

9. SELECT OLYMPIANS: *Athena: Imagining a Goddess*

Assigned Reading: Chapter I.8, “Athena”,
in Mark Morford et al., *Classical Mythology* (11th ed.), pp. 176-189



The Birth of Athena from the Head of Zeus. (left to right) Hermes, Apollo, Zeus (enthroned), Athena, Eileithyia, Ares. Detail of Attic black-figure amphora, c. 540 B.C. Musée du Louvre, Paris. (Cf. Morford et al., p. 177)

Zeus' Children

The Olympian pantheon is defined by its relationship to Zeus, king of the gods. The first generation are Zeus and his five siblings, the second are his many children. The genealogical chart below represents a blend of Hesiod's and Homer's accounts, which are not identical. (For Homer, Aphrodite and Hephaestus, bracketed below, were offspring of Zeus, whereas Hesiod describes birth from castration and parthenogenesis, respectively, as their means of birth.)

The Olympians**First Generation (Offspring of Cronus & Rhea)**

Zeus ♦ Poseidon ♦ Hades ♦ Hera ♦ Demeter ♦ Hestia

Second Generation (Offspring of Zeus)

(Aphrodite) ♦ Athena ♦ Persephone ♦ Apollo ♦ Artemis ♦

Hebe ♦ Ares ♦ Eileithyia ♦ (Hephaestus) ♦ Hermes ♦ Dionysus ♦ Heracles
3 Seasons ♦ 3 Fates ♦ 3 Graces ♦ 9 Muses

Although Zeus gained victory over his Titanic and monstrous enemies through judicious violence (i.e., a combination of cunning and powerful weaponry), it was by his many ‘marriages’ that he consolidated his hold on the pantheon, never thereafter to lose his hegemony—unlike Uranus and Cronus before him. The last 136 lines of the Theogony (more than ten percent of Hesiod’s poem, curiously missing from your textbook) are devoted to Zeus’ production of offspring, who together will govern the cosmos under his weariless leadership. The poet begins this crowning section with the unusual conception of Athena, and ends with her extraordinary birth from Zeus’ head.

Athena’s Double Conception

1. “Zeus, king of the gods, first took as his wife [*alochos*] Metis [‘Cunning’], / who was very wise indeed among both gods and mortals. / But when she was about to give birth to the bright-eyed goddess Athena, / then Zeus treacherously deceived her with wheedling words / and swallowed her down into his belly / at the wise instigations of Gaia and starry Uranus. / These two gave Zeus this advice so that no other of the eternal gods / might rule supreme as king in his place.” Hesiod, *Theogony* 886-894 (cf. Morford, p. 177)

The word that Hesiod uses here for ‘wife’ is *alochos*, which simply means ‘bedmate’; properly speaking, only Hera is his wife. More important is the meaning of *mētis*, signifying ‘wisdom’, ‘skill’, ‘craft’, and, by extension, ‘cunningness’ or ‘cunning’. It is of a slightly higher order than the treachery (*dolos*) with which Zeus deceives Metis. That kind of ‘wiliness’ or ‘trickery’ is as old as Gaia herself. Zeus knows that, if he is to rule his new Olympian order, he will need the new kind of wisdom that Metis personifies. And so, he swallows her. If you are immediately reminded of Cronus’ ‘swallowing’ of his children, then you are paying attention! Indeed, Hesiod’s narrative betrays a ‘first draft’, so to speak, in which Zeus was nervous about being supplanted by the children Metis would give him, in much the same way that Cronus begrimed the birth of his offspring. But the poet saves this from becoming the latest episode in the Succession Myth by having Athena, daughter of Zeus and Metis, emerge nine months later from Zeus’ own head (#2 below). Athena, goddess of wisdom and might, will henceforth faithfully stand by her father, no threat to his rulership but ever its strong buttress.

The Goddess of Wisdom

2. “But Zeus himself gave birth from his own head to bright-eyed Tritogeneia,* / the awful, the strife-stirring, the host-leader, the unwearying, / the queen, who delights in tumults and wars and battles.”

Ibid., 924-926 (not in Morford)

*Tritongeneia, i.e. Athena (the epithet is of uncertain meaning)



The Birth of Athena: (left to right) Hephaestus (with axe), a female figure (Hera? Eileithyia, the goddess of childbirth?), Zeus (enthroned) with Athena emerging from his head, another female figure, and Poseidon (with trident). The crouching figure below Zeus’ throne has been tentatively identified as Metis. Attic black-figure exaleiptron, c. 570-560 B.C. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Imagining Athena

3. “Imagination [*phantasia*] is more skilled than imitation [*mimēsis*] at crafting [representations of the gods], for imitation fashions only what it has seen, but imagination also what it cannot see If you’re going to make a representation [*eidos*] of Athena, you must do as Pheidias once did, and think of armies, cunning [*mētis*], handicrafts [*technai*], and of how she sprang from Zeus himself.”

Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 6.19 (2nd cent. A.D.)

Let us focus on Athena's visual iconography. How was she typically portrayed by ancient sculptors and painters? As the patron of Athenian artists and artisans, she was naturally one of the most popular subjects of Attic (i.e., Athenian) art. It is no surprise, then, that so many representations of Athena have survived to crowd the halls of modern museums. They do much more than merely illustrate the written texts from antiquity; they are, in their own right, important sources of our knowledge of ancient mythology. Philostratus, an Athenian sophist of the third century A.D. (who had, thus, an artistic tradition of almost a millennium in his view), insists that any artist who would render Athena adequately must have in mind the following: at least two of her mythological functions (leader of armies and protector of craftsmen); one of the most colourful episodes in her mythos (her unique birth from the head of Zeus); and her principal quality (cunning)—perhaps the hardest feature of all to depict. These, Philostratus thinks, capture the essence of Athena. Let us consider artistic examples of them one at a time.

Leader of Armies & Patron of Artisans

4. "Athena is often represented in art with her attributes as a war goddess: helmet, spear, and shield (the *aegis*, on which the head of the Gorgon Medusa may be depicted). Sometimes she is attended by a winged figure (Nike, Victory) bearing a crown or garland of honour and success." Morford *et al.*, p. 185

It may seem odd that the Greek pantheon featured two deities devoted to war, Ares and Athena. Of course, there are other examples of such doublets, but they are usually cross-generational (e.g., Apollo succeeded Helios, who succeeded Hyperion as gods of the sun). Ares and Athena, however, are half-siblings, belonging to the same generation. The usual explanation is that he is the god of martial prowess and the fury of battle, while she, being goddess of wisdom, is responsible for strategy and the planning that wins wars. Hence her association with Nike, the personified deity of 'victory'.



(left) Athena with snaky aegis, helmet, and shield. Attic red-figure lekythos, 5th cent. B.C. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. (centre) Statuette of Athena Promachos ('First in Battle'), c. 470 B.C., modelled on the colossal gilt statue that dominated the Acropolis. National Archaeological Museum, Athens. (right) Athena, helmeted with her aegis. Detail of Attic black-figure Panathenaic amphora, c. 500-480 B.C. Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.

As the leader of armies, Athena is easily recognized in pictorial art by her spear and shield, though in sculpted portraits the former is sometimes now missing (as in the statuette above, where she must originally have held a spear in her upraised hand), while your textbook has misleadingly identified the latter (her shield) with her aegis (#4). The aegis, to be more precise, was either a tunic or breastplate made of goat-skin, with a fringe of snakes and, occasionally, the snaky head of a Gorgon at its centre (cf. the painted images on the previous page, or the replica of Phidias' statue below). Since one of Zeus' common Homeric epithets was aigiochos ('aegis-bearing'), we see in this detail a means of associating father and daughter even more closely. He was evidently not averse to lending this item to Athena, who frequently wears it into battle.

Pheidias' Statue of Athena

The centerpiece of the great temple to Athena on the Acropolis, the Parthenon ('Temple of the Virgin'), was Pheidias' colossal cult-statue of the goddess. It was made of wood covered in gold and ivory; it has not survived, though smaller replicas of it exist from antiquity (such as the Roman copy called 'Varvakeion' from the 3rd cent. A.D.; see photos below). We also have written descriptions of the statue and its base by Pausanias and Pliny the Elder (##5 & 6). Take note of the details that our ancient authors thought worth mentioning: Athena's helmet and spear, her breast-plate (a form of the aegis), the smaller statue of Nike (only six feet high!) that she held in her hand. Even the goddess' sandals merit description (Pliny), inasmuch as they were elaborately carved with a mythical scene. The contest between humans and centaurs, like the Amazonomachy and Gigantomachy that illustrated both sides of Athena's shield, was symbolic of the struggle between humanity and nature, or civilization and barbarism. I invite you to consider why the myth of Pandora featured on the pedestal of the statue.



5. “[Pheidias’] statue is made of ivory and gold. On the middle of Athena’s helmet is placed a likeness of the Sphinx . . . and on either side of the helmet are griffins in relief The statue of Athena is upright, with a tunic [*chitōn*] reaching to the feet, and on her breast the head of Medusa is worked in ivory. She holds a statue of Nike [Victory] about four cubits high [=approx. 6 ft.=1.8 m.], and in the other hand a spear. At her feet lies a shield and near the spear is a serpent. This serpent would be Erichthonius. On the pedestal of the statue is the birth of Pandora in relief. Hesiod and others have sung how this Pandora was the first woman; before Pandora was born there was as yet no womankind.”

Pausanias, *op. cit.* 1.24.5-7
(not in Morford)

(left) Athena “Varvakeion” (Roman ivory replica of Pheidias’ 5th-cent. B.C. statue of Athena Parthenos. For the link between serpent and Erichthonius (one of the early kings of Athens), see Morford et al., pp. 582-5. National Archaeological Museum, Athens.



Details of the Athena "Varvakeion". (left and centre) Two views of the goddess' head and helmet, with griffins and sphinx; (right) her snaky aegis, with the head of Medusa (circled).

National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

Hybrid creatures figured prominently in Pheidias' conception. Centaurs are half-horse, half-human; the griffins (part lion, part eagle) that surmounted Athena's helmet, as well as the sphinx that featured in its middle (a winged lion with a human head), were neither this nor that. Rather, they occupied the liminal space between natural categories, suggesting the peril of confusion and, thus, a collapse back into chaos, which is the underlying threat of most monsters in Greek myth. Inasmuch as Athena was patron of the city named after her (or, just as likely, for which she was named), such monsters also represented any barbarian threat against Hellenic civilization, of which she was the protectress. Another hybrid, Medusa's serpent-covered head, was affixed to Athena's breastplate for its apotropaic function (i.e., to scare away the enemies of Athens). It also reminds us of the goddess' patronage of many important heroes in Greek myth, from Perseus (who presented her with the gorgon's head) to Heracles to Athens' principal local hero, Theseus.

6. “In order that even those who have not seen the works of Pheidias may know that he is justly praised, I shall provide a few small indications of his great genius. It is not the beauty of his Olympian Zeus that I shall use as my proof, or the size of the Athena that he made at Athens (even though the latter, made of ivory and gold, is 26 cubits [=12m.=39ft.] in height); but rather Athena's shield, around the convex side of which he carved a battle of the Amazons, and on the concave side the conflicts of the Gods and Giants; and likewise her sandals, on which he put the struggle of the Lapiths and Centaurs . . . On the base of the statue is carved a scene which they call the Birth of Pandora, with twenty gods present at the birth. The figure of Victory is particularly remarkable, but knowledgeable viewers also admire the serpent and the bronze sphinx beneath her spear-point. Let these remarks be made in passing about an artist who can never be sufficiently praised; and let us at the same time recognize that his grandeur was applied consistently even in small details.”

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 36.18-19 (1st cent. A.D.;
not in Morford)



Athena, Protector of Greek Heroes.

(above left) Athena with Perseus and the head of Medusa. Apulian red-figure krater, 4th cent. B.C. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. (centre) Athena and Heracles. Attic red-figure kylix attributed to Douris, c. 490-470 B.C. Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich. (right) Athena and Theseus. Attic red-figure kylix attributed to Onesimos, 500-490 B.C. Musée du Louvre, Paris.



Patron of Artisans

As for Athena's relationship with art, we might say that the medium was her message. A monumental sculpture or a well-crafted clay pot was, in and of itself, a tribute to the artisanal skills fostered by the goddess. That same pot, painted with a mythological scene, became an artistic artifact even worthier of her patronage. If that scene included Athena herself—engaged in the Gigantomachy, say, or standing beside one of her heroic protégés such as Heracles—then the circle was complete: the deity who had instilled craftsmanship within the potter and painter was now being honoured through those very arts. A special type of pottery, the large Panathenaic amphorae, were given as prizes at the annual athletic games in honour of Athena. These were highly valued not only for their painted artistry and for the victories they represented, but also for their contents: they held some thirty-nine litres of olive oil, of which Athena was also the patron.

(left) Attic black-figure Panathenaic amphora, inscribed with dating to the archonship of Niketes (332 B.C.). One of hundreds of surviving amphorae that were carried by victors at the Panathenaic games throughout the ancient world; this one was found at Capua in Italy. British Museum, London.

Athena's Cunning: The Eyes Have It

Finally, how did ancient Greek artists and artisans convey Athena's cunning (*mētis*)? The written myths accomplished this allegorically, by identifying her mother as Metis herself. The story of how Zeus took that goddess as his first mate, then swallowed her, giving birth nine months later to his sagest of daughters, is first told in Hesiod's Theogony. But how does a painter, sculptor, or even a minter of coins, picture a purely mental attribute such as wisdom? Unsurprisingly, it was done with the eyes. Consider, for example, a typical depiction of Athens' patron deity on an Athenian coin, such as the 'old-style' silver tetradrachm pictured on the next page. It dates from the early fifth century B.C. On one side (obverse) is a bust of Athena in her regalia of crown and earrings (not, here, her more usual helmet). She sports the 'archaic smile' that we associate with representations of the gods from that period, but her most prominent feature is her large, penetrating eye. One of Athena's epithets, after all, was *Glaukōpis*, which is variously translated as 'bright-eyed', 'grey-eyed', or 'owl-eyed'. The owl was, in fact, her emblematic bird, and it appears on the reverse of the coin. Endowed with excellent vision, it is a fitting symbol for the goddess of wisdom.



Athenian 'old-style' silver tetradrachm, 5th cent. B.C. (obverse) Crowned head of Athena Glaukopis ('Bright-eyed'? 'Grey-eyed'? 'Owl-eyed'?). (reverse) Athena's owl.