

RISUS HEROIC GREECE

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The myths of ancient Greece speak of heroes, gods, and monsters, of mighty quests and tragic fates. It differs from standard fantasy in many ways, yet much of it has found its way into our books, our movies, even our RPGs.

Fans of the popular "Hercules" and "Xena" TV series will find much that they recognize here, but many of my interpretations of various mythological characters will be based more on the myths themselves. However, "maximum game fun" is my goal, so don't look for a dry, scholastic dissertation, either.

To use this page you'll need a copy of [Risus: the Anything RPG](#), (copyright 1993-2001) by S. John Ross. Note: I've often included variations on the cliches presented below. These can be used as synonyms for the cliches, although sometimes they might suggest something a little bit different.

HEROES

Most heroes have a divine patron or parent, and have earned the displeasure of some god or another because of the circumstances of his conception (Hera despises the issue of Zeus' infidelities, for example), something they've done (such as stealing some god's sacred cattle, or cuckolding them), or something they didn't do (omitting an important sacrifice, especially if you promised one).

- **Lover of Battle:** Slay monster, hew limbs, bash heads, clean gore off your armor, avenge insults to your honor, have divine patron or parent
Variations: Wild Spear-Fighter, Spear-Famed Warrior
King: Look regal, find compromise, keep factions happy, rally followers, sense mood of followers, instill pride, find weakness in argument, negotiate
Variations: Leader of Men, Shepherd of the People
Stalwart Charioteer : Keep chariot upright, give advice, avoid obstacles, keep chariot out of danger, repair chariot, get hero to physician, bring back word of the hero's death
Variations:
- **Sacker of Cities:** Besiege city, rally warriors, survive battle, maintain morale, command authoritatively, break enemy line, recognize valor
Variations: Leader of Battles
Note: Agamemnon should have had more of this.
- **Athlete:** Flex muscles, oil body, compete for prizes
Variations: Rock-fisted Boxer, Ungrabbable Wrestler, High-vaulting Bull-leaper, Fleet-footed Runner, Long-armed Javelin-thrower
- **Godlike Warrior:** Give no quarter, rage against foe, destroy shield, terrify opponent, delight in slaughter
- **Cattle Raider:** Sneak past patrols, quiet cattle, liberate heard, know lots of rope tricks
- **Far-Shooting Archer:** Hit distant target, be calm and steady, keep people from playing with your bows, make more arrows, object when people say that archers are cowards
- **Child of a God:** Call on Mom or dad for favors, have funky power (see Signature Abilities, below)
- **Antlike Myrmidons:** Fight in formation, work well with your fellow Myrmidons, obey orders absolutely
- **Horse-riding Amazons:** Fight as well as a man (or better), shoot from horseback, live off the land

COMMON FIGHTERS

These men fight for reasons other than glory: duty to their lord, personal gain, etc.

- **Freeborn Soldier:** Obey superiors, complain about food, stand watch, complain about superiors, gamble and drink and wench whenever possible
- **Gold-Greedy Pirate:** Sail the seas, attack ships, demand ransoms, climb the rigging, say things like "sink me fer a lubber" and "shiver me timbers"
- **Bandits:** ambush passers-by, live off the land, retreat when overmatched

CRAFTS, PROFESSIONS, CALLINGS

These vocations are primarily practiced by those of non-heroic stature, but many heroes practice them as well at home or on campaign.

- **Pragmatic Priest:** butcher animal, interpret sacrifice, perform ritual, perform marriage
Variation: Doom-shouting Priest, Devious Manipulative Priest
- **Blood-Spattered Chirurgeon:** ignore screams, amputate maimed limb, cauterize stump, stitch wound, tell them "this won't hurt a bit", bind ribs, splint broken bones
- **Gossipy Midwife:** tell old wives' tales, spot pregnancy, treat infertility, prescribe contraceptive, terminate pregnancy, tend mother-to-be, deliver child, save mother
- **Doting Herdsman:** keep herd safe, watch out for predators, run after animal, tend sick animal, butcher animal, stay awake
- **Hard-Working Farmer:** manage farm, plow fields, lift heavy burdens, talk about crops, complain about weather, fix things
- **Fisherman:** go fish, keep quiet, make traps, make nets, swim, know the waters, boating
- **Honorless Thief:** skulk about, slink warily, wait for opportunity, pilfer swag, pocket valuables
Variations: Adorable Street Urchin
- **Wide-Faring Poet:** compose poem, enrapture audiences, sing and play lyre, be welcome anywhere
- **Low-Born Entertainer:** entertain audience, sense mood of audience, have casual fling
Variations: Somber Lyre-player, Slender-waisted Dancer, Sweet-throated Singer, High-vaulting Acrobat
- **Craftsman:** make things, appraise things, find stuff to make things out of
Variations: Meticulous Woodworker, Finger-stained Leatherworker, Clay-daubed Potter, Wealthy Goldsmith
- **Broad-Shouldered Metalsmith:** make things out of bronze, ignore burns, flex muscles impressively, evaluate metal
- **Clever-Handed Engineer:** build palace, drain swamp, build fortifications, build the occasional mechanical bull or strap-on wings
- **Swift-Stalking Hunter:** live in the wild, stalk prey, wait patiently, know nature lore, wise in the chase
- **Sun-Darkened Sailor:** man oars, set sail, follow the coastline, know landmarks, gossip and swear, keep a weather eye out, be superstitious, keep a girl in every port
- **Wing-Worded Herald:** Memorize messages, walk long distances, travel under the protection of the gods
- **Labor-Weary Slave:** bear heavy burden, live on scraps, ignore pain, go without sleep, work until you drop, endure mistreatment
- **Far-Roving Trader:** Evaluate goods, drive hard bargain, protect goods, organize trading expedition, communicate with stranger
- **Battle-Hardened Medic:** Bandage injury, splint broken bone, carry patient, scream piercingly, dodge attacker, survive battle
- **Unwashed Beggar:** Tell sad story, beg for scraps, flatter patron, show old wound, do amusing trick, swallow pride, sleep anywhere
- **Dutiful Wife:** Do chores, run household, prepare meals, welcome guests, raise children, keep household gods happy
- **Grape-Stained Vintner:** Grows grapes, make wine, shake off hangover
- **Sleep-Wary Sentinel:** Challenge newcomers, defend wall, remain at post, withstand pain, go without sleep, stand fast, light beacon, sound alarm

DRAMATIC ROLES

These aren't occupations or nationalities or races, but they're roles that come up frequently in Greek mythology.

- **Calm-browed Peacemaker:** End feud, forge alliance, put down weapons, see both sides, calm passions, find compromise
- **Favored by Aphrodite:** Be mysteriously attractive, caress passionately, perform under duress, demonstrate ardor, endear with a glance, stay awake, run from enraged spouse, jump out window
- **Wise Friend:** Boost confidence, resolve argument, prevent anger, sting pride, lift friend's burden, lighten heart
- **Steadfast Companion:** Fight to the death for friend, stand loyal, watch friend's back, avenge friend's honor, talk sense
- **Trustworthy Counsellor:** Be impartial, cite precedent, know unseen factors, sense dissent, find weakness in argument, talk for hours, know traditions, find compromise, memorize, speak with authority
- **Princess Chained to a Rock:** Have parents that tick off the gods, get chained to a rock waiting for a monster to eat you, marry the hero who rescues you, slays the monster, and kills your parents.

- **Wicked King:** be paranoid of mysterious visitors, arrange to have mysterious visitors killed, try and circumvent prophecy that you'll be killed by a mysterious stranger get killed by mysterious stranger

RACES

There aren't any elves, dwarves, or orcs in the myths of the Greeks, but there were plenty of non-human intelligent beings.

- **Lustful Satyrs:** Have the legs of a goat, be horny all the time, try to seduce anything female, shy away from confrontation, play panic song, play frolicsome tune

Note: Satyrs are always male.

- **Woman-Stealing Centaurs:** Be part-human/part horse, get rowdy when you drink wine, be an archer

Note: Centaurs are always male.

- **Wild-Haired Wood Nymphs:** Live in forest, make friends with forest animals, know home territory, disdain cities, move easily through forest, etc.

Note: Nymphs are always female.

Different Types of Wood Nymphs:

- Alseids: Sacred groves in the midst of the forest
- Meliads: Ash Trees in particular, but not bound to one single tree like Hamadryads
- Hamadryads: Live as long as your tree does, protect and avenge your tree, merge with your tree

- **Deep-Dwelling Water Nymphs:** Live in river/ocean, speak to fish, know home territory, disdain cities, swim quickly, breathe in air and water equally well, etc.,

Note: Nymphs are always female.

- Naiads: clear springs and freshwater brooks, often the daughter of a river-god
- Nereids: live in grottoes and near shore, attend court of Poseidon.

SIGNATURE ABILITIES

Many heroes have a special ability or quality that marks them as unique. These abilities are often the result of being the child of a god, or an object of the god's special interest. Take the "Child of a God" cliché above and choose a "signature ability" like the ones below to go with it (or make up one of your own). Generally, you should only have one signature ability or a very closely related set of signature abilities (e.g., a special way with horses: communicating with horses, calling horses to you, a special healing touch with horses).

- Godlike speed (run really fast, run over special surfaces e.g. over water, up a wall, over a field of grain, over the tops of trees, on the wind)
- Godlike strength (divert rivers, grab boulders, punch out horses)
- Godlike vitality (spend the night with the 50 daughters of a king)
- Godlike beauty (be adored by the opposite sex/envied by the same sex)
- Godlike agility (dodge arrows, leap over chariots)
- Godlike cunning (think of ways to get an army into a city, think of places to hide loot in plain sight)
- Battle frenzy (ignore wounds, fight to the death, inspire terror, face insurmountable odds)
- Wing-footed (have wings on your feet or back)
- Weather-wise (predict weather, read weather-omens)
- Keen-eyed as Lynceus (notice things too small or distant for others to see, see ghosts)
- Sharp-eared (Hear words spoken upwind, hear soft or distant sounds, eavesdrop)
- Shapechanger (any animal, certain types of animals, one animal only)
- Understand the speech of animals (all animals, one kind of animal only)
- Diviner (read entrails, examine livers, interpret dreams)
- Sneaky as Autolycus (change appearance of stolen objects, fabricate truth)
- Vigilant as Argus (never sleep on duty, see clearly at night)
- Impenetrable skin (except for a single vulnerable spot)
- Immortality (cannot be killed even from a mortal wound, though that may not be much fun)
- Function normally underwater
- Inflict blindness (temporarily or permanently)
- Evil eye (cause illness or misfortune to befall the object of envy or jealousy)
- Prophetic trance
- Srying in a pool of water, a mirror, a pond, etc.
- Great strength or size when standing barefooted on the unpaved ground
- Invisible in one type of environment or circumstances (the dark, the deep woods, the sea, etc.)
- Inflict emotions (love, hate, disgust, etc.)

- A non-verbal mental connection to a special person or creature (your twin, a favored animal, your mother, etc.) The other person knows when you're badly hurt, in terrible trouble, dead, and so forth. The bond can be one-way or two-way..

COMBINING CLICHES

Most of the cliches above can be combined easily. You can have Cattle-raiding Amazons, a Rock-fisted Sacker of Cities, a Wise Spear-famed Friend, a Silent-stalking Hunting Nymph, a Wing-footed Centaur Favored by Aphrodite, a Horse-taming Wife, or any combination agreeable to you and the gamemaster.

TRAITS

These are not cliches in themselves, but may be used in conjunction with them, e.g. Silver-Tongued Counselor, Huge and Mighty Warrior, etc.

- **Physical:** Mighty-thewed, strong-limbed, tough, stalwart, Herculean, vigorous, robust, brawny, well-built, muscular, huge and mighty, of the great war-cry, powerful, tall
- **Mental:** Clever, wily, cunning, smart, wise, crafty, resourceful, sly, scheming
- **Appearance:** Favored by Aphrodite, cow-eyed (F), fair-cheeked (F), white-armed (F), godlike, fair-haired, flowing-haired
- **Behavior:** Brutal, reckless, overconfident, generous, noble, fearless, valiant, proud, just, great-hearted, eyer of young girls
- **Famous:** Much-praised, justly famed, renowned, illustrious
- **Wealthy:** rich in substance
- **Eloquence:** wing-worded, silver-tongued

SORCERY

(Women only)

Sorceresses are women with divine blood in their ancestry, which enables them to work magic, often using magic herbs and other substances, words of power, and special equipment.

Unlike the magicians of most fantasy games, they do not teleport, cast fireballs or lightning bolts, fly (though they can change into a bird or summon a flock of them up), visit other planes of existence (except via an entrance to the Underworld), or become insubstantial. Invisibility is something that only the gods possess, though sometimes they place it upon an object for use by mortals. Spells often take some preparation time to cast properly.

Here are some things you might want to provide in your magical ceremony. (It adds to the atmosphere of the game and it might entertain the gamemaster.) Generally speaking, the more powerful the spell is, the longer it will take; the more props and ceremonies you use, the easier it will be to cast.

- A lead tablet, inscribed with the name of the victim, what was supposed to happen to them, the names of appropriate (or even inappropriate or foreign) gods or powerful magicians. The tablet is folded and put where the powers of the underworld can find it, buried in the grave of someone who died untimely or down a well. Sometimes a scrap of the victim's clothing or some of their hair or a wax doll labeled with their name is folded up inside the tablet.
- Magical herbs served in food.
- A wax doll, as above, with hair or clothing scraps attached, pierced with nails in the portion of the body the spell is supposed to affect.
- An engraved gem, useful for protective amulets and talismans.
- Names of powerful magicians and gods (especially foreign gods)
- Special times (midnight, dawn, twilight, when the moon is full, when the moon is new, a sacred day for a god, at a solstice or equinox, an anniversary, a holiday)
- Special places (graveyards, the home of the person you want to cast the spell on, sacred places, groves, caves, waterfalls, pools, the crest of a hill, the peak of a mountain)
- Magical instruments (flutes, drums, chimes, pipes, lyres) and dancing
- An animal to sacrifice
- Hand gestures (thumb between forefinger and midfinger, forefinger and midfinger placed on either side of the nose), facial expressions (the "gorgon face"), etc.

Here are some examples of spells you might be able to cast. The list is not complete, but it might provide you with a sense of the style of magic employed.

- Restoring and causing injuries, illness, blindness
- Casting illusions (they seem real, but disbelieving them doesn't make them go away)
- Scrying (using a mirror, a pool of water, a pond, etc.)
- The Evil Eye (causing illness or misfortune to the object of your envy or jealousy)
- Protection from injury on the battlefield or when traveling, malicious sorcery and ghosts
- Illusions, causing places to seem bright and cheery or cold and gloomy, causing unseen musicians to play
- Sharpening or dulling the senses
- Influencing emotions, particularly love and hate
- Keeping people from speaking against you
- Taking the form and abilities of an animal
- Call nearby creatures to you
- Communicate with animals or those who don't speak your language
- Fertility of people, beasts, and crops
- Calling forth spirits of the dead, awakening corpses, and banishing the same

HOOKS

There are plenty of great hooks in the Greek myths. Some are fairly common, while others are rather rare. Here are some ideas you can use when developing flaws and backstories.

- Most heroes tended to die on the battlefield or through accident or treachery rather than old age. Older kings tended to settle down and leave the wars to the young.
- Passions tended to run high against the highly competitive warrior-nobles, so you often hear of them killing someone in a fit of anger. Quite often this would be a father or a brother, and would lead to exile.
- Quite often, one of the gods is sufficiently peeved at a character to make his life difficult. Hera did this to several of Zeus' illegitimate offspring as well as his paramours. Poseidon raised storms and sent sea-monsters off the people who committed offenses against him. Ares tended to aid the enemies of the hero he hated, and hampered the blows he struck in combat. Aphrodite would interfere in a character's love life, perhaps getting him involved in a disastrous affair, breaking up his marriage, or any number of other disastrous affairs of the heart. Dionysus can send maenads and forest creatures after victims to drive them mad or tear them to pieces, or make the crops fail and seduce their women. Most of the gods don't want the offending heroes to die, they want them to suffer. Don't tick off Apollo or Artemis, though.
- Many heroes are impulsive, acting without considering the consequences of their actions (for example, Paris' abduction of Helen of Troy, Jason's rashly vowing to retrieve the Golden Fleece, Odysseus' revealing his true name to Odysseus). Stubbornness, lechery, and jealousy are also common.
- Heroes often travel incognito, sometimes disguised as a beggar. Since there are no inns or hostels in Achaea, In spite of Zeus' command that houseguests are sacred, there's a distressing tendency for kings to feel threatened by any mystery guests in their households, and thus making an attempt to have them secretly bumped off.

THE GODS

Many times a character will want to contact a god to ask for help or a favor. Priests can try and contact a god during a sacrifice. The children of the gods can also appeal to their divine parents, who might answer if they happen to be looking in on their children. Listed below are the Gods and some areas they are usually interested in.

- **Zeus** : weather, sky, lightning, thunder, lightning, protecting fugitives, oracles
- **Hera**: women, childbirth
- **Apollo**: archery, healing, shepherds, music, athletics, prophecy, plagues
- **Artemis**: hunting, forests, she-bears, the moon, childbirth
- **Ares**: uncontrolled war, fear, terror
- **Athena**: wisdom, cunning, intelligent warfare, many crafts
- **Aphrodite**: all aspects of love
- **Hephaistos**: Metalcraft, beneficial fires, craftsmanship, volcanoes
- **Hestia**: Hearth, the home

- **Hermes:** flocks, travelers, profit, gambling, eloquence, thieves, traders, conducting the dead to the underworld
- **Dionysus:** wine, vegetation, pleasure, frenzy, madness
- **Poseidon:** the sea, seafarers, earthquakes, horses
- **Demeter:** fertility, growing things
- **Helios:** the sun, sight
- **Selene:** the moon
- **Eos:** The dawn
- **Eros:** Capricious love
- **Eilythia:** Childbirth
- **Leto:** Darkness and nature, mother of Apollo and Artemis
- **Mnemosyne:** Memory
- **Nemesis:** Revenge
- **Hades:** The underworld