



Greek mythology

Related topics

Image not available

[Titan \(mythology\)](#)

[mythology](#)

Image not available

[Mount Olympus](#)

[Zeus](#)


AdChoices

[► Facts](#)
[► Greek Gods](#)
[► Greek Myths](#)
[► Poseidon](#)

 Myths and Legends
of the World

World Encyclopedia

 Further
reading

Greek Mythology

 Myths and Legends of the World | 2001 | [Copyright](#)
[+ Tools](#)

Greek Mythology

The mythology of the ancient Greeks included a dazzling array of **deities**, **demigods**, monsters, and heroes. These figures inhabited a realm that stretched beyond the Greek landscape to the palaces of the gods on snow-capped Mount Olympus, as well as to the dismal **underworld**. In time, Greek mythology became part of European culture, and many of its stories became known throughout the world.

Despite their awesome powers, the Greek gods and goddesses were much like people. Their actions stemmed from recognizable passions, such as pride, jealousy, love, and the thirst for revenge. The deities often left Mount Olympus to become involved in the affairs of mortals, interacting with men and women as **patrons**, enemies, and sometimes lovers. They were not above using tricks and disguises to influence events, and their schemes and plots often entangled people.

Heroes and ordinary humans in Greek myths frequently discovered that things were not what they appeared to be. The underlying moral principle, though, was that the gods rewarded honorable behavior and obedience, and people who dishonored themselves or defied the gods usually paid a high price.

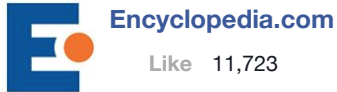
deity god or goddess

Ink Pixi - Sale Page

[inkpixi.com](#)

New Items Just Put on Sale
Personalized Shirts, Hats
and More

[25% Off Invitations](#)
[Assisted Living
Costs](#)
[Poll: You've been
chosen](#)



demigod one who is part human and **part god**

underworld land of the dead

patron special guardian, protector, or supporter

Roofs and Sources

Geography helped shape Greek mythology. [Greece](#) is a peninsula surrounded by sea and islands. Rugged mountains and the jagged coastline break the land into many small, separate areas. Ancient Greece never became a unified empire. Instead, it consisted of small kingdoms that after about 800 b.c. became **city-states**. Because travel was easier by sea than by land, the Greeks became a nation of seafarers, and they traded and established colonies all over the Mediterranean and the Near East.

Greek mythology is a patchwork of stories, some conflicting with one another. Many have been passed down from ancient times in more than one version. The roots of this mythology reach back to two civilizations that flourished before 1100 b.c.: the Mycenaean, on the Greek mainland, and the Minoan, on the nearby island of Crete. The ancient beliefs merged with legends from Greek kingdoms and city-states and myths borrowed from other peoples to form a body of lore shared by most Greeks.

For hundreds of years, these myths passed from generation to generation in spoken form. Then, around the time the classical Greek culture of the city-states arose, people began writing them down. The works of Hesiod* and [Homer](#)*, which date from the 700s b.c., are key sources for the mythology of ancient Greece. Hesiod's *Theogony* tells of creation and of the gods' origins and relationships. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, **epics** said to have been written by Homer, show the gods influencing human **destiny**. In addition, Pindar*, a poet of around 600 b.c., wrote poems called odes that contain much myth and legend.

Non-Greek sources also exist. The Romans dominated the Mediterranean world after the Greeks and adopted elements of Greek mythology. The Roman poet Ovid's poem the *Metamorphoses* retells many Greek myths.

The Greek Pantheon

The *word pantheon*, which refers to all the gods of a particular culture, comes from the Greek *pan* (all) and *theoi* (gods). The pantheon of the ancient Greeks consisted of the Olympian gods and other major deities, along with many minor deities and demigods.

Olympian Gods. The principal deities, six gods and six goddesses, lived on Mount Olympus, the highest peak in Greece. [Zeus](#) (called Jupiter by the Romans) was the king of the gods and reigned over all the other deities and their realms. He was the protector of justice, kingship, authority, and the social order. His personal life was rather disorderly, however. Many myths tell of his love affairs with various goddesses, **Titans**, and human women—and their effects.

[Hera](#) (Roman Juno), queen of the gods, was Zeus's sister and wife. She could cause all kinds of trouble when her husband pursued other women. Although the patron of brides, wives, and mothers

city-state independent state consisting of a city and its surrounding territory

epic long poem about legendary or historical heroes, written in a grand style

destiny future or fate of an individual or thing

Titan one of a family of giants who ruled the earth until overthrown by the Greek gods of Olympus

See **Names and Places at the end of this volume for further information.*

Major Greek and Roman Deities

Olympian Gods and Goddesses

Greek Deity Roman Name Role

Aphrodite	Venus	goddess of love and beauty
Apollo	Apollo	god of the sun, arts, and medicine; ideal of male beauty
Ares	Mars	god of war
Artemis	Diana	goddess of hunting and protector of wild animals
Athena	Minerva	goddess of wisdom, warfare, and crafts
Demeter	Ceres	goddess of grain, farming, and soil
Hephaestus	Vulcan	god of fire, volcanoes, and industry
Hera	Juno	queen of the gods, protector of marriage and childbirth
Hermes	Mercury	messenger of the gods, patron of travelers, merchants, and thieves
Hestia	Vesta	goddess of the hearth
Poseidon	Neptune	god of the sea
Zeus	Jupiter	king of the gods, protector of justice and social order

Other Major Deities

Dionysus	Bacchus	god of wine and revelry
Hades	Pluto	king of the underworld
Persephone	Proserpina	queen of the underworld
Prometheus	— — —	giver of fire and crafts to humans

in childbirth, Hera could be cruel and vengeful toward Zeus's mistresses and their children.

Poseidon (Roman Neptune), Zeus's brother, was god of the sea and of earthquakes. He was married to Amphitrite, a sea **nymph**, but like Zeus, he fathered many children outside his marriage. Among his descendants were nymphs, sea gods, and monsters such as the Hydra*.

Demeter (Roman Ceres), a sister of Zeus, was the goddess of grain, farming, and soil. She had a daughter, Persephone, by Zeus.

nymph minor goddess of nature, usually portrayed as young and beautiful

Before merging into the Olympian pantheon, Demeter and Hera were aspects of a much older deity called the Great Goddess, an earth goddess worshiped by the agricultural Greeks.

Aphrodite (Roman Venus), the goddess of love, beauty, and desire, greatly resembled Near Eastern goddesses such as Ishtar and Astarte. Her husband was Hephaestus (Roman Vulcan), god of fire, volcanoes, and invention. The other gods mocked Hephaestus because he was lame and also because of Aphrodite's **adulteries**, such as her love affair with the god of war, Ares (Roman Mars).

Two Olympian goddesses were virgins who resisted sexual advances from gods and men. Athena (Roman

Minerva), the daughter of Zeus and a female Titan, was the goddess of wisdom, military skill, cities, and crafts. Artemis (Roman Diana) was the goddess of hunting and the protector of wild animals. She and her twin brother, the handsome young god Apollo, were the children of Zeus and the Titan Leto. Apollo functioned as the patron of archery, music, the arts, and medicine and was associated with the sun, enlightenment, and **prophecy**. He also served as the ideal of male beauty

Hermes (Roman Mercury) was the son of Zeus and yet another Titan. He served as the gods' messenger and also as the patron of markets, merchants, thieves, and storytelling. Hestia (Roman Vesta), another sister of Zeus, was goddess of the hearth, and her identity included associations with stability domestic well-being, and the ritual of naming children.

Other Major Deities. Hades (Roman Pluto), the brother of Zeus and Poseidon, was god of the underworld, where the dead could receive either punishment or a blessed afterlife. Hades dwelt in his underground kingdom and not on Mount Olympus. He controlled **supernatural** forces connected with the earth and was also associated with wealth.

Dionysus (Roman Bacchus), born as a demigod, became the god of wine, drunkenness, and altered states of consciousness such as religious frenzy. Like plants that die each winter only to return in

adultery sexual relationship between a married person and someone other than his or her spouse

prophecy foretelling of what is to come; also something that is predicted

supernatural related to forces beyond the normal world; magical or miraculous

* *See **Names and Places** at the end of this volume for further information.*

the spring, Dionysus is said to have died and been reborn, a parallel to Cretan and Near Eastern myths about dying-and-returning gods. Dionysus eventually took Hestia's place on Mount Olympus.

Major Themes and Myths

Stories about the gods—along with other supernatural beings, demigods, heroes, and ordinary mortals—illustrate the major themes of Greek mythology. They explain how the world came to be and offer examples of how people should and should not live. The myths provided support for the Greeks' idea of community, especially the city-state.

Origins of Gods and Humans. The theme of younger generations overcoming their elders runs through the history of the Greek gods. Creation began with Chaos, first imagined as the gap between earth and sky but later as formless confusion. The mother goddess, Gaia, the earth, came into being and gave birth to Uranus, the sky. Joining with Uranus, she became pregnant with six male and six female Titans. But before these children could be born, Uranus had to be separated from Gaia. Cronus*, the youngest Titan, cut off his father's sexual organs and threw them into the sea. Aphrodite was born from the foam where they landed.

The 12 Titans mated with each other and with nymphs. Cronus married his sister Rhea (Roman Cybele). Perhaps remembering what he had done to his own father, Cronus swallowed his children as they were born.

When Rhea gave birth to Zeus, however, she tricked Cronus by substituting a stone wrapped in baby clothes for him to swallow. Later, when Zeus had grown up, a female Titan named Metis gave Cronus a drink that made him vomit up Zeus's brothers and sisters. They helped Zeus defeat the Titans and become the supreme deity. Zeus then married Metis. However, because of a prophecy that her children would be wise and powerful, he swallowed her so that her children could not harm him. Their daughter Athena sprang full-grown from Zeus's head.

The matings of the gods and goddesses produced the rest of the pantheon. As for human beings, one myth says that they arose out of the soil. Another says that Zeus flooded the earth and drowned all human beings because they did not honor the gods. Deucalion and Pyrrha, the son and daughter-in-law of Zeus's brother Prometheus, survived the flood in a boat. Afterward they created the present human race from stones, which they threw onto the muddy land.

Myth and History

Generations of readers have wondered whether the great Greek myths were based on true stories. One reader who decided to investigate was German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann. Convinced that the ancient city of Troy mentioned in Homer's *Iliad* had actually existed, he set out to find it. In the early 1870s, Schliemann began digging at a site in northwestern Turkey that matched Homer's description of Troy. He found the buried remains of a city as well as gold, silver, pottery, and household objects. Later excavations by other researchers revealed that a series of different settlements had risen on the same site over thousands of years. One of these may have been Homer's Troy.

The Ages of the World. According to the poet Hesiod, the world had seen four ages and four races of human beings before his time. The Titans created the people of the golden age, who lived in comfort and peace until they died and became good spirits. The Olympian gods created the silver race, a childish people whom Zeus destroyed for failing to honor the gods. Zeus then created the bronze race, brutal and warlike people who destroyed themselves with constant fighting.

Zeus next created a race of heroes nobler than the men of the bronze age (no metal was associated with this age). The Greeks believed that distant but semihistorical events such as the Trojan War had occurred during this fourth age, the age of heroes. Some heroes died, but Zeus took the survivors to the Isles of the Blessed, where they lived in honor. The fifth age, the age of iron, began when Zeus created the present race of humans. It is an age of toil, greed, and strife. When all honor and justice have vanished, Zeus will destroy this race like those before it.

The theme of this myth is decline, with the best times always in the past. Yet the Greeks also believed that one day the golden age would return again. Decline was only part of a long cycle.

War. The gods were born in strife and struggle, and the theme of war as an inescapable part of existence runs through Greek mythology. Many myths recount episodes in the Olympians' conflict with the Titans. Others are connected to the Trojan War, a long conflict in which both people and deities displayed such qualities as courage, stubbornness, pride, and anger. In addition to the war itself, the travels and adventures of warriors after the war ended are subjects of myth and legend.

Love. Many myths deal with the loves of Zeus, who sometimes disguised himself in order to enjoy sexual relations with mortal women. Other myths present examples of trust, loyalty, and eternal love—or of the pitfalls and problems of love and desire. The tragic myth of Pyramus and Thisbe illustrates a divine reward for lovers who could not live without each other. The story of Eros and Psyche revolves around the issue of trust. In another myth, the gods reward the elderly Baucis and Philemon for their devotion to each other and their kindheartedness toward strangers.

Love affairs in Greek myth do not always end happily. One story tells how Apollo fell in love with a nymph named Daphne, but like Artemis she cared more for hunting than for love. She ran from Apollo in terror, and when he was about to seize her, she asked her father, a river god, to save her. He changed her into a laurel tree, which is why the laurel was considered Apollo's sacred tree.

Heroes. Many Greek myths focus on the marvelous achievements of heroes who possessed physical strength, sharp wits, virtue, and a sense of honor. These heroes often had a god for a father and a human for a mother. One cycle of myths concerns the hero Hercules—Zeus's son by a mortal princess—renowned for his strength and for completing 12 remarkable feats. Unlike other heroes, who died and were buried, Hercules eventually became **immortal** and was worshiped as a god by both Greeks and Romans. Other heroes include Perseus, who killed the serpent-haired Medusa* and rescued a princess from a sea monster; Theseus, who defeated the man-eating Minotaur of Crete; Jason, who led a band of adventurers to capture the Golden Fleece; Achilles, a mighty warrior of the Trojan War; and Odysseus, who fought at Troy and

Transformation

Transformation—the act of changing from one form into another—is a common theme in Greek mythology. The gods had the power to change themselves into animals, birds, or humans and often used this power to trick goddesses or women. Zeus, for example, turned himself into a bull for one romantic adventure and into a swan for another. Sometimes the gods and goddesses transformed others, either to save them or to punish them. Daphne, for example, was changed into a laurel tree; Narcissus and Hyacinthus became the flowers that bear their names.

immortal able to live forever

** See **Names and Places** at the end of this volume for further information.*

afterward faced many challenges from gods, men, and monsters during his long journey home.

The Underworld. Myths can give expression to a culture's ideas about death. Characters in Greek myths sometimes enter the underworld, the kingdom of the god Hades. Heroes may go there seeking advice or prophecies from the dead. Persephone, Demeter's daughter, was carried to the underworld by Hades, who fell in love with her. Her myth explains the seasons: plants grow and bear fruit while Persephone is aboveground with her mother but wither and die during the months she spends with Hades. The tale of Orpheus* and Eurydice explores the finality of death and the tempting possibility of a reunion with loved ones who have died.

Morality and Fate. Many Greek myths present visions of right and wrong behavior and the consequences of each. The myth of Baucis and Philemon, for example, illustrates the importance of hospitality and generosity toward all, for a humble stranger may be a deity in disguise with power to reward or punish. Another story tells how the handsome Narcissus, so vain and heartless that he could love only himself, drowned while gazing at his reflection in a stream. The myth of Icarus, who gains the ability to fly but soars so close to the sun that his wings melt, points out the dangers of tempting fate and rising above one's proper place in life. Such stories often involve unexpected changes or transformations. For example, the myth of King Midas, whose request for a golden touch turns his own daughter into a golden statue, warns of the perils of greed.

Like Icarus, those who claim godlike qualities, who defy the gods, or who perform outrageous acts suffer swift and severe punishment. Arachne was a mortal who boasted that she could weave better cloth than the goddess Athena, inventor of weaving. The goddess turned the boastful girl into a spider weaving its web. The gods devised eternal punishments in the depths of Hades for Sisyphus, who tried to cheat death, and for Tantalus, who killed his own son and fed him to the gods. They also punished Oedipus, who killed his father and married his mother, even though he did not know their identities when he did so.

The Legacy of Greek Mythology

Greek mythology has profoundly influenced Western culture. So universally familiar are its stories that words and sayings refer to them. The

Greek Mythology

Other entries relating to Greek mythology include

Achilles	Aurora	Fates	Lethe	Philomela
Adonis	Baucis and Philemon	Furies	Medea	Pleiades
Aeolus	Bellerophon	Gaia	Medusa	Poseidon
Agamemnon	Boreas	Galatea	Menelaus	Priam
Ajax	Cadmus	Ganymede	Midas	Procrustes
Alcestis	Calliope	Golden Fleece	Minos	Prometheus
Amazons	Callista	Gorgons	Minotaur	Proteus
Ambrosia	Calypso	Graces	Muses	Psyche
Androcles	Cassandra	Hades	Narcissus	Pygmalion
Andromache	Cassiopeia	Halcyone	Nemean Lion	Pyramus and Thisbe
Andromeda	Castor and Pollux	Harpies	Nike	Saturn
Antaeus	Centaur	Hecate	Nymphs	Satyr
Antigone	Cephalus and Procris	Hector	Odysseus	Scylla and Charybdis
Aphrodite	Cerberus	Hecuba	Oedipus	Sirens
Apollo	Circe	Helen of Troy	Orestes	Sisyphus
Arachne	Clytemnestra	Hera	Orion	Styx
Arcadia	Cybele	Hercules	Orpheus	Tantalus
Ares	Cyclopes	Hermaphroditus	Pan	Thanatos
Argonauts	Daedalus	Hermes	Pandora	Theseus
Argus	Daphnis and Chloe	Hero and Leander	Paris	Thetis
Ariadne	Delphi	Hydra	Pegasus	Tiresias
Artemis	Demeter	Hypnos	Peleus	Titans

Asclepius	Dionysus	Io	Penelope	Uranus
Astyanax	Echo	Iphigenia	Persephone	Vesta
Atalanta	Electra	Jason	Perseus	Vulcan
Athena	Eros	Jocasta	Phaedra	Zeus
Atlas	Eurydice	Laocoön	Phaethon	

myth of Narcissus, for example, produced *narcissism*, or excessive vanity, and something that causes an argument may be called an "apple of discord," after an apple that Eris, the goddess of discord, used to start a dispute among Athena, Aphrodite, and Hera. Greek myths and legends span the sky in the names of constellations and planets.

Literature and drama have long drawn upon themes and stories from Greek myth. Besides the works of the ancient Greeks themselves—including the plays of Sophocles and Euripides—writers from ancient times to the present have found inspiration in Greek mythology. Roman authors Virgil (the *Aeneid* *) and Ovid (the *Metamorphoses*) used Greek stories and characters in their poems. References to Greek myths appear in the works of the medieval Italian poets Petrarch and Boccaccio and in those of the English poet Chaucer. Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* contains the story of Pyramus and Thisbe as a comic play-within-a-play. Modern writers who have drawn upon Greek mythology include James Joyce (*Ulysses*) and Mary Renault (*The Bull from the Sea*).

Artists from the Renaissance to the present have depicted scenes from Greek mythology. Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (ca. 1480),

discord disagreement

* See **Names and Places** at the end of this volume for further information.

Poussin's *Apollo and Daphne* (ca. 1630), and Renoir's *Diana* (1867) are just a few of many such paintings. The Greeks chanted songs and hymns based on myth at religious festivals, and Greek mythology has continued to inspire composers of the performing arts. Operas based on mythic stories include Monteverdi's *Ariadne*, Strauss's *Elektra*, and Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld*. Marcel Camus' film *Black Orpheus* also came from the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. *Apollo* and *Orpheus* by Balanchine, *Ariadne* by Ailey, and *Clytemnestra* by Graham are four modern ballets that interpret Greek myths through dance.

See also [Creation Stories](#); [Homer](#); [Iliad, the](#); [Metamorphoses, the](#); [Odyssey, the](#); [Ovid](#); [Roman Mythology](#); [Trojan War](#).

Cite this article

Pick a style below, and copy the text for your bibliography.

MLA

Chicago

APA

"Greek Mythology." *Myths and Legends of the World*. 2001. *Encyclopedia.com*. 30 Oct. 2014
<<http://www.encyclopedia.com>>.

[Learn more about citation styles](#)

**THE 2015
RANGE ROVER EVOQUE**
FROM \$41,100*

EXPLORE



*LEGAL

Search over 100 encyclopedias and dictionaries:

[HighBeam™ Research, Inc.](#) © Copyright 2014. All rights reserved.

[Encyclopedia.com home page](#) [About us](#) [Help](#) [Site feedback](#) [Privacy policy](#) [Terms and conditions](#)

The Encyclopedia.com advertising network includes: [womensforum.com](#) • [GlamFamily](#)