

## MAIN IDEAS


- 1 Belief Systems** Like other ancient peoples, the Greeks believed their gods controlled the human and natural worlds.
- 2 Belief Systems** The Greeks honored their gods by worshiping them and by holding festivals and games in their honor.
- 3 Culture** Early Greek literature included stories that taught lessons, and long poems that told of adventures.

## TAKING NOTES

**Reading Skill: Making Generalizations**

As you read Lesson 2, look for information that will help you make a generalization, or broad judgment, about the relationship between Greek beliefs and literature. Record the information on a chart like the one below.

Greek Religious Beliefs	Greek Literature

 Skillbuilder Handbook, page R8



▲ **Greek Vase** This vase shows a scene from a Greek myth. The hero Heracles (also called Hercules) rescued Alcestis from the underworld after she offered to die in place of her husband, the king of Thessaly.

**Words to Know**

Understanding the following words will help you read this lesson:

**hero** a person who is admired for great courage or special achievements (page 360)

*Odysseus was a famous hero of ancient Greece.*

**vivid** producing clear mental images (page 361)  
*People still enjoy reading the vivid stories that the Greeks told about their gods.*

**public** open to all people; not private (page 362)  
*The Greeks built special places for public rituals and celebrations.*

**javelin** a light spear thrown by hand (page 363)  
*The javelin throw is an Olympic event.*

# Beliefs and Customs

## TERMS & NAMES

Zeus  
Mount Olympus  
myth  
Olympics  
epic poem  
fable

**Build on What You Know** Like other ancient peoples, the Greeks were polytheistic—they worshiped many gods. But you won't find gods with animal heads in Greece as you did in Egypt. Greek gods looked like humans, yet were more powerful and more beautiful than any human could be.

## Greek Gods and Myths

### 1 ESSENTIAL QUESTION What was Greek religion like?

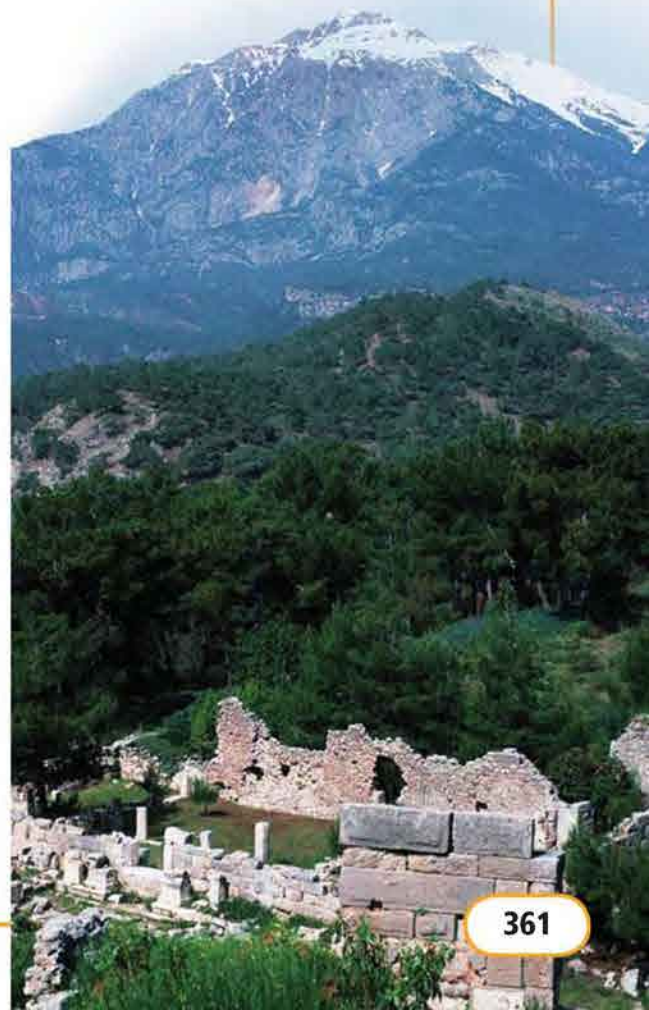
To the Greeks, the gods were not distant beings. They became involved in people's lives, and the Greeks loved to tell stories about them. These vivid tales showed that the gods were sometimes cruel and selfish.

**The Gods of Greece** The Greek gods had both divine and human qualities. For example, they were very powerful and could shape human events. Yet they had a wide range of human emotions, including love, anger, and jealousy. The gods and goddesses of Greece constantly competed with one another.

**Zeus** (ZOOS) was the ruler of the gods. The Greeks believed that he and 11 other major gods and goddesses lived on **Mount Olympus** (uh•LIHM•puhs), the highest mountain in Greece. (See the box on pages 362–363.) The Greeks also worshiped many less-important gods.

Each city had a special god or goddess to protect it. For example, Athena (one of the 12 who lived on Olympus) was the protector of Athens. She was the goddess of wisdom, a warrior, and the patron of crafts such as weaving.

**Mount Olympus**  
The ancient Greeks believed that their most important gods lived on this mountain. As a result, this group is frequently called the Olympian gods. ▼





**Greek Mythology** **Myths** are stories that people tell to explain beliefs about their world. Myths often begin as oral stories. Later they might be written down.

The Greeks created myths to explain the creation of the world and of human beings. Many myths described the gods and goddesses and how they related to one another and to humans. For example, the myth of Prometheus (pruh•MEE•thee•uhs) tells how he stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans. Zeus punished him for this by chaining him to a rock. Every day, an eagle ate his liver—which grew back every night. Today, Prometheus is seen as a hero who defied unjust authority.

Other myths portrayed Greek heroes and heroines. The Reader's Theater on pages 366–369 is based on the myth of a young woman named Atalanta, who was a skilled hunter and runner.

**P** Primary Source Handbook  
See the Greek myth: "The Boy Who Flew," pages R54–55.

**REVIEW** How were Greek myths and religion connected?

## Honoring the Gods

**2 ESSENTIAL QUESTION** How did the Greeks honor their gods?

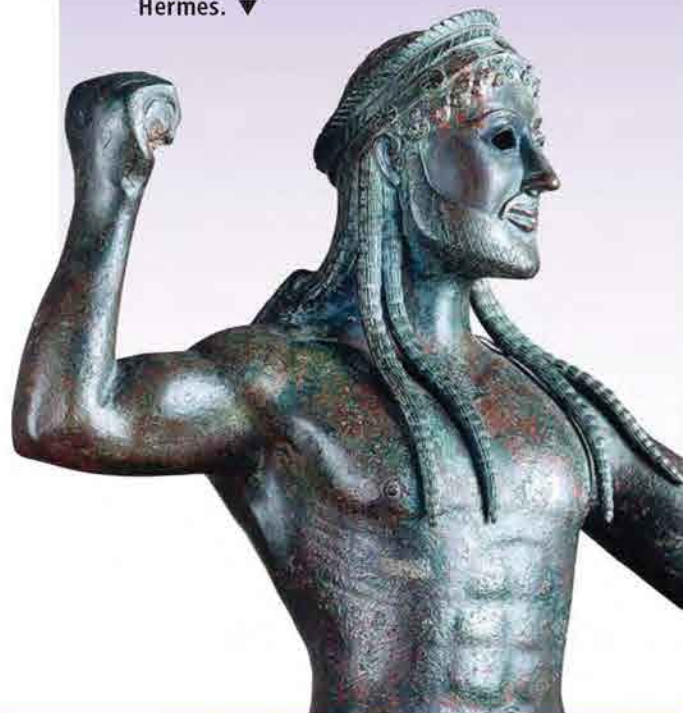
Like other ancient peoples, the Greeks believed it was important to honor the gods. An angry god could cause trouble. The Greeks created statues of the gods and built temples as places for the gods to live. They also held special events to honor the gods.

**Holy Festivals** Certain days of each month were holy to different gods and goddesses or to aspects of nature. For example, each month began with the new moon, and the festival of Noumenia was held. People celebrated holy days with sacrifices and public ceremonies.

The most important festivals honored the 12 Olympian gods. For example, there was a great festival to honor Athena. A new robe was woven for her statue in the main temple. The festival also included a procession, races and other athletic games, and poetry recitals.

### Greek Gods and Goddesses

Zeus was the father of many other gods. Some of his children were Aphrodite, Apollo, Athena, and Hermes. ▼





**The Olympics** In Greece, games were always part of religious festivals. The largest and most elaborate of these were the Olympics. The **Olympics** were games held every four years as part of a major festival that honored Zeus. They took place in a stadium built in the city of Olympia. Only men competed in these contests.

The oldest records of winners at the Olympics date to 776 B.C. But the games might have been going on for centuries before that. The first Olympics included only a foot race. Over time, longer races and other events were added. Events included wrestling, the long jump, the javelin throw, and the discus throw. These games tested skills that were valuable to soldiers.

Unmarried girls competed in a festival to honor the goddess Hera. Hera was Zeus' wife, and her festival was held at the same time as the Olympics. This festival featured a foot race in three different age categories.

**REVIEW** Why did the Greeks hold the Olympics?



#### Connect to Today

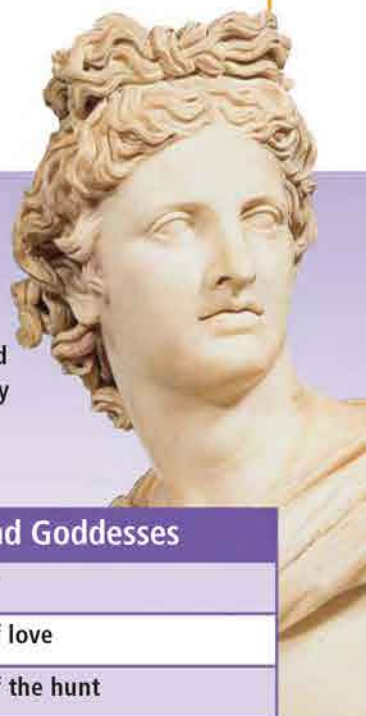
▲ **Olympics for All** In modern times, a wider variety of athletes has the chance to compete in the Olympic games than ever before.

◀ Demeter was a fertility goddess who was especially linked with growing grain.



▲ Athena was the goddess of wisdom and also a warrior. Athena had no mother. She sprang from the forehead of Zeus.

Apollo was the god of archery, healing, music, poetry, and prophecy. Later, he was honored as the god of the sun. Zeus and Apollo were the most widely worshiped gods. ▶



#### Other Greek Gods and Goddesses

Ares	god of war
Aphrodite	goddess of love
Artemis	goddess of the hunt
Hephaestus	god of fire
Hera	wife of Zeus; protector of marriage
Hermes	messenger of the gods
Hestia	goddess of home life
Poseidon	god of the seas and earthquakes



## Early Greek Literature

### 2 ESSENTIAL QUESTION What literature did the early Greeks produce?

In addition to stories about gods, the Greeks told stories about their ancient heroes. Much of what we know about the early Greeks comes from stories passed down through generations and from long poems that told stories. These long poems are called **epic poems**. According to tradition, a blind man, Homer, composed the most famous epics.

#### Primary Source Handbook

See the excerpt from the *Iliad*, pages R51–52.

**Epics of Homer** Homer's epic the *Iliad* is about the Trojan War, which started because a Trojan stole a Greek king's wife. In the *Iliad*, the Greeks surrounded the city of Troy for more than nine years, trying to capture it. The *Iliad* is famous for its portrayal of heroes. For example, no one could defeat the Greek warrior Achilles (uh•KIHL•eez). When he was a baby, his mother dipped him in a river that would make him live forever. But an arrow wounded Achilles in his one weak spot—the heel his mother held as she lowered him in the water—so he died.

#### Primary Source Handbook

See the excerpt from Aesop's Fables: The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing, page R53.

For centuries, people thought Homer's story was fiction. Around 1870, archaeologists discovered the ruins of ancient Troy. A real war did take place there, but it did not happen exactly as the *Iliad* portrays it.

**Achilles** The ancient Greek epics still influence our culture. For example, in 2004, the movie *Troy* retold the story of the Trojan War. Here the warrior Achilles does battle. ▼

Homer's other major epic was the *Odyssey*. It describes the adventures of the Greek hero Odysseus (oh•DIHS•YOOS) after the Trojan War. The Greek gods decided that Odysseus' trip home should take ten years. During that time, he and his men encountered many dangers. The gods sometimes helped Odysseus and sometimes worked against him.

These ancient stories still influence speech and art today. For instance, we use the phrase *Achilles' heel* to refer to a person's weakest area.

**Aesop's Fables** A **fable** is a short story, usually involving animals, that teaches a moral lesson. A storyteller named Aesop (EE•suhp) is credited with writing down many ancient Greek fables.





One of Aesop's best-known fables is "The Hare and the Tortoise." In it, a hare (rabbit) makes fun of a tortoise (turtle) for being slow. The tortoise challenges the hare to a race. The hare is so sure he will win that he lies down for a nap. The tortoise never stops but goes at a slow, steady pace to the finish line. The hare wakes up too late for his speed to save him. We still use this story today to encourage people to work steadily at a task that seems impossible to accomplish.

**Cyclops** On Odysseus' long voyage, a one-eyed monster called a Cyclops made him and his men prisoners. The Cyclops ate several of the men before Odysseus defeated him. ▼

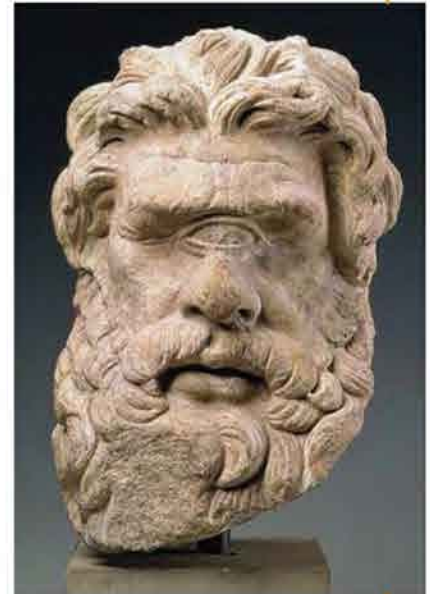
**REVIEW** Why are Homer's epics important?

### Lesson Summary

- The ancient Greeks created stories about their gods, who were important to their daily lives.
- The ancient Greeks honored their gods through festivals that included rituals and athletic games.
- Early Greeks wrote fables and epic poems.

### Why It Matters Now . . .

Greek mythology, epics, and fables continue to influence our literature, language, and movies.



## 2 Lesson Review

### Terms & Names

1. Explain the importance of

Zeus	myth	epic poem
Mount Olympus	Olympics	fable

### Using Your Notes

**Making Generalizations** Use your completed chart to answer the following question:

2. How were Greek religious beliefs and Greek literature linked? Write your answer as a generalization.

Greek Religious Beliefs	Greek Literature

### Main Ideas

3. Why was mythology important to the lives of ancient Greeks?
4. What role did religious festivals play in Greek life?
5. How are the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* connected?

### Critical Thinking

6. **Drawing Conclusions from Sources** What lesson might the Greeks have learned from the myth of Prometheus?
7. **Comparing and Contrasting** In what key ways were the religions of Egypt and Greece similar and different?



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### Activity

**Writing a Fable** Consider a moral lesson that is important to you. Working with a group, create a story that uses animals to teach that lesson.



# Atalanta's Last Race

**Background:** According to Greek myth, the father of Atalanta (AT•uh•LAN•tuh) wanted a son, not a daughter. So he left Atalanta to die in the wilderness as an infant. She was raised first by a mother bear and then by caring hunters. As a result, the beautiful young woman was skilled in running, hunting, and wrestling.

## Cast of Characters

**Narrator**

**Oeneus:** (EEN•yoost) king of Calydon

**Atalanta:** a young Greek woman

**Hunter:** Atalanta's foster father

**Meleager:** (mehl•ee•AY•guhr) son of Oeneus

**Iasus:** (EYE•ah•suhs) father of Atalanta

**Aphrodite:** (AF•ruh•DY•tee) Greek goddess of love

**Milanion:** (my•LAN•ee•uhn) suitor of Atalanta

**Spectator**



**Atalanta Running** This vase from about 500 B.C. depicts the myth of Atalanta running in her famous race. ►



**Narrator:** The goddess Artemis (AHR•tuh•mihs) is angry at King Oeneus because he forgot to make sacrifices to her. So she has sent a wild boar to destroy his country of Calydon (KAL•ih•DAHN). The king has asked the best hunters in Greece for help. When they arrive, Atalanta is with them. She stands before the king, looking lovely in her simple woolen robe. A quiver of arrows hangs over her left shoulder. Her right hand clasps her bow.

**Oeneus:** Who are you, young woman? I have need of skilled hunters, not foolish girls.

**Atalanta:** Your majesty, I think you will find that I am as skilled as any man here. I have spent my life in the woods.

**Hunter:** I can speak for her, my lord. Atalanta has lived among us since she was a small girl. She once killed two centaurs<sup>1</sup> single-handedly. In our land, she is known as “the pride of the woods.”

**Oeneus:** Very well, let us see what she can do. We need all the help we can get.

**Narrator:** The king’s son Meleager falls in love with Atalanta instantly. Although some of the men dislike the idea of hunting with a woman, Meleager insists that she go with them.

**Meleager:** Come, Atalanta, you can hunt by my side. If you are as skilled as the hunters say, I will be glad of your presence. In fact, I should like you always near me.

1. **centaur** (SEHN•TAWRZ): a creature with the head, arms, and chest of a man, and the body and legs of a horse.

**Atalanta:** I am happy to be your friend, Meleager, and I look forward to the hunt. But I only care for men as fellow hunters. I don’t plan to ever get married.

**Narrator:** When the hunters surround the boar, it attacks and kills two men. Atalanta stays calm, and it is her arrow that first strikes the animal. Meleager then moves in for the kill.

*(continued)*

**Artemis** The goddess Artemis, sister of Apollo, was another female in Greek mythology who was a skilled hunter. ►





**Meleager:** Although it is my knife that has killed this beast, I insist that the honor go to Atalanta. She shall have the boar skin as a trophy.

**Narrator:** Meleager's uncles quarrel with him because he honored Atalanta. This quarrel leads to his death. But Atalanta's fame is just beginning. After defeating a great hero in a wrestling match, she meets her father, Iasus.

**Iasus:** Congratulations, daughter. I am very proud of you and would like to welcome you back to my home. I see that you will be almost like a son to me. But I understand that many young men want to marry you.

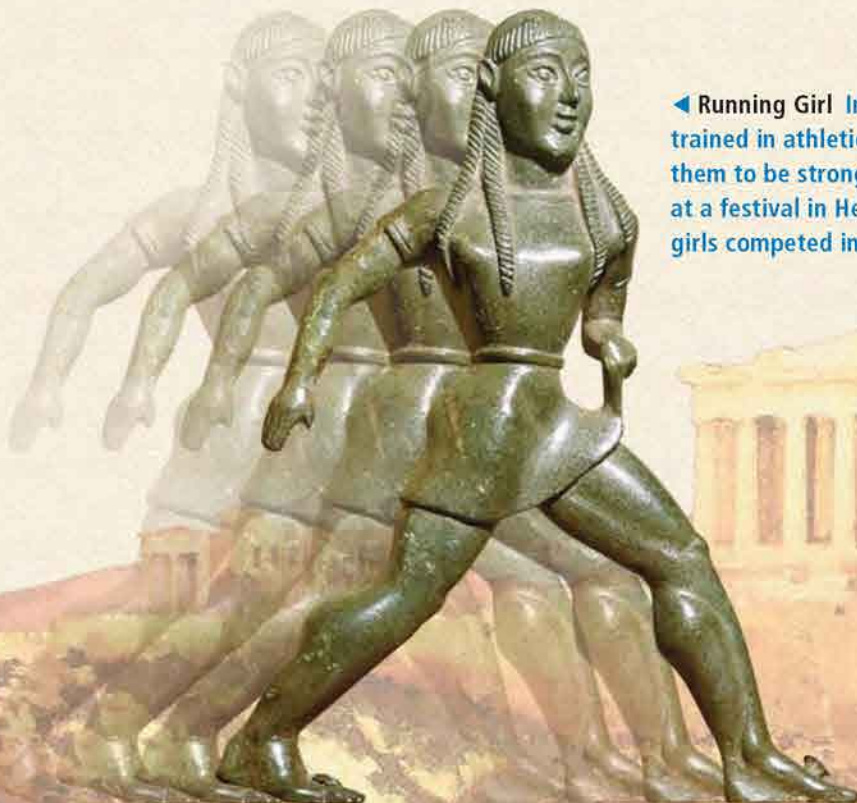
**Atalanta:** Don't worry, Father, I will never marry a man unless he can beat me in a foot race. *(Aside)* And I know there is no man alive who can do that.

**Narrator:** Atalanta enjoys defeating all the young men who come to race with her. No matter how fast they are, she is faster. She cares nothing for their promises of love. Her actions do not go unnoticed by Aphrodite, the goddess of love on Mount Olympus.

**Aphrodite:** It has come to my attention that there is a wild, young maiden who thinks she is too good for love. I may need to teach her a lesson.

**Narrator:** As it happens, a young man named Milanion wants very much to marry Atalanta. He is smart enough to know he cannot rely on his speed to beat her. He calls upon Aphrodite.

**Milanion:** Aphrodite, will you help me to marry Atalanta?



◀ **Running Girl** In Sparta, girls were trained in athletics because it taught them to be strong. Also, every four years at a festival in Hera's honor, unmarried girls competed in races.



**Aphrodite:** I will gladly help tame this young woman who refuses to honor me. Here are three magical golden apples. Their beauty is so dazzling that anyone who sees them will feel she must have them. Use them wisely and you will succeed.

**Milanion:** Thank you, goddess, for your wise and generous assistance.

**Narrator:** The day arrives when Milanion and Atalanta are to race. Atalanta looks so confident of her skill that Milanion almost despairs of being able to succeed in his plan.

**Milanion:** I must not lose courage. Aphrodite is on my side.

**Narrator:** The race begins. Milanion is swift, but Atalanta is pulling ahead. He rolls his first golden apple right in front of her.

**Atalanta:** Oh my! What is this? I've never seen anything so lovely. I'll just reach down and scoop it up.

**Milanion:** She barely lost her stride! I've caught up with her, but now she is racing ahead again. I've got to slow her down even more.

**Narrator:** This time, Milanion throws his apple to Atalanta's side. She has to move to the right to pick it up.

**Spectator:** Look, he's pulled ahead of her! But here she comes again, and the finish line is just ahead. Will she win this time?

**Milanion:** This is my last chance. I must distract her long enough for me to reach the goal ahead of her. Here goes.

**Narrator:** The third golden apple rolls right in front of Atalanta and onto the side of the racecourse. She sees it glinting in the green grass and follows it.

**Atalanta:** I must have that gorgeous glowing ball. But wait, what's this? Milanion is sprinting past me. He has won!

**Milanion:** (*panting for breath*) Atalanta, do not be angry with me. I only acted out of my great love for you. I will be extremely honored to be your husband.

**Atalanta:** I admire your skill and your wit. And I see that Aphrodite is your friend. I will honor my promise and be your wife.

## Activities

- 1. TALK ABOUT IT** Why might Atalanta prefer not to marry?
- 2. WRITE ABOUT IT** Imagine that you are a spectator watching the race between Atalanta and Milanion. Write a paragraph describing the details of the race—the sights, the sounds, and other important impressions.

