quickly angered by the less-than-perfect behavior of the victorious Greeks. Poseidon helped Athena punish the Lesser Ajax for his rape of Cassandra during the sack of Troy [see Athena] and he kept Odysseus from his home for ten years to punish the hero for blinding his son Polyphemus.

Posiedon, King Minos, and the Minotaur

To read about this myth, see the Minotaur.



The temple to Poseidon at Sounion

Posiedon's History

Poseidon seems to be a merging of the Mycenaean god, Poseidaon (meaning "husband of Da", πόσις/posis = husband) who may have been the consort of Demeter, and one or more pre-Greek sea gods. Since the Mycenaeans migrated into Greece from central Europe, they had no sea gods and thus had to adapt some of their gods to new functions.



The cape at Sounion

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1.28: Prometheus

Prometheus (Forethought) was the son of the Titan Iapetus and was brother to the Titans Epimetheus (Afterthought) and Atlas. Prometheus and Epimetheus sided with Zeus and the other Olympians against the Titans and their brother and father because Prometheus could foresee the outcome of the conflict. Because of this, Prometheus and Epimetheus did not suffer the same fate as Iapetus and Atlas.

Prometheus was considered the father of mankind because he created them from clay. He only made men, no women, and let them loose to live in the world. The world was not a kind place though, it was filled with beasts and getting enough food to stay alive was a difficult task. This was not made any easier by Zeus, who insisted that mortal men sacrifice to the gods frequently and give the entire animal to the gods. Prometheus appealed to Zeus to allow the mortals to give only a portion of the animal to the gods and to keep the rest for themselves. Zeus agreed, but the two could not agree on which parts would be reserved for the gods. Prometheus knew that Zeus wanted all the good parts of the animal and came up with a plan to trick him. Prometheus took an animal and divided the choice cuts of the meat from the bones and other less savory tissues. On the pile of bones, he placed fat and a small portion of nice meat on top to disguise it, but on the pile of good meat he placed some lesser meat and gristle. He had Zeus choose from the two piles and Zeus chose the bones and fat. Zeus was very angry when he found out, and he never forgave Prometheus for tricking him.

Men now had meat, but they still had difficulty surviving because they could not keep warm or cook their food. Prometheus knew that fire would save them, but Zeus kept fire for the gods alone. So again, Prometheus thought up a plan. He took a red-hot coal and hid it inside a woody fennel stalk to give to mortals. Now the mortals could cook and keep warm and they were much happier; they worshipped Prometheus as the inventor of all the arts of civilization. But when Zeus saw mankind using fire, he became furious at having been tricked once again. He ordered that Prometheus be nailed to a lonely spot in the Caucasus Mountains. Every day an eagle would come every day to peck out his liver, but every night Prometheus' liver would grow back so the eagle could eat it again. But Zeus was not finished with his punishments; now he wanted to punish mankind. Zeus then had Hephaestus build a beautiful woman, named Pandora (All Gifts), because each of the gods had given her a gift, and he sent her to Epimetheus. Even though Prometheus had warned his brother not to accept any gift from the gods, Epimetheus (true to his name) forgot all about his brother's warning. As soon as Epimetheus saw Pandora, he knew he had to have her for his wife. But Pandora brought with her a jar (not a box) that was filled with evils. And once she opened her jar, all the evils flew out into the world; only hope stayed behind as a comfort for mankind.

Prometheus remained chained to the mountains until Heracles shot the eagle with his arrow and set the Titan free while on his labor to bring back the Apples of the Hesperides [see the 12 Labors of Heracles]. Zeus allowed Heracles to free Prometheus because he held some very useful knowledge that he would only divulge once he had been freed. After he was freed, Prometheus informed Zeus that the goddess Thetis, with whom Zeus was infatuated, was fated to give birth to a son who would be greater than his father [see Intro to Iliad]. Before Zeus knew this prophecy, he and Poseidon had been rivals for Thetis' hand, but once the prophecy was known, neither god wanted anything to do with her. Zeus and Poseidon agreed that Thetis should be safely married off to a mortal. And that is how Thetis, a sea-goddess, came to marry Peleus, who was only a mortal. For the story of their wedding and the identity of the son (who did turn out to be greater than his father), see the Introduction to the Iliad.

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1.29: Psychological Myths

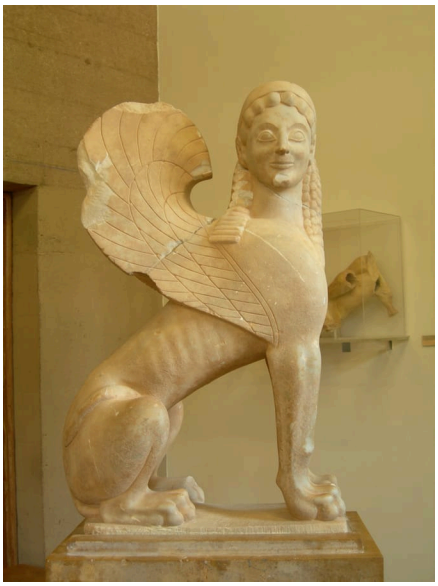
See Three Types of Myth

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1.30: Sphinx

The Greek sphinx was clearly inspired by the Egyptian sphinx, but the Greeks modified it and made it their own. The Greek sphinx had a woman's face and breasts, a lion's body, and bird's wings. The word sphinx is Greek (σφίγξ), and it means "strangler," perhaps from the fact that lionesses usually kill their prey by strangling it.

Since sphinxes were very intimidating, the Greeks frequently put them on gravestones, to frighten away would-be grave robbers. This use is called "apotropaic" — meaning "causing someone to turn away". Most of the examples of ancient Greek sphinxes that we have today are from ancient gravestones.



A Sphinx statue from a grave stele found in the Archaeological Museum in Corinth

In myth, there was one famous Sphinx, who turned up in Thebes shortly after their king, Laius, had been killed while on his way to consult the Delphic Oracle. This Sphinx flew on top of the city walls, and asked all the Theban youths a riddle. When they could not answer it, she ate them! At the time, Creon was the regent in Thebes (since Laius had died), and he was so desperate to get rid of the Sphinx that he promised the kingship and the hand of the widowed Queen Jocasta (who also happened to be his sister), in marriage to anyone who could solve the Sphinx's riddle. This was the Sphinx's riddle: "What goes on four feet in the morning, two feet in midday, and three feet in the evening?"



Oedipus answering the Sphinx's riddle on a kylix found in the Vatican Museum

At around this time Oedipus came to Thebes (since he didn't want to go back home to Corinth), and he solved the riddle. Oedipus said, "The answer is 'man'. A man crawls on all fours in the morning of his life, he walks on two feet in the midday of his life, and he uses a cane for extra support when he is old." The sphinx was so upset that Oedipus had answered the riddle correctly, that she threw herself down from the walls of Thebes and died.



Oedipus and the Sphinx by Gustave Moreau (1864) in the Metropolian Museum in New York

So Oedipus was welcomed to Thebes as a hero. He married Queen Jocasta and he became the King of Thebes. Oedipus and Jocasta had four children: Eteocles, Polynices, Ismene, and Antigone.

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1.31: Story Pattern of the Greek Hero

Myths from many lands illustrate the archetypal pattern of the hero, in which a hero's life follows a predictable pattern of types of events. These include an unusual birth, early tests, a heroic quest (with heroic tests), and a return and a reward. This pattern is drawn from the work of the comparative mythologist, Joseph Campbell. Campbell discovered that the story of a typical hero follows a predictable pattern across the mythologies of many different cultures.

Campbell's Story Pattern of the Hero applies to the Greek hero to some extent, but Greek heroes differ in one, crucial respect: the last stage. Greek heroes, contrary to heroes from other cultures, usually have an unhappy later life and a violent or unhappy death.

In setting forth our own **Story Pattern of the *Greek* Hero**, we will concentrate especially on the heroes' unhappy later lives (after they have completed their heroic journeys) and their unhappy deaths, because that is what differentiates Greek myths from the myths of most other cultures.

Story Pattern of the *Greek* Hero

I. Unusual Birth – usually has one divine parent & one mortal parent

-sometimes the god (if Zeus) changes his shape

-sometimes both divine & human father (both slept w/mother on same night)

II. Early Tests – must prove heroic nature while still young

III. Heroic Journey – motivated by a noble cause

-often b/c his family has been deprived of rightful power

-often imposed by a wicked king

-often includes a descent to Hades & return

-in psychological terms = facing own death

IV. Heroic Tests

– must pass series of difficult tests; often part of heroic journey

-includes performing difficult and dangerous acts that greatly benefit his people

-sometimes imposed by a wicked king

-sometimes includes killing a monster or dragon

– often wins princess bride as a reward

V. Unhappy Later Life and Violent or Unhappy Death

-this aspect is peculiarly Greek

-different from heroes of other cultures, e.g. our own

Note: variations are important

-most heroes don't follow pattern fully

-it is interesting to note that each Greek hero is unique and not all of them fit into every aspect of this general pattern.

-but all Greek heroes (except, perhaps, for Perseus) do have an unhappy later life and violent or unhappy death

-Heracles is perhaps the best example of this pattern.

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1.32: Theseus

Hero and King of Athens

The Birth of Theseus

Theseus was either the son of Poseidon and Aëthra, the daughter of Pittheus, the king of Troezen [map], or he was the son of Aëthra and Aegeus, the king of Athens [see Athenae on map]. Apparently both Aegeus and Poseidon slept with Aëthra on the same night.

Aegeus, the king of Athens, was having trouble producing an heir, so he went to the Delphic Oracle [map] to ask how he could solve his problem. The Pythia said: “Do not open the foot of the wineskin until you return home.” The meaning of this oracle, as often happens, was unclear. On his way home to Athens, Aegeus stopped at Troezen to ask his friend, Pittheus, who was known for his wisdom, what the oracle meant. In ancient Greece, wineskins were made from a whole skin of a goat; one foot of the goatskin was used for the spout. So when the Pythia said, “Don’t open the foot of the wineskin,” she was literally saying, “Don’t uncork the wine.” But the foot of the wineskin was also very long and straight, and it was also a phallic symbol. And that is what the Pythia meant; she meant to advise Aegeus not to sleep with any woman until he returned home, since the next woman he slept with would bear him a son.



A wineskin was made from the skin of a goat to hold wine. One of the feet of the goat would be made into the opening and thus it is called the foot. In this sculpture (found in the Naples Museum), the wineskin is placed on top of a lion skin.

Pittheus knew the meaning immediately, but instead of telling Aegeus what it meant, he chose to get Aegeus drunk and have him sleep with his daughter, Aëthra. He did this because as king of Athens, Aegeus was very powerful, and he wanted Aëthra’s son to become king of Athens. However, Aegeus did not know that Poseidon also slept with Aëthra later that same night.

Theseus’ Early Tests

The next morning, before Aegeus left Troezen to return home to Athens, he placed a pair of sandals and a sword under a large and heavy rock. He told Aëthra that, if she gave birth to a son, she should raise him. If he became strong enough to remove the rock, he told her to send the boy to him in Athens with the sword and sandals as tokens of his parentage. If he could not move the rock, however, she should keep him in Troezen.

Aëthra, of course, did give gave birth to a son. She named him Theseus, and he was so strong that he was able to move the rock and take the tokens when he was only sixteen. So, Theseus set out for Athens. Now, he could have taken the easy route to Athens by sea, but he chose the dangerous land route because he wanted to have plenty of opportunities to perform heroic deeds. He had

heard of the great deeds of Heracles, of course, and he wanted to show that Heracles was not the only hero in Greece. Theseus soon ran into Periphetes, a son of Hephaestus who was known by the name Corynetes, which means “club-bearer”, because he carried around a large bronze club which used to cave in the skull of anyone who passed by him. Theseus could not defeat him with brute strength, but he was clever and quick as well as being strong, so he managed to maneuver around Periphetes and take away his club. Once Theseus had the club, it was not difficult to overpower and kill Periphetes. Having done so, Theseus continued on his journey.

Next Theseus ran into the thief Sinis, who had earned the name Pityocamptes, meaning “pine-bender”, because of his habit of bending down two separate trees and tying men’s limbs to them. After that, he would let the trees go, causing the man’s body to tear apart. Theseus did the same to Sinis. He then decided to go a little out of his way to kill the Crommyonian Sow. He dispatched her easily and returned to his journey, stopping next at the Sceironian Rocks, named for the thief who lived at the top, Sceiron. This thief would terrorize travelers by forcing them to wash his feet and while they were doing that, kick them off the cliffs to a giant turtle living below them which would eat the travelers. Theseus defeated Sceiron by taking a hold of the thief by the legs before he could kick and threw him over the edge.

The two last major deeds Theseus accomplished along the way happened just outside Athens. First, he met the King of Eleusis, Cercyon, who would challenge anyone who passed by to a boxing match and kill his opponent. Theseus overpowered him with his speed and killed Cercyon. He then in a nearby town ran into a man named Damastes, who had earned the name Procrustes, which means “stretcher”, because he would invite travelers to stay the night, but when they did not fit the bed he provided, he would cut down those who were too large and stretch out those who were too small. Again, Theseus treated his foe to the same punishment he dealt out to his victims. And even today people use the term, “Procrustean bed,” to describe a theory that has been artificially made to fit the facts (because the facts have been altered).

Theseus and Medea

Finally, Theseus arrived in Athens and went to the palace of Aegeus. Tales of his deeds on his journey had arrived before he did. Aegeus was impressed and invited the young hero to feast with him. Because of the rules of xenia [see Xenia], Theseus had not yet introduced himself, and this allowed Aegeus’ wife, Medea to act. Medea was a witch, and by this time (sixteen years after Aegeus had consulted the oracle) she had married Aegeus and had born him a son, Medon. [For the background on how Medea came to Athens to be Aegeus’ wife, see Jason.] Medea recognized Theseus immediately and knew that if Aegeus discovered the hero’s identity, her son would not be able to inherit the throne.

Medea convinced Aegeus that the hero would side with Aegeus’ brother Pallas, who had been trying to take the throne away from Aegeus for years. She suggested that Aegeus put poison in Theseus’ wine, and the King, who was easily fooled, agreed to do this. But when the unsuspecting Theseus raised his hand to drink his wine, Aegeus recognized his own sword hooked to Theseus’ belt. In a panic, he dashed Theseus’ wine cup to the ground, just as Theseus was about to drink it. Needless to say, Medea and Medon were banished from Athens.

Theseus, Ariadne, and the Minotaur

Not long after Theseus was publicly recognized as Aegeus’ son, it was time for Athens to send seven youths and seven maidens to Crete to be fed to the Minotaur [see Minotaur]. The Athenians had to do this every nine years to atone for a previous crime. When Theseus heard about this, he was appalled that Athens — which was a great and powerful city — was so subservient to King Minos of Crete. So Theseus volunteered to be one of the youths taken. Theseus vowed to kill the Minotaur, to bring back all the Athenian youths and maidens alive, and to free Athens from such a terrible burden. Aegeus was distraught; he had finally found the son he had longed for, and now the boy was about to be taken away again. But he finally agreed to let his son go because Theseus was doing it for such a noble cause. But Aegeus asked only one thing. He put black sails on Theseus’ ship as it set out for Crete, and he asked that if Theseus died in the attempt against the Minotaur, the Athenian ship’s sails would remain black, but if he survived, he asked Theseus to switch the sails to white. Theseus agreed, and they all sailed to Crete.

When the Athenians arrived on Crete, there was a public parade of the prisoners, and as soon as Ariadne, Minos’ daughter, saw Theseus, she immediately fell in love with him. Now the Minotaur was a monster, half-man and half-bull, who lived in the labyrinth [See Minotaur]. Ariadne knew that Theseus would need her help to kill the Minotaur and then escape from the labyrinth. So, she secretly visited Theseus in prison, the night before the Athenians were going to be fed to the Minotaur, and she gave him a sword and a ball of thread. She told him to tie the thread to the entrance of the labyrinth, and, after he had killed the Minotaur, he could use the thread to find his way out again. Ariadne asked only one thing of Theseus: after he had killed the Minotaur and escaped from the labyrinth, he should take her back to Athens with him to be his bride. Theseus agreed.

Theseus took the ball of thread and the sword into the labyrinth, unwinding the string as he went. When he found the Minotaur, he

cut off his throat, and then he led the Athenian youths and maidens out of the labyrinth, following the trail of Ariadne's thread. He then picked up Ariadne, who was waiting by the Athenian ship, and they quickly sailed away. Minos' fleet could not pursue them because Ariadne had somehow found a way to bore holes into all their ships.



A kylix depicting Theseus dragging the Minotaur from the labyrinth, located in the British Museum

On the way back to Athens, the group stopped on the island of Dia (modern day Naxos) [map]. Theseus and Ariadne slept together on the island that night. But Theseus woke up around midnight. He had already escaped the labyrinth so he no longer had any use for Ariadne, and he felt a little embarrassed at the prospect of marrying into a family that was a little strange in their sexual habits. So, while Ariadne was sleeping, Theseus quietly gathered the group of Athenians together and left the island without her. When she awoke, she found herself alone on a desert island. Ariadne was devastated, of course; and she was sure she was going to die a horrible death. But it just so happened that, later that same day, Dionysus was passing by in the midst of his travels to promote his worship. He saw Ariadne and was so smitten by her beauty that he immediately made her his wife and she became a goddess. So, everything turned out well for Ariadne (no thanks to Theseus). And if you travel to the island of Naxos today, you will see a statue of Ariadne, looking out to shore.



A modern statue of Ariadne of the island of Naxos, the island on which she was abandoned by Theseus

Theseus, however, either because he was feeling guilty about his treatment of Ariadne (and thus was preoccupied) or just from

sheer cockiness, forgot to change the sails on his ships. So when Aegeus, watching for the return of his ship, saw the black sails, he was overcome with grief and threw himself into the sea. And that part of the Mediterranean Sea which is just off the coast of the Athenian peninsula, the Aegean Sea, is still named after him. When Theseus came home to Athens in triumph, he found his city in mourning for the death of the king.

Theseus and Hippolyte

At some point, Theseus helped the hero Heracles fight against the Amazons and brought back with him the Queen of the Amazons, Hippolyte, as his wife. The Amazons were unhappy to lose their queen and sent a force to attack Athens to regain her. The two groups fought, and Hippolyte died in battle, but nor before bearing Theseus a son, Hippolytus.

The Story of Hippolytus

Many years later, Theseus married Minos' youngest daughter, Phaedra, to smooth over relations with Crete. But when he brought Phaedra back to Athens, she fell in love with Hippolytus, who was now about 19 or 20 years old (and much closer to Phaedra in age than Theseus was). Some say that Aphrodite had caused Phaedra to do this because Hippolytus was a devotee of the virgin goddess Artemis. Since Artemis was a virgin, Hippolytus had vowed to remain a virgin as well, and Aphrodite took this as a personal affront. In any case, Phaedra was sick with love for the handsome young man. But despite her personal pain, she vowed never to breath a word of her feelings. Nevertheless, somehow, Hippolytus found out. And when he found out, he was both furious and disgusted. He confronted Phaedra and called her a lot of terrible names (as you can imagine). As a result, Phaedra became bitterly angry at Hippolytus and vowed revenge. She knew she had to commit suicide; she could not live with the shame of wanting to commit adultery with her own stepson. But before she killed herself, she wrote a note to Theseus, falsely claiming that his son had raped her. Theseus believed what he read in the note, despite Hippolytus' protestations that he had nothing to do with his stepmother. But by now, Theseus was in a rage. He banished Hippolytus from Athens and called upon his father, Poseidon, to kill the youth. As Hippolytus was driving his chariot out of Athens along the seashore, a terrifying bull emerged from the water. The horses were so frightened that they all reared up and ran in different directions. Hippolytus got tangled in the reins of his chariot and was eventually pulled apart by his horses. After this had happened, Artemis told Theseus the truth.

The Death of Theseus

Theseus now had to live with the terrible truth that he had killed his own son, and for no good reason. He continued on as king of Athens, but life was never the same. He became moody and sullen, and he neglected his duties as king. The Athenians asked him to leave, and Theseus agreed. He decided to go to the island of Scyrus, Aegeus' homeland, and Lycomedes, the king of Scyrus, agreed to give Theseus some land that had once belonged to Aegeus. But deep down, Lycomedes felt threatened by the presence of such a great hero. As Theseus was walking with Lycomedes along the cliffs at the edge of the island, somehow Theseus tripped (or did Lycomedes push him?) and he fell to his death.

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1.33: The Argonauts

The Argo

The hero Jason was asked by his uncle, Pelias, to bring him the Golden Fleece. [For more on the hero's life and how Pelias came to give him this command, see Jason]. The Golden Fleece was a ram's fleece of pure gold; it was the prize possession of Aëtes, the King of Colchis, which was located on the far-away shores of the Black Sea [map. Jason organized an expedition of heroes from all over Greece to sail with him on this adventure. The roster of heroes varies from source to source but there are a few who appear on almost every list: Heracles; Orpheus; the Dioscuri (sons of Zeus), Castor and Polyduces (also known as Pollux); Telamon, father of the Greater Ajax; Peleus, father of Achilles; and Argus, the builder and eponym of the Argo, the ship on which the Argonauts sailed. Argus had built the ship (with the help of Athena) with one beam from the sacred oak of Dodona. This beam could speak and at some points gave advice to the crew.

The Lemnian Women

The expedition first came to Lemnos, an island inhabited only by women, because all the men had been killed. Sometime before this, the women on the island had neglected the cult of the goddess, Aphrodite. Aphrodite, becoming angry, of course, had caused the women to give off a terrible odor. The women's husbands naturally began to avoid their wives, and eventually they sailed to Thrace and brought back concubines to sleep with instead of their wives. The women were so angry that they killed all the men and the Thracian women as well. (Only one man survived; the princess, Hypsipyle, hid her aged father in a chest and put him out to sea; he drifted ashore on the island of Oenoë.) Because of this terrible deed, the Lemnian women lived in constant fear that the Thracians would come and attack them in retaliation. When the Argonauts landed on Lemnos, the Lemnian women believed that the Thracians had come to kill them and got ready for battle. Jason sent one of his crew, a son of Hermes, as a messenger to ask the women if the Argonauts could camp out on their shore. His words convinced the women they were not in immediate danger, so they convened a council in which they decided that having a group of strong and handsome heroes around would not be a bad idea. The women sent a messenger to bring the heroes into the city.

Most of the Argonauts were thrilled to spend the night in the city (apparently the women no longer smelled bad), but Heracles and a few others stayed with the ship. Queen Hypsipyle became quite enamored with Jason and offered to allow the Argonauts to come and stay. If Jason had any skill, it was charming women. He thanked Hypsipyle graciously but told her that he and his men had to continue on with their journey. Most authors say that the Argonauts spent only a few days on Lemnos, but this was long enough for a new generation of Lemnians to result.

The Doliones

After leaving Lemnos, the Argo sailed for the Hellespont [see Hellespontus on map]. They landed on an island in the Sea of Marmara inhabited by a people called the Doliones. Their king offered to give them shelter and to restock their supplies because an oracle had told him to offer aid such travelers. Only a few men were left to guard the ship, so when a group of giants came upon the guards, the ship would have been easily destroyed had the mighty Heracles not been one of the guards. Heracles singlehandedly shot several of the giants and chased the others away. The King of the Doliones showed Jason the route for the next leg of their journey and the Argo soon headed off, but contrary winds pushed the ship back into the harbor.

By now it was dark, however, and no one could see very well. When the Argonauts disembarked, they did not realize where they were; the Doliones believed a group of raiders had come to attack them, and so a battle ensued. Eventually the Doliones retreated, having lost a large number of their men. The next morning, the Argonauts realized their mistake when they found the body of the king. The Argonauts and the Doliones together celebrated a magnificent funeral for all the deceased. A few days later, the Argonauts moved on.

Heracles and Hylas

The next day they came to the coast of Mysia [map]. Here, Heracles broke his oar, so the group put ashore to make a new one. Heracles went into the woods to cut down the wood for a new oar while his lover, Hylas, went to a stream to get some water. At the stream, Hylas' striking beauty caused the nymph of the stream to abduct him by grabbing him and taking him down to her palace under the water. Heracles was understandably upset by Hylas' disappearance and spent the entire night searching for him. He was still out searching the next day when the rest of the crew were getting ready to leave, and in their hurry, they left Heracles behind. Heracles managed to find his way home, where he continued his labors.

Phineus and the Harpies

Next, the Argonauts headed for the Bosporus [map] and landed in Salmydessus, the capital of Thynia. Here they met the king, a man named Phineus, who was blind and was being hounded by the Harpies. The Harpies were women with the wings, beaks, and talons of birds. Their name comes from the Greek verb *harpazein* (ἁρπάζειν) meaning "to snatch"; and that's what they did. Whenever Phineus tried to eat anything the Harpies would swoop down and steal some of the food; they left droppings on the rest, so as to make it inedible. So Phineus was slowly starving to death. Phineus was very weak by the time the Argonauts found him. He asked them for their help and they of course obliged. Two of the Argonauts. Zetes and Calaïs, were the sons of Boreas, the North Wind, and because of this, they had wings on their backs. A wonderful feast was prepared and when the Harpies came to snatch it, Zetes and Calaïs took flight and chased the Harpies away. The brothers would have killed the Harpies with their bows and arrows, but Iris (who was the rainbow and also the messenger of Zeus) told them that Zeus wanted them to spare the Harpies' lives, as long as the Harpies promised never to bother Phineus again. When Zetes and Calaïs returned to Salmydessus, everyone enjoyed the feast. In return for their help, Phineus gave them the information they needed to get past the Symplegades (otherwise known as the Clashing Rocks).



The Harpies stealing Phineus' food on a krater in the Archaeological Museum in Ferrara, Italy

The Clashing Rocks

The expedition now headed for the Clashing Rocks, located at the entrance to the Bosphorus [map]. These were floating islands that would crash together with tremendous speed at unpredictable intervals. When they got there, the Argonauts did as Phineus had instructed and sent a dove to fly between the rocks. They watched to see what would happen to the bird, since Phineus had told them that if the bird survived, they had a chance of making it through. If the bird did not, it was useless and they would most definitely perish if they tried. The dove successfully made it through the rocks, though it lost its tail feathers. As the rocks separated, the sailors prepared to row as hard as they possibly could because their lives depended on it. The boat rushed forward at top speed, but the waves created by the moving rocks nearly capsized the Argo. The crew would have perished had Athena not stepped in and held the rocks apart while pushing the Argo through. But after the Argo escaped, the rocks stayed in place; the gods had decided long ago that once a ship had passed through them, they would never crash together again.

The Sons of Phryxis

The rest of the journey to Colchis was relatively easy for the Argonauts. Zeus steered the group away from the island of the Amazons, Themiscyra, where the Amazons were already prepared for a fight. After a little more sailing, the ship came to a desert island sacred to Ares which Phineus had advised them to visit because they would find something vital to their mission while there. The island was filled with birds with feathers so sharp they could cut through flesh. To get onto the island, the Argonauts held their shields over their heads to make cover. They then clashed their weapons together to scare the birds away. Now able to move around, the crew found the sons of Phrixus stranded on the island. (Phryxis was the youth who had been carried to Colchis by the golden ram. He had stayed in Colchis and had married King Aeëtes' daughter.) The boys were able to show the group the rest of the way to Colchis.

Jason's Tasks

When the crew finally arrived in Colchis, they had no idea how they were going to get the golden fleece, but Hera and Athena asked Aphrodite for her help. Aphrodite sent her son, Eros (also known as Cupid), to shoot Medea, the daughter of King Aeëtes, with his arrows so she would fall in love with Jason [Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica*]. The moment Medea saw Jason she instantly fell in love with him. She brought them into the house and her father, on account of Xenia [see Xenia], had to allow the strangers to join them for dinner.

At the dinner banquet, Argus (one of Phrixus' sons) explained who they were and that they had come for the Golden Fleece. Unexpectedly, Aeëtes told the Argonauts that he would certainly give them the Fleece; he said he would only ask Jason to perform a few tasks first. All Jason had to do was to yoke a pair of fire-breathing bulls to a plow, sow a field with dragon's teeth, and then, when fully-armed warriors sprang up from the teeth he would have to kill all of the warriors. Jason had no idea how he was going to perform these asks, but he reluctantly agreed. Later that night, Medea, who was a priestess of Hecate and a very skilled witch, paid a visit to Jason. Medea made Jason promise that he would take her back to Iolcus with him if she helped him complete these impossible tasks. Jason eagerly agreed and Medea gave him a potion and told him what to do.

The night before he had to complete his tasks, Jason sacrificed to Hecate in the manner Medea had instructed him. Then early the next morning he rubbed the potion into his skin and went to find the fire-breathing bulls. Jason was able to yoke the bulls to the plow because the potion protected him from their fire. He plowed the field with the bulls and sowed the dragon's teeth. From the soil came hundreds of fierce warriors, but Jason had been told by Medea what he needed to do. Jason threw a rock into the middle of the warriors, and they, thinking their fellows were attacking them, began to attack one another. Jason waited while they fought one another until only one was left and he killed the remaining warrior.

Stealing the Golden Fleece

Aeëtes, angry that Jason had been able to complete these impossible tasks, refused to hand over the Fleece and the Greeks retreated to their camp. That night, Medea snuck out to the Greek camp and met with Jason. She told him that if he agreed to marry her, she would help him steal the Fleece. Jason agreed and they went to the grove which housed the Golden Fleece. A dragon stood guard over the grove, but Medea put it to sleep with drugs. Jason killed the dragon, stole the Fleece, and they rushed back to the Greek camp and jumped into the ship and sailed toward Greece, taking Medea's younger brother, Apsyrtus, with them. Aeëtes soon learned what had happened and sailed after them with his entire fleet.

The Murder of Apsyrtus

As Aeëtes and his fleet began to gain on the Argo, Medea had run out of ideas. But she was desperately in love with Jason, so she did the only thing she could think of. Medea killed her younger brother, Apsyrtus, and chopped him into pieces. Then she and threw the pieces over the side of the ship, one by one. Aeëtes, when he saw the pieces of his son floating by, stopped to pick up each of the limbs and eventually the head. He forgot all about pursuing the Argo, but he returned to Colchis to give his dead child a decent burial. This allowed the Argonauts to escape the clutches of Aeëtes, but it meant that Medea began her life with Jason by murdering her own brother.

Circe

Zeus was angry at the crew for the murder of Apsyrtus, so Hera blew them off their course, sending them to the waters around Italy to protect them from Zeus' wrath. The beam of the ship with the ability to speak told the crew that they could not return home until they had been purified of Apsyrtus' murder by Aeëtes' sister, the witch Circe, who lived on the island called Aeaea. They found Circe and she performed the proper sacrifices and purification rituals. After this was done she asked who they were. Medea explained the story (minus the death of Apsyrtus) to her and Circe was appalled to learn that her niece had stolen the Golden Fleece. She ordered the Argonauts to leave her island.

The Sirens

Now that they had been purified of the murder, Hera helped the crew of the Argo make their journey to Iolcus. They passed the Sirens, who are described as birds with the heads of women and the ability to sing so wonderfully that any sailor who heard their song would jump out of the boat and swim toward their island where they would die of starvation. The Argonauts had Orpheus amongst their crew and he played a song that rivaled the song of the Sirens and allowed the Argo to pass unharmed. The Argo also passed by Scylla (a monster with six dogs for legs) and Charybdis (a whirlpool that would suck up water and then regurgitate it) and would have surely perished had Thetis, a sea nymph, and her sisters, not guided the Argo through the waters. Thetis would later become the bride of one of the Argonauts, Peleus.

Return to Iolcus

After much wandering, the Argo finally made it back to Iolcus, where Jason and Medea were married. For the rest of the story about Jason and Medea, see Jason.

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1.34: The Delphic Oracle

The word, “oracle,” comes from the Latin word *oraculum*, which means both a prophecy made by a god (or priest) and the place where the prophecy is given. Similarly, the English word, “oracle,” has both meanings. So, the Delphic Oracle refers to the place where the prophecies were given, but an “oracle” can also refer to the prophecy that Apollo gives there.

The Delphic Oracle belonged to Apollo, and his priestess, called The Pythia, gave her oracles from inside Apollo’s temple.

The Oracle at Delphi [map] seems to have originally been held by Gaia (Aeschylus, *Eumenide*s 1-8). According to some accounts, Gaia had a snake or dragon, named the Python, that guarded her oracle. When Apollo came to take over the oracle, he first had to kill the dragon in order to take possession of it. Apollo’s priestess got her title, The Pythia, from the Python.



The Sacred Way at Delphi with the remains of the Athenians’ Treasury

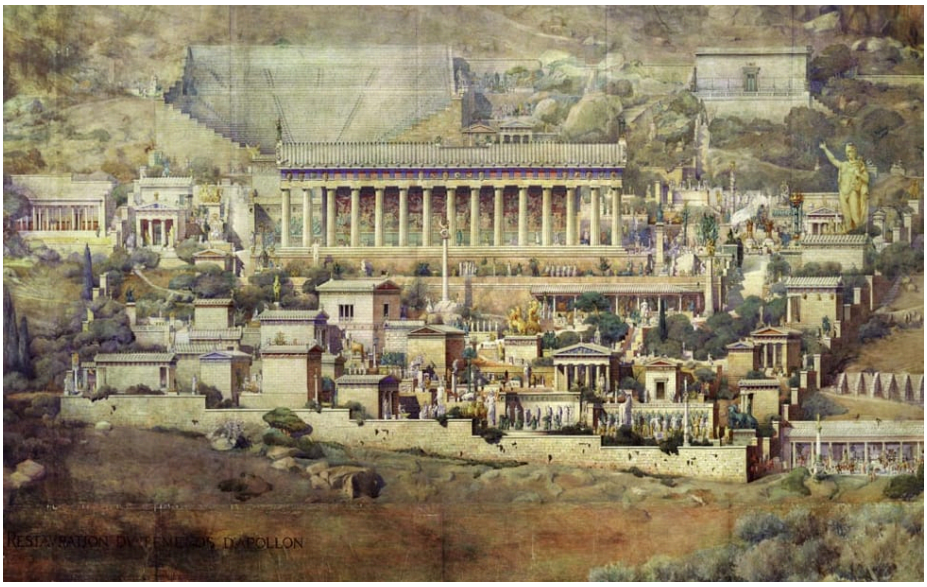
Delphi was (and still is) located in central Greece, on the side of Mount Parnassus. The temple of Apollo, where the prophesies were given, was (and still is) situated in an incredibly beautiful spot about half way up the mountain. This is one of the most beautiful places on earth, and the Greeks clearly chose this spot for the temple with good reason.



The Temple of Apollo at Delphi

The Consultation Procedure

There were many other oracles in Greece, but the Oracle at Delphi was the most famous, and everyone who could afford to consult the Oracle at Delphi preferred to do so. Of course, there was a long waiting period to consult the oracle (sometimes several months), and there were a number of expensive, preliminary sacrifices. Most of the people who consulted the Oracle at Delphi were wealthy individuals or even heads of state. The long path leading up the mountain to Apollo's temple, called the Sacred Way, was lined with treasure houses. These treasuries were filled with costly gifts that leaders and cities had given to Apollo. Some of these treasuries are still standing, and a very few of those precious gifts can still be seen in the museum at Delphi.



Albert Tournaire's recreation of Apollo's Temple at Delphi and the Sacred Way leading up to it.

When someone came to ask a question of the Oracle, he would need to make a preliminary sacrifice of a goat, and then purify himself in the nearby Castilian Spring. Then he would approach the adyton of Apollo's temple. The adyton is a room inside the temple that was off limits; no one could go in. It is unclear whether those who were consulting the oracle were allowed to go inside the adyton, or whether they had to remain outside. The Pythia is usually conceived of as sitting on a tripod when she gave her prophecies. A tripod (as its name implies) was a three-footed stand, usually made of metal. Tripods had a round, metal band around the top, and they were usually used to hold a cauldron over the fire for cooking. But in this case, the Pythia would sit on it,

almost like she was sitting on a three-legged stool, to give her prophecies.



The Pythia on her tripod giving an oracle on a kylix in the Altes Museum in Berlin

After the person consulting the Oracle asked his question, the Pythia would go into a trance; it was believed that Apollo himself possessed her. She would speak and a priest (or several priests) who were standing near-by would take down what she said and translate her words into a poem written in hexameters. It is usually assumed that the Pythia's original words were coherent, but not very clear. Of course, there is no way to know for sure what her words were really like, but perhaps we can get a good idea from Cassandra's prophecies in Aeschylus' play, the *Agamemnon*. In that play, Cassandra gives several prophecies that make sense to the audience (because we know what is going to happen), but are so fragmented and confusing that the other characters in the drama do not understand them.



The Oracle by Camillo Miola (1880) in the Getty Museum

Once the Pythia's words were translated into hexameter poetry, the poem was written down and given to the person who sought the advice; it was always the responsibility of the recipient to interpret the oracle correctly. And the oracles, even in their final form, were always ambiguous. Frequently (though not always), the recipients did not interpret them correctly, and they suffered as a result.

Famous Examples of Oracles

For example, Aegeus, the king of Athens, asked the Delphic Oracle how he could have children, and the Oracle said: “Do not open the foot of the wineskin until you return home.” [see Theseus]

According to Herodotus, Croesus, the king of Lydia, asked the oracle if he should go to war with Persia. Lydia was a large and very prosperous kingdom in what is now central Turkey, but Cyrus, the king of Persia, had recently expanded his kingdom so that it bumped up against Lydia’s borders. Croesus felt threatened by the Persian expansion, so he wanted to know if he should attack Persia before Persia attacked him. The Pythia answered: “If you go to war against Persia, you will destroy a great empire” (Herodotus 1.53). Croesus interpreted this to mean that he would destroy Persia, and so he gathered his forces and attacked. But Croesus lost the war, and in the end, he was forced to admit that he had destroyed his own, great empire (Herodotus 1.91).

There are many examples of people misinterpreting oracles (usually because, like Croesus, they interpret it according to what they want to hear), but there are a few examples of people who interpret their oracles correctly, and benefit greatly as a result.

The Omphalos



The Omphalos, or the navel stone of the earth, in the Archaeological Museum of Delphi

The Greeks believed that Delphi was located at the center of the earth. Near Apollo’s temple was a rock (about 2-3 feet high) shaped similarly to a bee-hive, and carved with a floral pattern. This was the omphalos (or “navel” in Greek), which was considered to be the navel stone of the earth. In art, Apollo is sometimes shown using this as his seat, implying that his oracle was in some sense the epicenter of everything that occurred on earth. According to Hesiod (*Theogony* 497-500), this was originally the stone that Rhea had given to Cronus to swallow instead of Zeus. Zeus placed it at Delphi after Cronus had vomited it up (with the other Olympians) and Zeus had won the battle with Titan to gain control over the cosmos (see Origins).



This coin was minted depicting Antiochus Hierax of the Seleucid Empire from the mint in Sardis. The reverse side depicts Apollo sitting on the omphalos.

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1.35: The Iliad - An Introduction

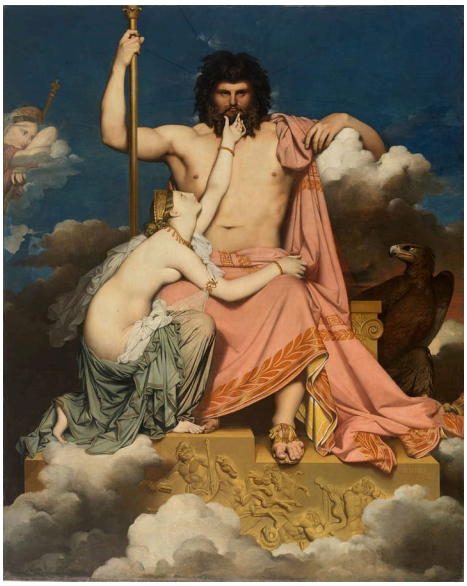
The *Iliad* is an epic that tells about only a few weeks during the Trojan War. The *Iliad* does not tell the entire story of the war, which is supposed to have lasted for ten years. But the audience is expected to be familiar with the entire story of the Trojan War, including all the events that occurred before and after the war. These pre- and post-war events are referred to in the *Iliad*, but they are not explained, so here are a few of the most important stories.

The Birth of Paris

The story begins in Troy with King Priam and his wife, Hecuba. Hecuba was pregnant and one night she had a dream in which the child she was carrying was a firebrand (a piece of burning wood used to start fires), and the firebrand set fire to the entire city. When Hecuba told her dream to her daughter, Cassandra, Cassandra prophesied that the child Hecuba was carrying was destined to destroy the city. Cassandra advised her parents to expose the child as soon as he was born. But Cassandra was fated never to be believed [see Apollo], and so her parents said they would not think of doing such a terrible thing. When Paris was born, he was a very handsome baby, and his parents treasured him greatly. (By the way, in the *Iliad*, Paris is also sometimes referred to as Alexandros or Alexander.)

The Wedding of Peleus and Thetis

Many years later, all the gods were excited about attending the wedding of Peleus and Thetis. Peleus was a mortal man who had distinguished himself as one of the Argonauts [see Argonauts]. Thetis was a gorgeous and desirable sea goddess, but she was fated to give birth to a son who would be stronger than his father. When Zeus and Poseidon, who were both very interested in her, learned of this prophesy, they were suddenly very eager to marry her off to a mortal man.



Jupiter and Thetis by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1811) in the Musée Granet in Aix-en-Provence, France

The wedding was a splendid affair, attended by all the gods and goddess except one. Eris, the Goddess of Discord, was not invited because of her tendency to cause problems among the gods. Eris was, of course, offended by the slight and created a sure way to cause as much strife as possible. She took a golden apple and inscribed the words “for the fairest” upon it and threw it among the party guests. There were three goddesses, each of whom believed that the apple was meant for her: Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite.

The Judgment of Paris

The goddesses took their dispute to Zeus, who wisely refused to judge the matter, knowing it would only cause trouble for him. Zeus decided that the handsomest man on earth should decide the contest, and the handsomest man on earth turned out to be none other than Paris, who was now about twenty years of age. So all three goddesses went to Troy and asked Paris to decide

which one of them was the most beautiful and should be awarded the golden apple. Each goddess secretly promised a gift to Paris if he should pick her. Athena offered to make sure he was always victorious in battle, Hera promised to make him ruler of the world, and Aphrodite promised to give him the most beautiful woman in the world. Paris naturally awarded the apple to Aphrodite. There was just one catch: the most beautiful woman in the world happened to be Helen of Sparta, and she was already married to Menelaus, the king of Sparta.



The Judgement of Paris by Peter Paul Rubens (1638-1639) in the Prado Museum in Madrid

The Abduction of Helen

Paris decided to take a trip to Sparta [map]. Paris was accepted into the house of Menelaus, the king of Sparta. Because of the laws of guest-friendship [see Xenia], Paris was invited to stay as long as he wished. Soon after Paris' arrival, Menelaus had to journey to Crete [map] for his grandfather's funeral. He left his wife and household, instructing them to make sure Paris was treated well. Aphrodite took the opportunity to send Eros to shoot Helen with his arrow and Helen fell in love with Paris. Paris absconded with Helen (and quite a bit of Menelaus' treasure) and went home to Troy while Menelaus was still away.

When Menelaus found his wife and wealth gone, he was quite angry. In addition to his personal desire for vengeance, Menelaus knew that Paris had violated the laws of xenia, and that Zeus punished those who violated these laws. So Menelaus called upon his brother, Agamemnon, who was the king of Mycenae [see Argos on map] and the richest and most powerful of all the Greek kings. Together, Menelaus and Agamemnon called on all the other Greek kings to join an expedition to Troy to bring Helen back to Sparta.

But why would the other kings want to join such a dangerous expedition? Before Helen and Menelaus married, nearly every eligible bachelor in Greece wanted to marry her, since she was the most beautiful woman in the world. Tyndareüs, Helen's earthly father, declared (at the advice of one of the suitors, Odysseus) that before he made his decision, all the suitors should swear an oath to come to the aid of the man he chose as Helen's husband if he should ever have a problem with Helen being abducted by someone else. The suitors all agreed and swore an oath. And now Menelaus invoked this oath and asked for their help to fight against Troy. Besides, Troy was the wealthiest city in the world, so all the Greek warriors would be sure to bring back a great deal of loot (assuming they won the war).

Odysseus Joins the Expedition

Not all the Greeks were easily persuaded to join the fight. Odysseus, the King of Ithaca [map], preferred to stay home with his wife and infant son. When Menelaus came to Ithaca to remind Odysseus of his oath, Odysseus decided to pretend to be crazy. Menelaus found him plowing his fields and sowing the fields with salt instead of seed (sowing salt prevents anything from growing). Menelaus knew this was exactly the sort of trick Odysseus would pull, so to test how crazy Odysseus really was, he placed Odysseus' son, Telemachus, in the path of Odysseus' plow. (Telemachus was about a year-and-a-half old at this time.) When Odysseus pulled the plow away so he didn't hurt the baby, he showed how sane he was. So Menelaus forced him to be true to his oath and join the expedition against Troy.

Achilles Joins the Expedition

Odysseus was instrumental in recruiting Achilles for the Trojan War. Achilles' mother, Thetis, knew that if Achilles went to Troy he would not come back, so she did not want to let him go. Besides, Achilles was only about fifteen years old at this time. So Thetis dressed her son in girl's clothing and she hid him on the island of Scyrus among the daughters of King Lycomedes. But Odysseus knew how to find out which one was Achilles. Odysseus dressed as a merchant and traveled to Scyrus, where he displayed his wares for all the girls to see. He set out some lovely jewelry and clothing, but he also set out some handsome weapons. All the girls flocked to the jewelry except one, who was examining the weapons. Odysseus knew that this "girl" was Achilles in disguise, and he easily persuaded the young hero to join the expedition to Troy. By the way, by the time Achilles left, one of Lycomedes' daughters, Deïdameia, was pregnant with Achilles' child. Deïdameia later gave birth to Neoptolemus. Because Achilles never did return from Troy, Neoptolemus was his only child.



Discovery of Achilles on Skyros by Nicolas Poussin from around 1651 found in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston

The Sacrifice of Iphigenia

The Greek warriors and their ships all gathered at Aulis for the long voyage to Troy. But just when they were about to leave, Artemis sent contrary winds, preventing them from leaving. The Greeks were forced to stay at Aulis for a month; their supplies were getting low and their tempers were getting short. In the end, Agamemnon was forced to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, to Artemis, so that Artemis would stop the contrary winds and allow them to set sail for Troy. For the full story of how this happened, see Agamemnon and Iphigenia.

The Beginning of the Trojan War

When the Greek fleet finally reached Troy, they found that the fight was not quick or easy. The walls of Troy were very strong (they had been built by Poseidon and Apollo [see Poseidon], and the Trojans and their allies were great warriors. So the Greeks beached their ships and built a camp on the shore, and they settled in for a long war. The Trojan War went on for ten years; sometimes the Greeks came very close to taking the city, and sometimes the Trojans came very close to destroying the Greeks' ships and their camp. The Greek troops also raided the nearby allies of the Trojans to gain plunder and supplies for themselves and also to prevent food from reaching Troy. The *Iliad* picks up in the ninth year of the war when everyone is extremely tired and cranky from the long, protracted struggle.



Ajax and Achilles playing draughts on an amphora in the Vatican Museum

Fighting at Troy

The Greeks fought at Troy for ten years without being able to conquer the great, walled city. Although the *Iliad* does not tell the story of the death of Achilles, we know that he dies before Troy falls. Paris kills him with an arrow. Note: The entire *Iliad* takes place during a few weeks of the 9th year.



Hypnos (Sleep) and Thanatos (Death) carry away the body of Sarpedon on a krater housed in the Archaeological Museum of Cerveteri, Italy

After Achilles' death, the Greeks were still unable to conquer Troy, even though they had fulfilled the four conditions that Helenus, the Trojan seer, had said were necessary before Troy could fall. (Those conditions were: Achilles' son, Neoptolemus, had to fight on the Greek side; the bow and arrows of Heracles must be used against the Trojans; the remains of the famous hero, Pelops, must be brought from Greece to Troy; and the ancient statue of Athena, called the Palladium, must be stolen from the Trojan citadel). The cunning Odysseus finally thought of a plan that would allow them to get inside the walls and capture Troy.



The Trojan Horse depicted on a pithos in the Archaeological Museum of Mykonos

The Trojan Horse

During the night, the Greeks built a huge, wooden horse, too big to fit inside the walls of Troy. They hid some of their best warriors inside, and sailed off to the neighboring island of Tenedos. When the Trojans awoke to find the Greek army gone and a huge wooden horse in its place (inscribed with the words: “For their return home the Greeks dedicate this thank offering to Athena.”), they joyfully brought the horse into their city, even breaking down part of their city walls in order to do it. That night, while the Trojans slept soundly after a day of feasting and celebrating, the Greek warriors crept out of the horse, opened the city gates to the rest of the Greek army which had sailed back from Tenedos, and the Greeks captured the city and burnt it to the ground. During the fall of Troy, Ajax the Lesser (the son of Oïleus, called “the Lesser” to distinguish him from the great warrior Ajax, the son of Telemon) rapes Cassandra in Athena’s temple. For the full story, see Athena.



Ajax the Lesser raping Cassandra while she seeks refuge at the statue of Athena on a cup in the Louvre

Returns (*Odyssey*)

After fighting at Troy for ten years, many of the Greek princes had long and difficult voyages home. Menelaus wandered the seas for seven years before returning home to Sparta, and Odysseus took ten years to reach home, so that he was gone for twenty years

in all. Agamemnon returned home quickly and safely, but as soon as he returned he was murdered by his wife, Clytemnestra, (with help from her lover, Aegisthus), who was angry over the sacrifice and murder of her daughter, Iphigenia. For more on the stories of the Greek warriors' returns, see *The Odyssey*.

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1.36: The Minotaur

Function: Half-man, half-bull monster

The Minotaur (which means “Minos’ bull”) was the son of Pasiphaë, the wife of Minos (the king of Crete), and a large and handsome bull. Minos had asked Poseidon for a magnificent bull to sacrifice to him and the god obliged, sending a handsome bull from the sea. However, when Minos saw the bull, he refused to sacrifice it because it was so beautiful. Poseidon, completely enraged, caused Minos’ wife, Pasiphaë, to lust after the bull. She convinced Daedalus, the famous engineer, to aid her in consummating her desire for the bull by making her a hollow wooden cow. Pasiphaë then climbed into the cow and was able to mate with the bull. The result was a child who was half-human and half-bull. Minos then had Daedalus build a maze, called a labyrinth, to house the Minotaur.



Theseus Slaying the Minotaur by Antoine-Louis Barye (1843) in the Baltimore Museum of Art

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1.37: The Odyssey - An Introduction



Odysseus blinding Polyphemus on an amphora in the Archaeological Museum in Eleusis

The *Odyssey* tells the story of the Greek hero Odysseus' return home from the Trojan War. Although the *Odyssey* focuses on Odysseus' story, it also tells about the returns of four other heroes: Nestor, Agamemnon, Menelaus, and the Lesser Ajax. These stories are told piecemeal and in flashbacks, so they are a little more difficult to follow. Furthermore, there are also a few events that happened between the end of the *Iliad* and the beginning of the *Odyssey*, that are helpful to know.



A bronze figurine of one of the men turned into pigs by Circe in the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore

The Death of Achilles

The first of these events is the death of Achilles, which came at the hands of Paris with the help of Apollo. The Greeks were fighting near the gates of Troy and Paris shot at Achilles with his bow, which Apollo guided to Achilles' one vulnerable spot, his ankle. This was the only vulnerable spot on Achilles' body because his mother tried to make him immortal when he was a baby by dipping him in the River Styx. Since she held him by the ankle, the waters of the Styx did not touch that part of him, so he was

mortal and vulnerable in that spot.

The Suicide of Ajax

After Achilles' death, it was decided that his armor should be given to the second greatest Greek warrior after Achilles. As we know from Book 18 of the *Iliad*, Achilles had immortal armor, which had been crafted for him by the god, Hephaestus, to make up for the armor he had lost when Patroclus had worn it into battle (and Hector had taken it after he killed Patroclus). Now that Achilles, the greatest of the Achaeans, was dead, it was agreed that his immortal armor should go to the second greatest warrior. Everyone knew that the second greatest warrior was the Greater Ajax, the son of Telamon; he was huge, he was brave, and he was selfless; he spent all his time protecting the other Achaeans. But Odysseus used his amazing speaking ability to convince Agamemnon and Menelaus (who were judging the contest) that his cleverness made him more valuable than Ajax (who was not known for his wits) and that he, Odysseus, was in fact the second best Greek warrior. As a result, Odysseus was awarded Achilles' armor, even though everyone knew in their hearts that Ajax really deserved it. Ajax was so mortified by being passed over for an honor that he felt was rightfully his, that he killed himself in shame. And, as we will see when we read the *Odyssey*, Odysseus later came to deeply regret his "win".



A small bronze figurine of Odysseus tied to the underside of a ram to escape Polyphemus in the Archaeological Museum of Delphi

The Bow of Heracles and the Palladium

Meanwhile, the Trojan War raged on, despite the deaths of both Hector and Achilles. The Greeks learned from Helenus, a son of Priam whom they had captured, that they needed to complete two tasks before they could capture Troy. First of all, they needed Heracles' bow, and second, they needed to capture the Palladium, a wooden statue of Athena, which was kept in Athena's temple in Troy. The Greeks first set out to acquire Heracles' bow, which was difficult because Heracles had given it to his friend, Philoctetes, before he died. Many years earlier, at the beginning of the Trojan War, the Greeks had abandoned him on a desert island, so now he hated the Greeks and did not want to give them Heracles' bow. But eventually, with the help of Achilles' son, Neoptolemus, they were able to convince him to give them Heracles' bow. The entire story, including the reason why the Greeks abandoned Philoctetes in the first place, is told in Sophocles' play, *Philoctetes*.

Now the Greeks needed to somehow acquire the Palladium, since Helenus had told them that as long as the Palladium was inside Athena's temple, the city could not fall. Odysseus and Diomedes snuck into the city in disguise and stole the Palladium, taking it with them to the Greek camp.

The Trojan Horse

Now the only thing standing in between the Greeks and victory were the impressive walls of Troy. Odysseus hatched a scheme to get them inside the city. A giant, hollow wooden horse was constructed and a select group of warriors was placed inside. The rest of the Greeks sailed just out of sight of Troy, waiting for a signal from the city to come back. The Trojans, when they saw that the

Greek army had left, assumed that the Greeks had finally admitted defeat and had sailed back home. The Trojans took the horse, which they believed to be a thank-offering to Athena for a safe trip home, inside their city. That night they celebrated the end of the war with an amazing party and then fell into a drunken sleep. While the city slept, the Greek warriors came out of the wooden horse. They quickly went to the gates and opened them and then lit a fire as a signal to the Greek fleet that they were ready for reinforcements. The Greek fleet returned, the warriors inside the city opened the gates, and the Greeks burned and pillaged the city, razing it to the ground.



This is a famous Athenian red-figure vase (c. 480-470 BC) showing Odysseus tied to the mast, listening to the Sirens' song, as his crew rows past their island. This vase shows the Sirens as part-woman and part-bird, although Homer seems to imagine them in completely female form. This very well-known vase, on display in the British Museum, has become the basis for several modern depictions of the Sirens, including the one by N. C. Wyeth, below.



N. C. (Newell Convers) Wyeth (1882-1945) was one of the greatest American illustrators of the early twentieth century. This painting, from a 1929 edition of *The Odyssey*, is clearly modeled on the Sirens vase in the British Museum, but it depicts Odysseus tied to the mast in a Christ-like pose, while the Sirens seem to embody sexual temptation. N. C. Wyeth (1882-1945), The Sirens, 1929, oil on canvas, 48 1/2 x 38 1/4″. Brandywine Museum purchase, 1991.

The Sack of Troy and the Returns

The Greeks were savage in their sack of the city and their actions had lasting consequences on their journeys home. The Lesser Ajax (the son of Oïleus, called “Lesser” to distinguish him from the more famous warrior named Ajax) raped Cassandra in Athena’s temple. As you can imagine, Athena was furious, and she found a way to punish him so that he did not survive [see Athena]. Neoptolemus killed Priam at the altar of Zeus but, when he arrived home, he was killed by Orestes in a quarrel over Hermione, the daughter of Helen and Menelaus. Menelaus had promised Hermione to Neoptolemus but then later gave her to his nephew, Orestes. Agamemnon arrived home quickly and without incident, but as soon as he arrived he was killed at a banquet by his wife’s lover, Aegisthus. Menelaus was blown off course to Egypt, and he spent seven years in Egypt before finally arriving home to Sparta. Odysseus was blown around the entire Mediterranean Sea and was not able to return home until ten years after the Trojan War was over (as we will see in the *Odyssey*). Only one important Greek warrior made it home quickly with no negative consequences: Nestor. We will discuss why Nestor alone had no difficulties getting home when we read the *Odyssey*.

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1.38: The Oresteia - An Introduction

The Oresteia is a cycle of three plays, written by the playwright Aeschylus, about Orestes, the son of Agamemnon. All Greek tragedies were written in trilogies, but this is the only example of a trilogy that still exists. The *Oresteia* was produced at the Greater Dionysia Festival in 458 BC, where it won first prize.

The Agamemnon

The first play in the trilogy is called the *Agamemnon* and it centers around Agamemnon's homecoming from the Trojan War and his subsequent death at the hands of his wife. Agamemnon has been gone for ten years and all that time his wife, Clytemnestra, has been angrily plotting her revenge on her husband for sacrificing their daughter, Iphigenia [see Agamemnon and Iphigenia]. Clytemnestra has taken a lover, Agamemnon's cousin Aegisthus, who also wants revenge on Agamemnon. Clytemnestra has sent her ten-year-old son, Orestes, away, so he will not get involved in the inter-family feud. Aeschylus makes several changes to the story of Agamemnon's death from the way that it is told in the *Odyssey*. In the *Agamemnon*, it is Clytemnestra, not Aegisthus, who kills her husband.

The Libation Bearers

The next play in the cycle is called *The Libation Bearers* and it takes place seven or eight years after the death of Agamemnon. Orestes, Agamemnon's son, now around eighteen, comes back to Mycenae with his cousin, Pylades. Apollo had instructed Orestes to avenge his father's murder by killing both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Orestes has no trouble killing Aegisthus, but it is extremely difficult for him to kill his own mother. Only after Pylades reminds Orestes of Apollo's command, is Orestes finally able to kill Clytemnestra. Agamemnon's murder has now been avenged, but the fact that Orestes has killed his mother creates a further problem. The Erinyes are female monsters who punish murderers, especially those who have murdered members of their own family. (The Erinyes, known as the Furies in Latin, are depicted as ugly women with snakes for hair. They are thought to have originated from the curses of the person who has been killed.) So now that Orestes his killed his mother, the Erinyes pursue Orestes and start to drive him mad.



Orestes and Pylades kill Clytemnestra and Aegisthus on a cinerary (funerary) urn in the Museo Archeologico Regionale Antonino Salinas in Palermo, Italy

The Eumenides

The final play in the trilogy is *The Eumenides*, a play that also serves as a foundation myth for the Athenian court system. It opens with Orestes, still pursued by the Erinyes, fleeing to Delphi to appeal to Apollo for help, since Apollo sent him to kill his mother in the first place. Apollo cannot send the Erinyes away, but he does make them fall asleep so Hermes can escort Orestes to Athens.



Apollo purifying Orestes while the Erinyes sleep nearby with the ghost of Clytemnestra trying to awaken them, found on a krater in the Louvre

Once in Athens, Orestes appeals to Athena for help and Athena organizes a trial for Orestes. The goddess presides over the trial with twelve Athenian citizens acting as jury; this is the mythical origin of the jury trial. The vote splits down the middle; six jurors find Orestes innocent and six find him guilty. It is up to Athena to cast the deciding vote, and she votes in favor of Orestes. This is the mythical origin of the Athenian custom that a tied vote is always decided in favor of the defendant. But the Erinyes do not accept the verdict; they still want to punish Orestes for the murder of his mother. Athena convinces the Erinyes to have mercy on Orestes; they also agree to change their name to the Eumenides (meaning “The Kindly Ones”) in return for receiving perpetual honor in Athens.

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1.39: The Three Types of Myth

There are actually many different types of myth, not just three. In fact, there are several entire theories of myth. The theoretical study of myth is very complex; many books have been written about theories of myth, and we could have an entire class just on theories of myth (without studying any of the myths themselves). The problem with theories of myth, however, is that they are not very good; they don't do a great job of explaining the myths or in helping us understand them. Furthermore, the myths themselves are much more interesting than the theories. For this reason, this textbook will not say very much about the theories of myth. But we don't want to ignore the theoretical study of myth entirely, so we will limit ourselves to discussing only three types of myth.

1. Aetiological Myths

Aetiological myths (sometimes spelled etiological) explain the reason why something is the way it is today. The word aetiological is from the Greek word *aetion* (αἴτιον) meaning "reason" or "explanation". Please note that the reasons given in an aetiological myth are NOT the real (or scientific) reasons. They are explanations that have meaning for us as human beings. There are three subtypes of aetiological myths: natural, etymological, and religious.

A **natural aetiological myth** explains an aspect of nature. For example, you could explain lightning and thunder by saying that Zeus is angry.

An **etymological aetiological myth** explains the origin of a word. (Etymology is the study of word origins.) For example, you could explain the name of the goddess, Aphrodite, by saying that she was born in sea-foam, since *aphros* is the Greek word for sea-foam.

A **religious aetiological myth** explains the origin of a religious ritual. For example, you could explain the Greek religious ritual of the Eleusinian Mysteries by saying that they originated when the Greek goddess, Demeter, came down to the city of Eleusis and taught the people how to worship her.

All three of these explanations are not true: Zeus' anger is not the correct explanation for lightning and thunder; Aphrodite's name was not actually derived from the Greek word *aphros*; and Demeter did not establish her own religious rituals in the town of Eleusis. Rather, all of these explanations had meaning for the ancient Greeks, who told them in order to help them understand their world.

2. Historical Myths

Historical myths are told about a historical event, and they help keep the memory of that event alive. Ironically, in historical myths, the accuracy is lost but meaning is gained. The myths about the Trojan War, including the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, could be classified as historical myths. The Trojan War did occur, but the famous characters that we know from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (Agamemnon, Achilles, Hector, etc.) probably did not exist.

3. Psychological Myths

Psychological myths try to explain why we feel and act the way we do. A psychological myth is different from an aetiological myth because a psychological myth does not try to explain one thing by way of something else (such as lightning and thunder can be explained by Zeus' anger). In a psychological myth, the emotion itself is seen as a divine force, coming from the outside, that can directly influence a person's emotions. For example, the goddess, Aphrodite, is sometimes seen as the power of erotic love. When someone said or did something that they did not want to do, the ancient Greeks might say that Aphrodite "made them" do it.

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1.40: The Twelve Labors of Heracles

As a punishment for the murder of his own children [see Heracles], Heracles was told by the Pythia that he had to perform twelve tasks for Eurystheus, the king of Tiryns. Eurystheus was also king of Mycenae [see Argos on map]. Eurystheus had inherited the throne of Mycenae from his father, Sthenelos, who had usurped it from Amphitryon, Heracles' mortal father [see Heracles]. So Heracles should really have been king of Mycenae instead of Eurystheus. Heracles had to perform any twelve tasks that Eurystheus set for him, even though Eurystheus had usurped Heracles' throne and he was neither as strong or as brave as Heracles was. This subordinate relationship to Eurystheus was humiliating for Heracles, and that was no doubt part of the punishment. The first six of Heracles' labors take place in the Peloponnese. The last six labors take place throughout the Greek world.

1. The Nemean Lion

Eurystheus first told Heracles to kill the lion that had been terrorizing the area of Nemea. This lion was no ordinary lion; it was the offspring of Typhoeus [for more on Typhoeus, see Origins]. Heracles tracked the Nemean Lion to its cave, blocked off the entrance, and tried to kill the lion by shooting it with his bow and arrows. But the arrows bounced right off the lion's hide, doing the animal no harm. Undeterred, Heracles used brute force to strangle the beast and brought the lion back to Tiryns for Eurystheus. Eurystheus, surprised that Heracles had survived the adventure, became very fearful of Heracles. Because Eurystheus did not want the lion, Heracles skinned it and used the hide as a cloak, with the lion's head serving as a sort of helmet. The lion's skin became Heracles' trademark, and he wore it on all his future endeavors.



Heracles killing the Nemean Lion while Athena stands near on a lekythos found in the British Museum

2. The Lernean Hydra

Next, Eurystheus sent Heracles to kill the Hydra. The Hydra was a sea-monster (its name comes from hydōr [ὕδωρ] which means "water" in Greek), that had many snake-like heads. The Hydra lived in a swampy area near Lerna, and Heracles came to its den. He engaged the Hydra by grabbing at one of the heads and hacking at it with his sword until the head was severed from the body. But as soon as Heracles had cut off the Hydra's head, two more heads grew in its place. At this point, Heracles realized that simply cutting off the Hydra's heads was not going to work. He also realized that he could not kill the Hydra alone, so he called Iolaüs, his charioteer, to bring a burning brand so he could cauterize the neck after Heracles cut off each head, to prevent new heads from growing back. Heracles and Iolaüs managed to destroy each head and burn the neck for all the Hydra's heads until just one head, which was immortal, survived. This head he buried beneath a giant rock. The Hydra's blood was a deadly poison, so Heracles dipped his arrows in the blood to make sure that anyone he hit would die of his wound. Heracles would one day regret that the Hydra's blood was so deadly.



Heracles fighting the Lernaean Hydra on a lekythos found in the Louvre

3. Cerynitian Hind

Eurystheus then sent Heracles to capture the Cerynitian Hind, a deer with golden horns which was sacred to the goddess Artemis. Because the deer was sacred to Artemis, Heracles could not kill it; he had to capture it alive. For a year he tracked the deer, which was the fastest deer in the world, around the forests of the Peloponnese. He finally captured it in Arcadia when it had paused for a little rest by creeping up behind it and surprising it. On his way back to Tiryns, Heracles encountered Apollo and Artemis hunting. Artemis was not happy to find her sacred deer so constrained, but after he explained his task, Artemis allowed Heracles to take the deer so long as it remained unharmed and it would be released after he was finished with it.

4. Erymanthian Boar

When the Cerynitian Hind had been released, Heracles now had to capture the Erymanthian Boar, which was ravaging the countryside around Mount Erymanthus and doing a lot of damage to the crops. On his way to find the Erymanthian Boar, Heracles met Pholus, a centaur who, unlike his fellow centaurs, was quite well mannered. Pholus hosted Heracles like a proper guest and offered him some wine. This wine was noticed by the other centaurs, however, who are notorious for loving wine but also for being unable to hold their liquor. When the centaurs smelled the wine, they went crazy and started attacking Heracles and Pholus in order to steal it. The two successfully drove the centaurs away, but in the process, Pholus dropped one of Heracles' arrows on his foot and, unfortunately, the Hydra's poison caused him to die in agony. This is yet another example of Heracles hurting anyone who gets too close to him. In this case it was an accident, but it was no less deadly for Pholus. After this unfortunate incident, Heracles caught up with the Erymanthian Boar and trapped it by driving it into deep snow. He brought the boar back alive to Tiryns to show to Eurystheus. But Eurystheus was so frightened of the enormous beast that he hid in a large storage jar (called a pithos) and only peeked out a little so he could verify that Heracles had completed his task.



Heracles bringing the Erymanthean Boar to Eurystheus on an amphora in the Louvre

At this point, word had spread throughout Greece that Jason was looking for the greatest Greek heroes to go with him on an expedition for the Golden Fleece. Heracles took a break from his labors to join the crew. However, he did not make the entire journey to Colchis [map] (if he had would there be any use for Jason?). The Argonauts left Heracles behind in Mysia while he searched for his lover Hylas [see Argonauts]. Unable to find Hylas, Heracles returned to Tiryns for his next labor.

5. Augeian Stables

The next task Eurystheus had for Heracles was to clean the Augeian stables in one day. Augeias was king of Elis [map] and he had massive stables which had never been cleaned, so they were filled with many years' worth of horse dung. Heracles came to Augeias and told him that he could clean out the stables in one day if he paid the right sum, one tenth of his cattle. Augeias agreed and Heracles set to work. He diverted the courses of two rivers so they flowed right through the stables and washed away the years of filth. Augeias had not believed Heracles could perform the task, so he refused to pay the outrageous sum. Heracles was livid, but at this point there was nothing he could do, so he went back to Tiryns.

6. Stymphalian Birds

Next Heracles was sent to clear away the Stymphalian birds. Lake Stymphalus was overrun by a flock of man-eating birds. Heracles decided that a loud noise would be just the thing, so he crashed a few shields together to scare the birds into taking flight. As the birds few into the air, he picked them off one by one with his arrows.



Heracles killing the Stymphalian Birds in a mosaic from Valencia housed in the National Archaeological Museum in Madrid

7. The Cretan Bull

Now Heracles was sent to capture the Cretan bull. This bull was the father of the Minotaur [see Minotaur] and Heracles trapped it and brought it back to Tiryns alive. Eurystheus did not want it, so Heracles let the bull go. The bull wandered up to the area around Athens [see Athenae on map] and Theseus later killed him as one of his heroic feats [see Theseus].

8. The Mare of Diomedes

The eighth labor was to retrieve the mares of Diomedes. Diomedes was a Thracian [map] king and he had man-eating mares. Heracles, with the help of his lover Abderus, stole the mares from their stable and herded them down to the sea-shore. Diomedes' men were in hot pursuit, so he left Abderus to take care of the mares while he dispatched with Diomedes and routed his men. When Heracles came back, however, he found that the mares had eaten most of Abderus. Heracles was upset at the death of his lover, and he carefully buried Abderus' remains. He then gathered the mares into his ship and took them back to Eurystheus. Again, Eurystheus did not want the terrible creatures in his city, so Heracles let the mares loose. They were eventually eaten by wild animals as they wandered on Mount Olympus [see Olympus Mons on map].

9. Hippolyte's Belt

For his next labor, Heracles had to retrieve the belt of the Amazon queen, Hippolyte. Hippolyte and the Amazons (female warriors) lived in Themiscyra, on the southern coast of the Black Sea. Heracles was joined on this expedition by his friend Theseus and they set off together. When they reached Themiscyra, Hippolyte came aboard their ship to meet with them. She agreed to give them her belt with no fight and everything seemed to be going swimmingly for Heracles and Theseus. However, Hera was not about to allow this labor to be easy, so she came down from Olympus, disguised as an Amazon. Hera told the Amazons that Heracles was kidnapping their queen, and she roused them to fight the heroes. Being angry because he believed the whole thing had been a set-up, Heracles killed Hippolyte and he and Theseus left taking Hippolyte's sister, Antiope, and the belt. Other versions say that Hippolyte was not killed at all, but that she was the one whom Theseus took with him to Athens, where she became the mother of Theseus' son Hippolytus [see Theseus].

10. The Cattle of Geryon

Next, Heracles was sent to steal the cattle of Geryon, who was the King of Erytheia (which is modern day Cadiz in Spain). Geryon had three heads, three upper- bodies, as well as six arms and six legs. Furthermore, his cattle were guarded by a two-headed watch dog named Orthus. Heracles decided to go through Africa to make his way to Spain and as he crossed the Strait of Gibraltar, he set up large rocks on either side, called the Pillars of Heracles, to show how far he had come across the world. The sun beat down upon him, greatly annoying Heracles, so he drew his bow and pointed it at the sun, chastising it. Helius, the sun god, was amused by this little stunt, so he lent his golden cup to Heracles to use as a boat to take him the rest of his way to Erytheia. When he arrived, Heracles dispatched of Geryon and Orthus.



Heracles battling Geryon on a kylix in Staatliche Antikensammlungen in Munich

11. The Golden Apples of the Hesperides

Nearly done with his labors, Heracles now went to retrieve the apples of the Hesperides. The Hesperides were nymphs who lived in Libya near the mountains where Atlas held up the world (now called the Atlas Mountains) and tended a garden growing golden apples. On his way there, Heracles passed by the Caucasus Mountains and shot the eagle that had long tortured Prometheus [see Prometheus], freeing him from his bonds. Grateful for his help, Prometheus gave Heracles some advice as to how to retrieve the apples. Prometheus told Heracles to ask Atlas (who happened to be Prometheus' own brother) to go get the apples. Heracles heeded his advice and asked Atlas to get the apples while he held up the world. Atlas was happy to retrieve the apples, but he had no intention of returning to his post. When he returned with the apples, Atlas offered to take them to Eurystheus for Heracles, intending to never return. But Heracles knew was Atlas was planning. He made a show of agreeing to Atlas' plan, but he asked the Titan to hold the world just for a minute so he could place a pad on his shoulders to made the task more bearable. Atlas took the world onto his shoulders again and Heracles picked up the apples and went back to Tiryns. After he had shown them to Eurystheus, he gave them to Athena, and she, in turn, returned them to the Hesperides.

12. Cerberus

Heracles' final labor was to bring Cerberus back from Hades; of course, he could not kill the three-headed dog in the process. Heracles began this labor by being initiated into the Eleusinian Mysteries. Then Hermes led him down into the Underworld. In Hades, Heracles saw his friends, Theseus and Peirithoüs, stuck to chairs [see Theseus] and they begged Heracles to set them free. Heracles managed to pry Theseus loose and began to move on to Peirithoüs, but the earth began to shake, and Heracles desisted. Heracles and Theseus were allowed to leave, but Hades insisted that Peirithoüs remain. When Heracles came to Hades' palace, he asked the ruler of the Underworld if he could take Cerberus with him. Hades agreed as long as Heracles did not use weapons to capture him. Heracles grabbed the hell-hound and dragged him all the way to Tiryns. Eurystheus hid as soon as he saw Cerberus, and, from his hiding place, ordered that he be taken back to Hades and Heracles obliged. With all the labors completed, Heracles was now free to go about his life as he wished. He was also promised that he would become immortal upon his death.



Heracles approaching Cerberus on an amphora in the Louvre

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1.41: What is a myth?

Today people often use the word “myth” to mean an untrue story or false rumor. For example, if one person asked: “Is Friday the 13th an unlucky day?” another person might answer: “No, that is just a myth.” But the ancient Greeks did not use the word *mythos* (μῦθος) in this way. For the Greeks, a *mythos* was simply a story. It was not important whether the story was true or false; what was important was the fact that the mode of speech was that of a story. The Greek word *logos* (λόγος), on the other hand, means a rational explanation or analytical statement. These two words, *mythos* and *logos*, point to two different kinds of speech, corresponding to two different ways of thinking. One was not considered more important than the other; they were just different. If you put the two words together: *mythos* + *logos* = mythology. And “mythology” is the explanation or the analytical study of myths.

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1.42: Why are there so many versions of Greek myths?

The sources we have that tell the stories of the gods and heroes come from many different authors from different parts of the Mediterranean world and from different points in time, spanning several centuries. Cultures and beliefs change over the course of a few decades, let alone centuries, so their stories adapt too. But with these myths, even within the confines of ancient Greek culture, each author had some artistic freedom to reinvent the story and make it more applicable or interesting to his audience. In this way, myths function similarly to comic book heroes, like Batman. Every author who tackles the story of Batman's origin has to bring something new to it or it gets boring. There are some important elements that have to stay the same (like Bruce Wayne's parents are killed when he is young as they leave the opera), but other elements can change (like the 1989 Tim Burton film, which makes Jack Nicholson's Joker the man who killed Bruce's parents). In the same way, the different authors who wrote versions of the Greek myths took liberties with various aspects of the myths, even though (for the most part) the main outlines of the stories remained the same. Thus, even though the Greek myths were in a very real sense sacred stories, in this respect they were more like modern literature, films, or the stories of comic book heroes than the Judeo-Christian Bible.

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1.43: Xenia

Xenia (pronounced “zenee-a” and written as ξενία in Greek) is guest-friendship, the relationship between a guest and host. Because there were no hotels in ancient Greece, travelers had to rely on the generosity of the people who lived in the area through which they were traveling. A traveler could knock on any door and he would immediately be invited in, at least in theory. Xenia is protected by Zeus and has specific rules of conduct. The host should accept any traveler who comes by and offer him a bath and a meal without asking for the person’s name. After the guest has eaten, the host may now ask the traveler’s name and place of origin. The guest has a responsibility to treat his host’s house and possessions with respect as well as to provide his name and background when asked. When the guest is taking his leave of his host, the two will exchange gifts as tokens of their newfound friendship. Once a xenia-relationship has been established between two families, it can last for generations, providing both families with a place to sleep on future journeys.

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1.44: Zeus

Roman name: Jupiter/Jove

Epithets: Kronion (Son of Cronus), Father of Gods and Men

Symbols: throne, scepter, thunderbolt, aegis, eagle, bull

Functions: God of the sky and weather; Ruler of the gods



Zeus with his thunderbolt on a kylix in the National Archaeological Museum of Spain in Madrid

The Birth of Zeus

Zeus was the youngest son of Cronus and Rhea. He rescued his siblings from their father, led a revolt against Cronus, and took his position as ruler of the cosmos [see Origins]. Like his grandfather and father before him, Zeus' rule did not go unchallenged, but he succeeded where they failed and managed to thwart his would be usurpers. After Zeus won the Battle of the Gods and the Titans, Gaia sent the monster Typhoeus against him [see Origins]. Later a race of giants revolted against Zeus, but Zeus defeated them with the help of his mortal son, Heracles.



Zeus fighting Typhoeus on a hydria in the Staatliche Antikensammlungen in Munich

Zeus' Marriage to Metis

As ruler of the universe, Zeus needed a wife, and he chose Metis, who had helped him rescue his siblings [see Origins]. Metis was the daughter of the Titans Oceanus and Tethys. Her name means "intelligence" or "cunning," and she is the personification of those qualities. When Metis was pregnant with Athena, Zeus learned that Metis was fated to give birth to a son who would one day overthrow his father. This would have perpetuated the cycle of rulers of the universe being overthrown by their sons, and Zeus wanted to end the cycle once and for all. Since swallowing his children did not work out well for Cronus, Zeus' father, Zeus decided to swallow his wife instead. So, Zeus swallowed Metis while she was pregnant, leading to Athena's very unusual birth [see Athena]. Metis lived on within Zeus, providing him advice, helping him to become known for his wisdom and thoughtful arbitration (for an example, see *Iliad* 24.64-76).

Zeus' Other Marriages and Liaisons: Themis, Demeter, Leto and Hera

After this marriage ended, Zeus had relationships with several goddesses: Themis (Natural Order), who bore the Horae (the Seasons) and the Moerae (the Fates); Eurynome, who gave birth to the Graces; Demeter, who bore Persephone; Mnemosyne (Memory), who conceived the Muses; Dione, who delivered Aphrodite [see Aphrodite]; and Leto, who begat Apollo and Artemis. (The gods, by the way, never have a sexual encounter in vain; children are always produced.) At some point Zeus married his sister, Hera, and together they had three children: Ares, Eileithyia, and Hebe.

Zeus' Relationships with Mortal Women

Zeus pursued mortal women even more frequently than he pursued goddesses. He sired the god Dionysus with the mortal woman Semele [see Dionysus]. He came to Alcmene in the form of her husband, Amphitryon [see Heracles], fathering Heracles. He turned Io into a cow to avoid Hera's wrath [see Hermes or Hera]. Io later traveled to Egypt and bore Epaphus, who became an Egyptian god. Zeus abducted Europa in the form of a bull and took her to Crete, where she bore him three sons, Minos, Rhadamanthys, and Sarpedon. He came to Danaë as a shower of gold, causing her to become pregnant with Perseus. He came to Leda as a swan and she later laid two eggs with two sets of twins. Two were the children of Zeus, Helen and Polydeuces (Pollux in Latin) who were immortal; the other two, Clytemnestra and Castor, were the children of her husband, Tyndareüs, and were mortal.

Hera was notoriously jealous of her husband's affairs, though this did not stop him from pursuing relationships with both goddesses and mortals.



The Flight of Europa by Paul Manship from 1925, copies are in the Indianapolis Museum of Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Columbus Museum in Columbus, Georgia, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C.

Ganymede



Zeus abducting Ganymede found in the Archaeological Museum in Olympia

Zeus was also attracted to young boys. Ganymede, a young and beautiful Trojan prince, was abducted by Zeus and taken up to Olympus to be his personal cupbearer (and probably his lover as well). In the *Aeneid*, Virgil cites Ganymede's presence on Olympus as one of the reasons why Juno was so angry at the Trojans and why she constantly harassed Aeneas, despite Jupiter's commands to cease.



The Abduction of Ganymede by Correggio in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna

The Justice of Zeus

Because Zeus was the ruler of the gods, the gods often took their quarrels to Zeus for arbitration. He also meted out punishments to immortals and mortals alike who angered him. When the Titan Prometheus stole fire to give to mortals, Zeus had him chained to a mountain where every day, an eagle would come and eat out the Titan's liver; but it grew back again every night and the process would begin again the next day [see Prometheus]. The Lydian King, Tantalus, was a son of Zeus who was favored by the gods, but he wanted to test their knowledge and power. He invited the gods to a dinner party and served them a dish made from his own son, Pelops. The gods knew immediately that the meat they were served was human flesh (except for Demeter who was grieving for her daughter, Persephone, and had eaten a bit of Pelops' shoulder). The gods grew very angry at Tantalus' sacrilege. They put Pelops together again (giving him an ivory shoulder to replace the one that had been eaten) and Tantalus was punished in the Underworld by having to stand up to his chin in a lake that would recede any time he moved to take a drink and overhead was a tree with delicious, ripe fruit that would move away from him when he tried to reach up and grab one. (This myth is the origin of the word tantalize.)

Zeus' Possible Origins

Zeus was the sky god of the Mycenaean (Greek-speaking) peoples who migrated to the Greek peninsula sometime around 2000 BC. As the sky god, he was in charge of the weather, and he was known to cause thunderstorms by hurling his thunder-bolt (= lightning bolt).

Zeus may have been conflated with a pre-Greek Minoan fertility god on the island of Crete. This was the child and/or young male consort of a female fertility goddess. This would help to explain the story of Zeus being brought to Crete as a baby and living on Crete for a year in a cave [see Origins]. The Minoans seem to have sometimes worshipped this god in the form of a bull, and that might explain why Zeus sometimes takes that form. This is probably how the details of the story of the rape of Europa came about, solidifying Zeus' connection to this god and to the island of Crete as well as establishing the mythological ruling family of the island (the Minoans were said to have descended from King Minos, one of the sons of Zeus and Europa). Zeus was easily adapted to the ill-defined Roman god, Jupiter (whose name means "sky father"), as the Roman god Jupiter did not have a strong personality of his own.



Zeus or Poseidon (we cannot tell which without the missing object in the figure's right hand) in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens

Zeus in the Trojan War

Although Troy was one of Zeus' favorite cities (as he explains to Hera at *Iliad* 4.44-49), he seems to have been neutral in the Trojan War. In Book 16 of the *Iliad*, for example, Zeus first favors Patroclus as he kills many Trojans and their allies (including Sarpedon, another one of his sons by Europa) but he also makes sure that Patroclus is, in turn, killed by Hector. Despite his love for Troy, however, Zeus knew that as long as the Trojans made certain decisions, Troy would eventually fall (this is clear, for example, at *Iliad* 4.68-72). (To the Greeks, fate was partially determined by choice, as can be seen in Achilles' choice in the *Iliad*.) At one point (*Iliad* 8.1-18), Zeus even ordered a cessation of divine involvement in the conflict (but as we will see when we read the *Iliad*, this does not stop them).

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