



Ancient Greek Myth & Religion

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The Twelve Olympians & others

The Olympian pantheon, defined for the Greeks by Homer, is patterned on an aristocracy, and as all things—stones to gods—shared qualities of willfulness, emotional swings, and personality we now assume are distinctly human (or perhaps including higher animals), the Greeks interpreted all things in human terms. Astutely, they saw the gods as having the characteristics of an aristocracy, to include boredom, petulance, casual cruelty, and needing entreaty and supplication. Usually they had individual shrine and temples, each worshipped with attention to Her or His individual qualities and powers. I give their later Roman names in parentheses.

Zeus (Jupiter) – King of gods – god of the sky, thunder, lightning, gold. Purely Greek, not pre-Greek. Homeric Zeus is the A-Male of a patriarchal aristocratic society. He could have been like an oriental god, with many wives, but Greeks were monogamous, so he expressed his potency and responsibility to populate the earth with deities by having many affairs. Overtime, he grew more omnipotent in all areas related to being guardian, protector, bringer of justice. At first, the universal moral agent; always a great tyrant.

Hera (Juno) – sister and wife of Zeus – goddess of marriage, childbirth. Spiteful because endlessly tormented by her hubby's affairs.

Poseidon (Neptune) – brother of Zeus – god of the sea and earthquakes. Must be honored prior to sea voyages (sailors, fishermen). Irascible, see the *Odyssey*. At end of his working life, a fisherman would hang up his net at shrine of P.

Demeter (Ceres) – sister of Zeus – goddess of growing things, harvest. The story of the abduction of her daughter, Persephone, is at the core of ancient Greek religion and indicates her importance and power.

Hestia – sister of Zeus, goddess of the hearth, i.e. the home.

Apollo (Apollo) – son of Zeus and Leto – god of light and arts (esp. poetry, and music). Combines all the qualities the Greeks thought unique to them: art, beauty, poetry, sanity, moderation. Associated with healing but also with bringing disease when punishment was warranted. He spoke though the oracle at Delphi.

Athena (Minerva) – daughter of Zeus and Hera – goddess wisdom, war, handicrafts, Patroness of Athens. Sprung from the head of Zeus in full armor, she is the personification of the Warrior Goddess with the Medusa on her shield. The owl is her symbol.

Aphrodite (Venus) – Goddess of Sex (not Love, that is Eros, an original deity at creation.) Born of the foam from the sperm of the castrated genitals of the original sky god, Uranus.

Ares (Mars) – son of Zeus and Hera – god of war. Representing the blind use of force that is absent of thought or reason, he fathered Deimos (Fear) and Phobos (Terror). Ares seemed to be in a state of perpetual conflict against Athena and Hercules. Yet, though of a fiery temperament, he was something of a wimp and whiner. Athena knocked him senseless with a hurled stone on the plains of Troy. Hercules stripped him of his armor in Pylos, and wounded him in his thigh. Zeus even struck him with a thunderbolt at Troy when he rushed to avenge his daughter Penthesilea.

Artemis (Diana) – daughter of Zeus and Leto – goddess of the hunt, protector of virginity, children, wild animals, hunters. Cold, pitiless (e.g. Acteon murder). Represents the masculine in female sexuality. Antagonistic to Aphrodite.

Hephaestus (Vulcan) – son of Zeus and Hera – god of the forge, ironworking craftsmanship, invention. Master craftsman, yet in the way in which the educated look down on the working man, he is presented as something of a dufus.

Hermes (Mercury) – son of Zeus and Maia. Messenger of the gods, god of travel, guiding, boundaries. Staff, traveler's hat, winged sandals. Prometheus mocked him as "God's lackey and errand boy". Quiet, polite, good-natured. When a room got quiet, the Greeks said that Hermes had entered it.

Dionysus (Bacchus) – son of Zeus and Semele – god of revels, intoxication, mysteries, theatre. The uncontrolled side of human nature, balanced against Apollo. A late arriver among Greek Gods, over time, he replaced Hestia as one of the 12.

important non-Olympian gods:

Hades (Dis) – God of the Underworld. Hades and his brothers, Zeus and Poseidon, divided all reality between them and were the most powerful gods, but he lived in the Underworld (also called Hades) not on Olympus

Persephone (Proserpine) – daughter of Zeus and his sister, Demeter. Abducted by Hades to become Queen of the Underworld.

Heracles (Hercules) – son of Zeus and the mortal, Alcmene – a demigod, and hero, but also portrayed in later literature as a bungler and lout.

Aschlepius -- God of Healing. Son of Apollo and mortal, Coronis, whom he killed for being unfaithful. Apollo saved the unborn baby by Caesarian section, hence his name - "to cut open." Grew in popularity late, during Hellenistic period.

Helios (Sol). God of the Sun. Drives the chariot of the sun across the sky every day.

Eos (Aurora). Goddess of Dawn, rising from her couch every morning.

Dioscuri (Castor & Pollux), the "Gemini Twins" – half-divine sons of Zeus, brothers of Helen. They aided men in dire situations ranging from war to disaster at sea.

Pan – Son of Hermês. Goat-footed and sexual, spirit of woods and glades, sired the satyrs.