

An Overview of Classical Greek Myth

- **The First Six Olympian Deities**
- **The Second Eight Olympian Deities**
- **Lesser Deities**
- **The Chronology of Myth**

The Principal Olympian Deities

The First Six

- Zeus
- Hera
- Poseidon
- Hestia
- Hades
- Demeter

The Principal Olympian Deities

The First Six

Zeus

- Zeus' father is the Titan **Cronus**
- Zeus usurps the throne of heaven from Cronus
- Zeus becomes the “tyrant” of Olympus

The Principal Olympian Deities

The First Six

Zeus

- his name translates as “day(-father)”
- he is not omniscient or omnipotent, e.g. he cannot control the Fates
- his attributes are the lightning bolt, the eagle, a shield called the **aegis** (“protection”)

The Principal Olympian Deities

The First Six

Hera

- Hera became Zeus' wife after a long courtship in which she resisted his advances
- finally he tricked her in marrying him by turning into a pitiful sparrow
- their marriage is rocky, to say the least

The Principal Olympian Deities

The First Six

Hera

- Hera is a suspicious wife, especially vengeful against Zeus' extramarital consorts (e.g. Io) and their offspring (e.g. Heracles)
- Zeus and Hera have only a few children together: Ares, Hebe, Hephaestus

The Principal Olympian Deities

The First Six

Poseidon

- the god of the sea
- the father of many lesser sea deities, e.g. **Oceanids** (sea-nymphs)
- also the father of several mortals, e.g. Theseus

The Principal Olympian Deities

The First Six

Poseidon

- he carries a trident with which he stirs up tidal waves and causes earthquakes
- his name means “the consort of Da”
- Da means “earth” in archaic Greek
- evidence of an early matriarchal religion?

The Principal Olympian Deities

The First Six

Hestia

- the least important of the six principal Olympians
- the goddess of hearth
- she stays at home on Olympus and is involved in very few myths

The Principal Olympian Deities

The First Six

Hades

- the god of the dead, the collector and keeper of souls
- he is **not** a god of death like the Grim Reaper
- he is **not** a demon like the Devil

The Principal Olympian Deities

The First Six

Hades

- he does not appear in many myths because he is too potent a force
- his most important myth: the Rape of **Persephone** (daughter of Demeter) which explains why there are seasons

The Principal Olympian Deities

The First Six

Hades

- Hades is a dark and gloomy place
- in one part of Hades is **Tartarus**, much like the Christian Hell (i.e. a place of punishment)
- Hades' name means the "Unseen One"
- he is also called **Pluto** ("Rich")

The Principal Olympian Deities

The First Six

Demeter

- the goddess of agriculture
- her name means “earth-mother,” not a traditional Indo-European deity
- it is possible she was originally a Pelasgian goddess adopted by the invading Indo-European Greeks

The Principal Olympian Deities

The First Six

Demeter

- many primitive myths are associated with Demeter
- the most important rites of Demeter in antiquity are the **Eleusinian Mysteries**
- highly influential but a “mystery cult” with secret rites, thus unattested in histories

The Principal Olympian Deities

The Second Eight

- **Aphrodite**
- **Hephaestus**
- **Ares**
- **Athena**
- **Apollo**
- **Artemis**
- **Hermes**
- **Dionysus**

The Principal Olympian Deities

The Second Eight

Aphrodite

- goddess of beauty and sexual love
- her name means “born (*-dite*) from foam” (*aphro-*)
- i.e., the foam around Uranus’ disembodied testicles after his son Cronus (Zeus’ father) castrates him

The Principal Olympian Deities

The Second Eight

Aphrodite

- she is wed to the blacksmith god Hephaestus
- but she cheats on him often
- even has affairs with mortal men, e.g. Anchises with whom she has a son Aeneas

The Principal Olympian Deities

The Second Eight

Aphrodite

- originally imported into Greece from the Near East, cf. Ishtar
- though she is a goddess, Greek authors often treat her with contempt, as a comic figure
- an exception is Euripides in *Hippolytus*

The Principal Olympian Deities

The Second Eight

Hephaestus

- the god of the fire and the forge
- son of Zeus and Hera, one of his few legitimate offspring
- at birth, he was so ugly that his mother Hera flung him off Mount Olympus
- because of the fall, he became lame

The Principal Olympian Deities

The Second Eight

Hephaestus

- associated with volcanos
- the creator of several (metallic) inventions, e.g. golden robots, the Shield of Achilles (*Iliad*, Book 18)
- in *Odyssey* (Book 8): Hephaestus catches Aphrodite and Ares in bed together

The Principal Olympian Deities

The Second Eight

Ares

- the god of war
- unpleasant and unpopular figure in Greek myth, because the ancient Greeks generally disliked war
- Ares is **not** successful in war, defeated by Athena, Heracles, Diomedes (*Iliad* 5)

The Principal Olympian Deities

The Second Eight

Athena

- a war deity more popular with the ancient Greeks than Ares
- virginal protectress of civilization
- born from Zeus' head
- goddess of Athens, wisdom, arts & crafts

The Principal Olympian Deities

The Second Eight

Athena

- credited with several cunning inventions:
 - the Trojan Horse
 - the double flute
 - the Argo
 - Pegasus' bridle
 - the mirror shield Perseus uses to kill the Medusa

The Principal Olympian Deities

The Second Eight

Athena

- Athena's principal attributes are the owl and the helmet and spear
- her childhood friend was a girl named **Pallas** but Pallas died young
- Athena adds Pallas' name to her own, creating the double name **Pallas Athena**

The Principal Olympian Deities

The Second Eight

Apollo

- Zeus is his father; **Leto** is his mother
- because of Hera's jealousy, Leto was forced to bear twins (Artemis and Apollo) on the island of **Delos**
- the god of many things: the sun, wisdom, prophesy, music, flocks, wolves, mice, entrances, plagues, medicine

The Principal Olympian Deities

The Second Eight

Apollo

- the center of Apollo worship is **Delphi** (northern Greece)
- the **Delphic oracle** is famous for misleading oracles, e.g. Croesus
- hence, another of Apollo's names: **Loxias** (“slanting”)

The Principal Olympian Deities

The Second Eight

Apollo

- Apollo has many love affairs with nymphs, mortal women and young men
- in spite of that and his being the god of many things, a central tenet of Apollo worship is “Nothing in excess”

The Principal Olympian Deities

The Second Eight

Artemis

- Apollo's twin sister (and his antithesis): moon (sun), darkness (light), chastity (sexuality), black magic (wisdom), death (medicine)
- primarily, the goddess of hunting
- her major attribute is the bow and arrow

The Principal Olympian Deities

The Second Eight

Artemis

- not many myths involve her (too cold and remote!)
- Euripides' *Hippolytus* is a major exception
- what myths exist are typically violent, e.g. Actaeon and Niobe

The Principal Olympian Deities

The Second Eight

Hermes

- the messenger of the gods
- Zeus' illegitimate son
- sometimes denounced as his father's "lackey" (groveling servant who does his master's dirty work)

The Principal Olympian Deities

The Second Eight

Hermes

- in general, the god of lower-class working people: merchants, athletes, gamblers, thieves
- comical birth story: baby Hermes invents cattle rustling and the lyre

The Principal Olympian Deities

The Second Eight

Hermes

- his principal attributes are the traveler's hat and the *caduceus* (staff with snakes around it)
- also serves as ***psychopompus*** (“soul-guide”), the god who escorts the souls of the newly dead to the Underworld

The Principal Olympian Deities

The Second Eight

Dionysus

- yet another illegitimate son of Zeus
- his mother is a mortal woman
- the youngest of the Olympian gods, and the latest to join the Greek pantheon
- his cult was imported from the East (Asia Minor)

The Principal Olympian Deities

The Second Eight

Dionysus

- his birth story is an important part of his mythology
- his Greek mother dies before he is born
- he is born a second time from Zeus' thigh
- as a child, he is raised in the East

The Principal Olympian Deities

The Second Eight

Dionysus

- brings Eastern things and ideas to Greece, e.g. cymbals, ecstatic worship
- in Greek art, he is depicted as an Easterner: long robes and hair, young and beautiful, effeminate
- but he is **not** weak!
- central rite in his worship is *sparagmos*

The Principal Olympian Deities

Lesser Deities

- **Muses**
- **Fates**
- **Furies/Erinyes**
- **Pan**
- **Nymphs**

The Principal Olympian Deities

Lesser Deities

Muses

- the personifications of poetic and scientific inspiration
- their name means “the reminders”
- they were considered necessary to oral poets who recited verse from memory
- among later poets, invoking the Muses is just a convention

The Principal Olympian Deities

Lesser Deities

Fates

- depicted as three old women spinning thread:
 - Clotho (“I spin”)
 - Lachesis (“allotment”)
 - Atropos (“inflexible”)
- a metaphor for birth, destiny, death
- implacable deities

The Principal Olympian Deities

Lesser Deities

Furies/Erinyes

- torch-bearing female earth-demons
- depicted with blood dripping from their eyes and snakes instead of hair
- their principal function is to avenge murder, especially the murder of a parent by a child

The Principal Olympian Deities

Lesser Deities

Furies/Erinyes

- originally, part of a cult based on ghost worship?
- the Furies serve as the chorus in Aeschylus' **Eumenides**

The Principal Olympian Deities

Lesser Deities

Pan

- a woodland god
- depicted with goat's ears, horns, legs
- born in Arcadia (central southern Greece)
- causes terror during battle, hence "panic"

The Principal Olympian Deities

Lesser Deities

Nymphs

- a catch-all category of minor female divinities
- usually associated with ecological niches: trees, springs, rivers, seas

The Principal Olympian Deities

Lesser Deities

Nymphs

- often attend a more important deity, e.g. Artemis
- their name means “bride”
- in myth they are often the victims of sexually predatory male deities, e.g. Zeus, Pan
- e.g. Apollo and Daphne

The Chronology of Myth

- **Creation and the Age of Chthonic Gods**
- **Age of Heroes and the Founding of Cities**
- **The Trojan War**
- **The *Nostoi* (“Returns”)**

The Chronology of Myth

- **Creation and the Age of Chthonic Gods**
 - monstrous early gods
 - *chthonic* means “subterranean”
 - chthonic myths tend to revolve around violent and perverse acts, e.g. incest, bestiality, castration

The Chronology of Myth

- **Age of Heroes and the Founding of Cities**
 - **Heracles** (Thebes): kills many chthonic beasts, e.g. the Hydra, the Nemean Lion
 - **Theseus** (Athens): kills the Minotaur in Crete
 - **Perseus** (Argos): kills the Medusa
 - **Jason** (Corinth): leads the Argonauts and recovers the golden fleece

The Chronology of Myth

- **The Trojan War**

- **Oedipus** (Thebes): lives early in the “post-heroic” period
- **Helen/Menelaus** (Sparta): the break-up of their marriage precipitates the Trojan War

The Chronology of Myth

- The ***Nostoi*** (“Return Journeys”)
 - **Odysseus**: returns to Ithaca after twenty years abroad (ten years of war at Troy and ten years of wandering)
 - **Clytemnestra** and **Agamemnon**: Agamemnon’s wife kills him when he returns home from the Trojan War
 - **Orestes**: Clytemnestra’s son kills his mother to avenge his father’s murder