

# Greek Religion

- polytheistic
- anthropomorphic gods
- charis relationship between gods and mortals
- Non eschatological
- No dogma/sacred books/religious personnel

# Main Greek Gods

Aphrodite

Zeus Poseidon Hades Hera Demeter Hestia

Athena

Apollo

Artemis

Hermes

Dionysus

Hephaistos Persephone

Ares



# Gods everywhere!

But Zeus bade Themis summon the gods to the place of gathering from the brow of many-ribbed Olympus; and she sped everywhither, and bade them come to the house of Zeus. There was no river that came not, save only Oceanus, nor any nymph, of all that haunt the fair copses, the springs that feed the rivers, and the grassy meadows.

Homer Iliad 20.4

# Not Eternal: The Birth of Hermes

And when the purpose of great Zeus was fulfilled, and the tenth moon with her was fixed in heaven, she was delivered and a notable thing was come to pass. For then she bare a son, of many shifts, blandly cunning, a robber, a cattle driver, a bringer of dreams, a watcher by night, a thief at the gates, one who was soon to show forth wonderful deeds among the deathless gods. **Born with the dawning, at mid-day he played on the lyre, and in the evening he stole the cattle of far-shooting Apollo on the fourth day of the month;** for on that day queenly Maia bare him....

....**Then glorious Hermes went hurriedly to his cradle, wrapping his swaddling clothes about his shoulders as though he were a feeble babe,** and lay playing

with the covering about his knees; but at his left hand he kept close his sweet lyre.

But the god did not pass unseen by the goddess his mother; but she said to him:

“How now, you rogue! Whence come you back so at night-time, you that wear shamelessness as a garment?

And now I surely believe the son of Leto will soon have you forth out of doors with unbreakable cords about your ribs, or you will live a rogue's life in the glens robbing by whites. Go to, then; your father got you to be a great worry to mortal men and deathless gods.”

**Homeric Hymn to Herms**

# How much did the Greeks know about the gods?

But whence each of the gods came to be, or whether all had always been, and how they appeared in form, they did not know until yesterday or the day before, so to speak; for I suppose Hesiod and Homer flourished not more than four hundred years earlier than I; and **these are the ones who taught the Greeks the descent of the gods, and gave the gods their names, and determined their spheres and functions, and described their outward forms.**

Herodotus 2.53

And one day they taught Hesiod glorious song while he was shepherding his lambs under holy Helicon, and this word first the goddesses said to me— the Muses of Olympus, daughters of Zeus who holds the aegis: “Shepherds of the wilderness, wretched things of shame, mere bellies, **we know how to speak many false things as though they were true; but we know, when we will, to utter true things.**”

Hesiod Theogony 27

# Zeus guaranteeing and distributing the honours of the gods



Pediment of Siphnian Treasury at Delphi: Apollo and Heracles fight for the tripod.  
Zeus intervenes

# Gods' timai (honours/powers)

Artemis we hymn—no light thing is it for singers to forget her—whose study is the bow and the shooting of hares and the spacious dance and sport upon the mountains; **beginning with the time when sitting on her father's knees—still a little maid—she spoke these words to her sire:** “**Give me** to keep my maidenhood, Father, for ever: and **give me** to be of many names, that Phoebus may not vie with me. And give me arrows and a bow—stay, Father, I ask thee not for quiver or for mighty bow: for me the Cyclopes will straightway fashion arrows and fashion for me a well-bent bow. But **give me** to be the Bringer of Light and give me to gird me in a tunic with embroidered border reaching to the knee, that I may slay wild beasts. And **give me** sixty daughters of Oceanus for my choir—all nine years old, all maidens yet ungirdled; and **give me** for handmaidens twenty nymphs of Amnisus who shall tend well my buskins, and, when I shoot no more at lynx or stag, shall tend my swift hounds. And **give to me** all mountains; and for city, **give me** any, even whatsoever thou wilt: for seldom is it that Artemis goes down to the town.

Callimachus Hymn to Artemis



# How can we make sense of the Greek gods?

## Marriage:

- Hera
- Artemis
- Aphrodite
- Athena
- Nymphs

## War:

- Ares
- Athena
- Enyalios
- Artemis
- Zeus
- Poseidon

## Athena at Athens:

City protector  
Craftmanship  
War  
Marriage  
Seafaring  
Health  
Agriculture?  
Childcare  
Horsemanship

# J. P. Vernant and the French Structuralists

## Structuralism

- Theoretical movement popular in 1960s
- Things cannot be understood as isolated entities
- Meaning is created by the interrelations between them and their role in a larger structure.

## Vernant on the Greek gods

‘The pantheon is a system of which we should study **the structures instead of concentrating on divinities as individuals**

Which gods are **paired** and which are **opposed** to each other? What is the precise mode of intervention? What logic governs their being?’



J. P Vernant  
1914-2007

# Athena, Ares, and Poseidon

- Athena-Poseidon: Horses, Seafaring
  - Athena-Ares: Warfare
- Athena and the power of the mind, the cunning goddess

he boasted to them that in the city of Peirene lay the rule and rich estate and hall of his ancestor, Bellerophon, who once suffered greatly when beside the spring he wanted to harness Pegasus, the son of the snake-entwined Gorgon; [65] until **the maiden Pallas brought to him a bridle** with golden cheek-pieces. The dream suddenly became waking reality, and she spoke: “Are you sleeping, king, son of Aeolus? Come, take this charm for the horse; and, sacrificing a white bull, show it to your ancestor, Poseidon the Horse-Tamer.”

Pindar Olympian 13 65-9

# Back to the unknowability of Greek Religion: To which god shall I sacrifice?

“To whom of the gods (and heroes) must I pray and/or sacrifice in order that I fare better?” (or “to achieve what I have in mind” and variants).

Typical Question posed to the oracle of Zeus at Dodona



Lead tablet from the sanctuary of Zeus at Dodona

You must pray to Zeus, to Hera of Kithairon, to Pan and the Sphragitic Nymphs, and sacrifice to the heroes Androkrates, Leukon, Peisandros, Damokrates, Hypsion, Aktaion, Polyeidos.

Delphic oracle given to Athenians at the time of the Persian Wars

# How much did the Greeks know about the gods?

But whence each of the gods came to be, or whether all had always been, and how they appeared in form, they did not know until yesterday or the day before, so to speak; for I suppose Hesiod and Homer flourished not more than four hundred years earlier than I; and **these are the ones who taught the Greeks the descent of the gods, and gave the gods their names, and determined their spheres and functions, and described their outward forms.**

Herodotus 2.53

And one day they taught Hesiod glorious song while he was shepherding his lambs under holy Helicon, and this word first the goddesses said to me — the Muses of Olympus, daughters of Zeus who holds the aegis: “Shepherds of the wilderness, wretched things of shame, mere bellies, **we know how to speak many false things as though they were true; but we know, when we will, to utter true things.**”

Hesiod Theogony 27

# Anthropomorphic

Phoibos met you in the battle's fury ... a terrible god. Patroclus did not see him moving through the rout. Apollo came against him hidden in thick mist, and stood behind him and struck his back and broad shoulders with the flat of his hand, so that his eyes spun round...

**Iliad 5.339**



Rubens: The death and burning of Semele

# Ageless



The story of Eos (Dawn) and Tithonus:  
Immortality but not eternal youth



Artemis the eternal virgin



# Hephaestus: The lame-god





# Wounded gods

But when he (Diomedes) had come upon her (Aphrodite) as he pursued her through the great throng, then the son of great-souled Tydeus thrust with his sharp spear and leapt upon her, and **wounded the surface of her delicate hand**, and forthwith through the ambrosial raiment that the Graces themselves had wrought for her the spear pierced the flesh upon the wrist above the palm and forth flowed the immortal blood of the goddess, the **ichor**, such as floweth in the blessed gods; **for they eat not bread neither drink flaming wine, wherefore they are bloodless, and are called immortals.**

**Iliad 5.339**

# Charis relationship between gods and men

‘Sminthian if I ever roofed a temple **that pleased you**, or if I ever burnt you rich thighs of bulls or goats, fulfil this prayer for me’

Iliad 1. 39-41

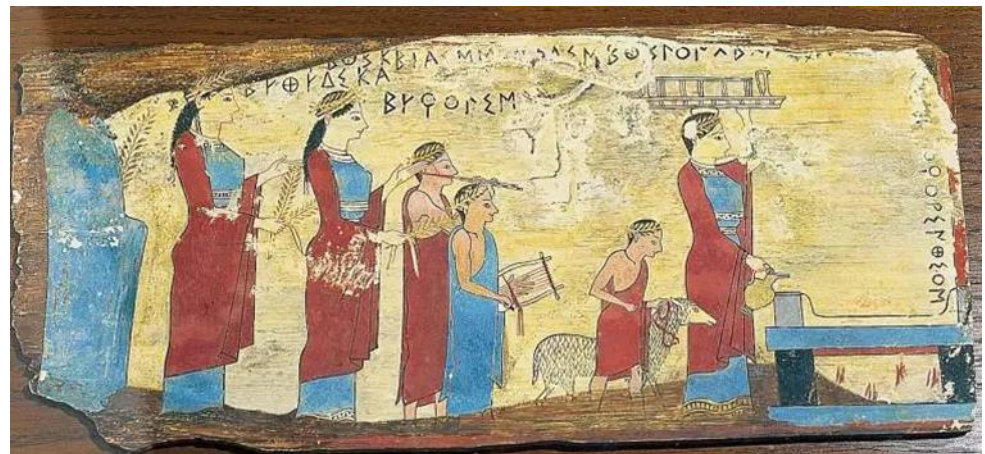
Maiden Telesinos son of Kleitias dedicated this image on the Acropolis. **Take delight in it**, and allowed him to dedicate another one

Dedicatory epigram from Athenian Acropolis

- charis = charm, delight
- Men give to the gods pleasing gifts in exchange of pleasing returns

# What delights the Greek Gods?

- sacrifices
- libations
- material objects (from temple buildings to one's used shoes!)
- hymns
- competitions
- festivals



# Ungrateful gods?

When Croesus heard this, he sent Lydians to Delphi, telling them to lay his chains on the doorstep of the temple, and to ask the god if he were not ashamed to have persuaded Croesus to attack the Persians, telling him that he would destroy Cyrus' power; of which power (they were to say, showing the chains) these were the first-fruits. They should ask this; and further, if it were the way of the Greek gods to be **ungrateful (acharistoi)**.

Herodotus 1.90

And it was the wish of Loxias that the evil lot of Sardis fall in the lifetime of Croesus' sons, not in his own; but he could not deflect the Fates. [3] Yet as far as they gave in, he did accomplish his wish and **favor (echarisato)** Croesus: for he delayed the taking of Sardis for three years. And let Croesus know this: that although he is now taken, it is by so many years later than the destined hour. And further, Loxias saved Croesus from burning..

Herodotus 1.91



Sleep and death carry the body of Sarpedon, son of Zeus.