

GREEK & ROMAN CIVILAZTION





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Ancient Greek religion was decidedly polytheistic, characterized by the many gods and goddesses it believed in. As Cartwright explains, the Greeks worshiped "a broad group of gods believed to reside in northern Greece, on Mount Olympus, ruled by Zeus" (2012). This included major deities like Poseidon, God of the sea; Athena, goddess of wisdom and warfare; Apollo, God of music, poetry, and medicine; and Aphrodite, goddess of love (Cartwright, 2016). Additionally, Pan was the god of nature; Demeter was the goddess of agriculture and a goddess related to seasons and fertility; while Artemis was linked to childbirth and hunting (Sakoulas, 2024). Each watched over diverse facets of Greek life. The array of different gods the Greeks prayed to demonstrates the polytheistic nature of their religion.

The premier Greek gods were the fabled twelve Olympians who resided on Mount Olympus: most importantly Zeus, Poseidon, Apollo, Hermes, Athena, and Hera (Gill, 2020). Cartwright cites that the Olympic gods "presided over every aspect of ancient Greek life directing the lives of the people, demanded tribute and sacrifice, punished oath-breakers, and blessed their followers" (2012). Greeks believed these anthropomorphic gods also often descended from Olympus to intervene directly in human affairs, actively meddling in people's lives in myths. For example, in Homer's *Odyssey*, Athena personally ensures the hero Odysseus returns safely home after the Trojan War by helping him avoid dangers while imploring Zeus and other gods to allow him passage (Homère, 2005). These elaborate mythic stories fundamental to Greek culture underscored a deeply ingrained reverence of their pantheon.

Beyond the principal Olympian gods and goddesses, Greeks additionally worshipped an array of minor deities, nymphs, and Others. As Cartwright observes, these included gods like Eros, the god of love; Morpheus, god of dreams; or Nemesis, representing punishment (2012). It also

encompassed supernatural nymphs linked to natural places and landforms - like oceans, rivers, springs, mountains, forests, trees, and more. These multifarious minor deities similarly illustrate the diversity of gods described within Greek polytheistic beliefs.

While yielding at times to some key gods like Zeus, the abundant range of major and minor deities, supernatural nymphs, demigods, and mythical beings found in Greek stories reveal an undisputedly polytheistic religion underpinning society. Their gods explained natural phenomena while exemplifying virtues and vices innately human qualities. Indeed, to the Greeks, "...it was the gods who were responsible for justice, security, and resources," fundamentally shaping their cultural understanding of the world (Gill, 2020). This expansive pantheon was core to Greek ritual, myths, and philosophy.

Greek art and architecture were profoundly shaped by the Greeks' polytheistic religious convictions. This is evidenced by the profusion of temples, sculptures, ceramics, and other artworks devoted to portraying the exploits of the gods and acting as offerings to them.

According to Ancient History Encyclopedia, enormous temples served as monumental tributes to the gods in Greek cities, housing cult statues and sites for rituals and offerings to honor them (Cartwright, 2014). The Parthenon hosted Phidias' gigantic chryselephantine statue showing Athena, while scored with intricate scenes depicting gods battling giants (Cartwright, 2014). Other temples like the Temple of Zeus and Temple of Hephaestus similarly exemplified the preeminence of gods in religious architecture. Gods also featured prominently in other buildings like the Erechtheion, an ancient Greek temple constructed for Athena that highlighted elaborate friezes of Poseidon and Athena's battle for Athens (Sakoulas, 2024).

Beyond architecture, representations of gods and heroes were ubiquitous in Greek art from paintings on ceramics to grand sculptures. Ancient Greek sculptures commonly captured storied moments from mythology involving the exploits of gods and heroes for temple reliefs or decorations (Cartwright, 2014). For example, the Bassae Frieze is a renowned 23-meter-long sculpture showing the legendary Amazon Battle, Lplan Fights, and Centauromachy from Greek legends. Cartwright explains these Bassare reliefs "...demonstrate the importance of myth and legend to Greek culture" by decorating temples with dramatic renderings of myths featuring gods as active characters (Cartwright, 2014). Gods also widely appeared painted on pottery and kraters used for offerings at ceremonies and rituals. Greek fine art and construction was abundantly preoccupied with deities, leveraging gods' stories and forms across media to honor them through aesthetic beauty fitted to their noble bearing.

In summary, temples, statues, ceramics, friezes, and an array of Greek material culture frequently paid tribute to gods through artistic depictions that venerated them. This reflected profound religious influence broadly evident in Greek creative expression.

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