

EXPLORING GREEK
MYTHOLOGY



Gods of Greek Mythology

Don Nardo



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Chapter One

Rulers of the Three Great Realms

Today people often call the vast expanse that includes everything that exists the universe. The classical Greeks called it the cosmos. They envisioned the great cosmic sphere, so to speak, as having three principal and distinct sections, or realms. One, the most immediate and important to them, encompassed the lands in which they and other humans dwelled on the earth's surface. The other two cosmic realms were the underworld, the shadowy world lurking deep beneath their feet, and the sky, or heavens, stretching high overhead.

The Greeks were polytheists, meaning they recognized and worshipped multiple gods. Not surprisingly, therefore, they assumed that each of these cosmic realms must be controlled or overseen by a separate deity. Moreover, like nearly all societies in human history, that of the Greeks was patriarchal, or centered around and run by men. So it is only natural that they viewed those primary cosmic overseers as males.

The Gods at War

In the massive corpus of surviving ancient Greek myths, the rulers of the three great realms were brothers with a shared and quite torturous background. These three gods were the leaders of a divine race the Greeks called the Olympians. They were not the

first group of deities to watch over the world, having usurped that power from the first race of gods—the Titans. In charge of the latter was the brutish Cronos. Having deposed his father, the sky god Uranus, he was worried that one or more of his own children might do the same to him. So, as they emerged from the womb of his wife, Rhea, Cronos devoured them whole. This proved the grisly fate of young Demeter, Hera, Hestia, Poseidon, and Hades. Nevertheless, because they were gods they were immortal, so they remained alive for years in their father's monstrous gut.

Cronos

Leader of the first race of gods, the Titans

Eventually, Rhea had had enough of this abuse. When she gave birth to her next child, Zeus, she hid him from her husband. Then she wrapped the baby's swaddling clothes around a large rock, and the dim-witted Cronos, assuming the child was inside, swallowed it.

Later, when Zeus was older and strong enough, he decided to challenge his father's authority. He forced Cronos to vomit up the now-grown children he had earlier swallowed. Seething with anger, they joined their brother Zeus

Zeus

A son of Cronos and the leader of the Olympian gods

in a monumental battle against their pitiless father and most of the other Titans. The Greeks called this enormous conflict the Titanomachy. As the early Greek epic poet Hesiod describes it, Zeus led the attack, "hurling his lightning bolts without pause. The life-giving earth resounded all about with flames and the great forests crackled on all sides with fire. All the earth throbbed with heat. [It was] as if the earth and vast heaven above had come together, so great was the din as the gods opposed one another in strife."³

After years of devastating struggle, Zeus and his followers were victorious. They became known as the Olympians because they made cloud-wrapped Mt. Olympus, the tallest mountain in



A surviving carved relief shows Rhea holding her son, the infant Zeus. A myth tells how, behind her husband Cronos's back, she had the boy raised in secret on the large island of Crete.

Greece, their home base. Then they set about cleaning up the awful mess the horrific strife had made of the earth's surface. Yet they were well aware that the landmasses of the earth composed only part of the greater cosmos they had won the right to rule. As the late myth teller E.M. Berens worded it, the Olympians now considered how the cosmos "should be divided among them. At last it was settled by lot that Zeus should reign supreme [on the earth], while Hades governed the lower world, and Poseidon had full command over the seas. But the supremacy of Zeus was recognized in all three kingdoms. [He] held his court on the top of Mt. Olympus."⁴

The Olympian Zeus: Wonder of the World

Zeus was such a commanding figure in Greek religion and mythology that the Greeks had many shrines and religious festivals dedicated to him. Of the shrines, the most renowned was the Temple of Olympian Zeus at Olympia (where the ancient Olympic Games were held) in southwestern Greece. Inside the building was an enormous statue of the god fashioned by the Athenian Phidias, who, in later ages, was recognized as the finest sculptor of the ancient world. A few centuries after its creation, the statue was named one the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. According to the second-century CE Greek traveler Pausanias, who personally visited the temple,

The god is sitting on a throne. He is made of gold and ivory. There is a wreath on his head like twigs and leaves of olive. In his right hand he is holding a [figure of the goddess] Victory of gold and ivory with a ribbon and a wreath on her head. In the god's left hand is a staff in blossom with every kind of precious metal, and the bird perching on his staff is Zeus's eagle [one of his symbols]. The sandals are gold and so is his cloak, and the cloak is inlaid with animals and flowering lilies. The throne is finely worked with gold and gems, and with ebony and with ivory.

Pausanias, *Guide to Greece*, vol. 2, trans. Peter Levi. New York: Penguin, 1971, pp. 226–27.

Humanity's Savior Sires a Daughter

From that lofty vantage within the swirling clouds that often enveloped Greece's highest peak, mighty Zeus not only oversaw his many fellow deities but also surveyed the wide world of humans. The Greeks believed that he maintained the crucial human areas of justice, law, and morality. They also saw him as a major protector of the hundreds of Greek city-states. (Consisting of a central town supported by a network of surrounding farms and villages, each was, in essence, a tiny nation unto itself. The Greeks did

not come together into a unified nation until modern times.) To acknowledge that role, the Greeks sometimes referred to the supreme god as Zeus Polieus, meaning “Zeus of the city.” A few of the many other names that described him in his varied roles included Zeus Hikesios, or “Zeus the protector of suppliants”; Zeus Xenios, or “Zeus the protector of strangers”; and Zeus Soter, or “Zeus the Savior.”

One might well expect that a god possessing the great stature of Zeus would find his way into a large number of Greek myths, and this was indeed the case. His central place in the stories of Cronos’s swallowing the young Olympians and the devastating Titanomachy that followed are but two examples. Another similar tale involving Zeus described how his famous divine daughter Athena came to be. At one point the leader of the gods found himself in a position that mirrored that of his repugnant father. Just as Cronos had swallowed his children out of fear they would overthrow him, Zeus worried that his own future child might pose a threat. The source of this concern was Gaia, a primitive mother goddess who embodied the earth itself. She predicted that if Zeus had a daughter, she might prove equal to him in wisdom.

To forestall the possibility that he would sire a daughter, Zeus swallowed his first wife, Metis, after she became pregnant. Surely, he reasoned, she could not bear a child while imprisoned in his gut. But he was wrong. Only days after Metis had disappeared down Zeus’s gullet, he developed a splitting headache. Normally when used this way, the word *splitting* is only a figure of speech, but this time the metaphor was transformed into reality as the god’s head suddenly split open. To the surprise of everyone present, including Zeus himself, out sprang his new daughter—Athena. A deity of war as well as wisdom, she was fully clothed in shining armor, with her invincible breastplate—the aegis—projecting prominently.

Athena

Zeus’s daughter and the goddess of war and wisdom

Source Notes

Introduction: The Ideal of What Humans Should Be and Do

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2. Bowra, *The Greek Experience*, pp. 121–22.

Chapter One: Rulers of the Three Great Realms

3. Hesiod, *Theogony*, trans. Rhoda A. Hendricks, in *Classical Gods and Heroes: Myths as Told by the Ancient Authors*. New York: Morrow Quill, 1974, p. 21.
4. E.M Berens, *Myths and Legends of Ancient Greece and Rome*. Wolcott, NY: Scholar's Choice, 2015, p. 20.
5. Hesiod, *Theogony*, in *Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns, and Homerica*, trans. H.G. Evelyn-White. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964, p. 25.
6. Michael Grant and John Hazel, *Who's Who in Classical Mythology*. London: Routledge, 2001, p. 342.
7. Edith Hamilton, *The Greek Way*. New York: Norton, 2017, p. 156.

Chapter Two: Masters of Nature and the Human Condition

8. Carlos Parada, "Basic Aspects of the Greek Myths," Greek Mythology Link, 1997. www.maicar.com.
9. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A.D. Melville, in Theoi Greek Mythology, "Phaethon." www.theoi.com.
10. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, in Theoi Greek Mythology, "Phaethon."
11. Aristophanes, *Birds*, lines 693–95, 698–702, trans. Don Nardo.
12. Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, trans. P.G. Walsh. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 113.
13. Euripides, *Alcestis*, in *Euripides: Three Plays*, trans. Philip Velacott. New York: Penguin, 1974, p. 147.

The Ancient Myth Tellers



Aeschylus

Today often called the world's first great playwright, he was born around 525 BCE. In 490 BCE, when in his thirties, he fought in the pivotal battles of Marathon and Salamis, both against Persian invaders. All of his more than eighty plays (seven of which survive) were heavily influenced by the huge corpus of old Greek myths, parts of which he dramatized in those works.

Euripides

Born in about 485 BCE, this Athenian master of tragic drama wrote more than eighty plays, nineteen of which have survived. He was known for his frequent emphasis of themes and ideas that questioned traditional religious and social values. Among his works that retell important Greek myths are *Alcestis* (438 BCE), *Medea* (431), *Electra* (ca. 413–417), and *Helen* (412).

Herodotus

Often considered the father of history because he wrote the first-known modern-style history text, he was born around 484 BCE. Although he dealt largely with historical events, his book mentions or summarizes a number of old Greek myths. They include episodes and characters from the Trojan War, Theseus and the Minotaur, and Zeus's disguising himself as a bull.

Hesiod

Born sometime during the early 700s BCE, the ancient Greeks considered him one of the two greatest epic poets (the other being Homer). Hesiod was a farmer by trade but devoted much of his time to writing. His two epic poems, *Works and Days* and the *Theogony*, contain a wealth of detail about the early Greek creation myths, including the rise of the first race of gods, the Titans.

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