

Gods of World MYTHOLOGY

Don Nardo





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CHAPTER ONE

Immortality and Power: The Greco-Roman Gods

Not long after the imposing Athena, goddess of war and wisdom, was born from the head of her father, Zeus, life on earth underwent a dramatic change. Zeus's trusted adviser, the god Prometheus, created humans and taught them how to use fire, which helped them build a thriving civilization. In the centuries that followed, Athena watched with fascination as the humans erected cities, including majestic Athens. Steadily, she grew to admire the Athenians and desired to become their local patron deity, or divine protector.

One thing stood in the goddess's way, however. Her uncle Poseidon, lord of the seas, wanted that role for himself. Hearing of this rivalry, Zeus suggested that his daughter and brother take part in a public contest, with Zeus as judge. Whichever deity provided Athens with the most useful gift would win the competition and become the city's patron.

Poseidon, wielding his three-pronged spear, the trident, arrived in Athens first and stood atop the city's central hill, the Acropolis. In the words of the ancient myth teller today called Pseudo-Apollodorus, "With a blow of his trident on the middle of the Acropolis, he produced a [freshwater

stream].” Then Athena leapt onto the Acropolis. “Having called on [the city’s king] to witness her act of taking possession, she planted an olive tree.”⁵

Zeus carefully weighed the situation and decided that giving Athens its first olive tree was the most valuable of the two feats. So he chose Athena as the winner of the contest. Thereafter, she remained the Athenians’ proud patron and bore the nickname Athena Polias, meaning “Athena of the City.”

The Power to Destroy Humankind

These events supposedly took place far back in the mists of time, long before the emergence of the so-called classical Greeks, who in the fifth century BCE created the world’s first democracy and erected the magnificent Parthenon temple atop the Acropolis. The classical Greeks envisioned their gods as looking and acting like people. Yet no matter how much the gods resembled humans, the Greeks recognized two special differences. First, the gods were immortal, whereas people were born, grew old, and died.

The second factor that separated the gods from their human worshippers was the tremendous power those divinities wielded. As the classical Greek poet Pindar put it, “Single is the race . . . of men and gods. From a single mother we both draw breath. But a difference of power in everything keeps us apart.”⁶ It was understood, therefore, that the gods could easily destroy humanity if they chose to.

That divine power was a prominent theme running throughout the colorful stories making up Greek mythology. Although Poseidon lost the contest on the Acropolis to his niece, for instance, he successfully exerted his tremendous strength in numerous other tales. One of the more famous examples was his manipulation of the Greek king Odysseus. After helping other Greek leaders capture the city of Troy in Anatolia (today Turkey), Odysseus and his followers departed for home. But a massive storm scattered their

Odysseus

The king of the Greek
island kingdom of Ithaca

ships. They ended up on a remote island inhabited by giant one-eyed creatures—the Cyclopes. During their escape, the Greeks blinded a Cyclops, who, to their horror, they later learned was Poseidon’s son. The enraged god thereafter used his immense power to punish Odysseus repeatedly and kept him from returning to Greece for ten long years.

When Gods Lost Their Tempers

Meanwhile, Athena often employed her own considerable power to keep selected humans in line. Entering a contest with her divine uncle was acceptable to the goddess, but she viewed competing with a mere human as an insult. So when a woman named Arachne challenged Athena to see which of the two was the more talented weaver, the goddess lost her temper. Athena turned the maiden into a spider (which explains why modern scientists call spiders arachnids.)

Zeus, who had chosen his daughter as winner of the competition in Athens, possessed far more power than either Athena or Poseidon and wielded it frequently. One of the more famous examples of Zeus’s legendary wrath was his punishment of his own adviser, Prometheus. The trouble between the two deities

Prometheus

The god who created humans and later gave them fire

stemmed from Prometheus’s gift of fire to humans. Earlier, Zeus had prohibited anyone from doing that, saying that only the immortal gods should benefit from fire.

But Prometheus pitied the beings he had created, who, lacking fire, could not cook their food. So he swiped some fire from the gods’ hearth on Mount Olympus and presented it to the humans. “He showed them how to cook and how to keep themselves warm,” the late modern myth teller W.H.D. Rouse wrote. With fire, they also learned “how to make bricks and burn pottery [and] how to smelt metals and make tools.”⁷

When Zeus found out what had happened, he was livid. The most powerful of the Olympian immortals proceeded to inflict a



Nineteenth-century German artist Alexander Zick created this dramatic painting of Prometheus's agonizing daily punishment, an ordeal ordered by his former mentor, mighty Zeus.

horrifying punishment on his former adviser. Prometheus was chained to the summit of a faraway mountain, and there each day a giant vulture tore out the captive's liver. Then each night the organ grew back and the grisly process continued to repeat itself.

The Romans Overhaul Their Pantheon

Such stories describing Zeus, Athena, and other powerful Greek gods steadily became known all across the ancient Mediterranean world. Among the many peoples who heard them were the Romans, who rose to prominence in Italy. The Greek deities and their

colorful tales turned out to be particularly fascinating to Rome's residents, in part because of the way the Romans initially viewed their own early gods. Before they came into close contact with Greek civilization in the last few centuries BCE, the Romans recognized simple, mostly formless nature spirits called numina. Each numen exerted influence over only a small, localized aspect of life. Flora, for instance, made flowers grow, Sylvanus protected woodcutters, and Janus guarded doorways.

Sylvanus

The early Roman numen, or nature spirit, who protected woodcutters

Unlike the Greek gods, most numina were not very powerful, although there were a few exceptions. For instance, the Romans had a story about a feat performed by Janus when, in the dim past, an enemy people attacked Rome. The invaders attempted to pass through a gate that led to the main town square. Because a gate is a kind of doorway, Janus held sway there, and he made the attackers pay dearly. According to the first-century-BCE Roman poet Ovid, the deity forced water from some local fountains to spurt out in "a sudden gush." Janus also injected hot "sulfur into the water channels, so that the boiling liquid might bar the way against [the invaders]." ⁸

Such displays of power were rare among the numina, who were not nearly as strong as Zeus and his Olympians. Along with the Greek gods' colorful personalities, this made these divinities very attractive to the Romans. So as the latter conquered the Greek lands and steadily absorbed Greek cultural ideas, they began to associate some of their numina with the more formidable Greek gods. In early Roman society, for example, Jupiter had been a simple sky spirit with modest powers. In Rome's overhauled pantheon, however, he was equated with the leading Greek deity, Zeus. Similarly, the humble Roman farming spirit Mars became the equivalent of the Greek war god Ares.

The Divine Stars of the Story

The Romans also absorbed the myths associated with the Greek divinities, so that, for instance, Jupiter inherited most of Zeus's

Athena's Birth Myth Captured in Art

Several ancient writers described the myth in which Athena sprang miraculously from her father's head. Of those literary accounts, the most often cited is the one penned by the seventh-century-BCE epic poet Hesiod in his *Theogony*. Greek painters and other artists also depicted the events of that tale, but most of those artworks long ago decayed and disappeared. Fortunately, the third-century-CE Greek orator Philostratus of Lemnos viewed and described in writing a now-lost painting of Athena's birth that was once on display in western Italy. According to Philostratus, the painting showed a crowd of deities gathered around their leader, Zeus. Those onlookers

shudder at the sight of Athena, who at this moment has just burst forth fully armed from the head of Zeus. [As] for the material of her panoply [armor and weapons], no one could guess it; for as many as are the colors of the rainbow [are] the colors of her armor. Hephaestus seems at a loss to know [how] her armor was born with her. Zeus breathes deeply with delight, like men who have undergone a great contest for a great prize, and he looks searchingly for his daughter, feeling pride in his offspring.

Philostratus the Elder, *Imagines*, trans. Arthur Fairbanks. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931, pp. 245, 247.

legends. Yet Roman writers did assign some new myths to their refurbished, more awe-inspiring gods. Often this was meant to justify Rome's rapid conquest of the known world. Such new Roman myths claimed that the gods had chosen the Romans to rule humanity forever, a destiny vividly described in the *Aeneid*. Penned by Ovid's contemporary, Virgil, it instantly became Rome's cherished national epic.

Many gods appear in the myths constituting that massive work, but Jupiter and his mate Juno are the divine stars of the story. In that tale, they both watched the Greek siege of Troy with great interest and noticed that when the city eventually fell, a Trojan prince, Aeneas, escaped. Jupiter decided to give that young man a fateful mission. Aeneas and his small band of followers were to sail to Italy and there establish the Roman race. In so doing, Jupiter said, they would fulfill

Juno

**Jupiter's divine wife and
a protector of women**

an ancient prophecy foretelling that Rome would someday rule the world.

To ensure that destiny came to pass, the chief god repeatedly aided Aeneas. When a fire was about to engulf the Trojan ships, for example, Jupiter whipped up a huge rainstorm that rapidly



A medieval Spanish painting depicts the scene from Virgil's Aeneid in which the goddess Juno asks the god of the winds to blow up a storm and thereby wreck the hero Aeneas's ships.

GODS AND CULTURE

Vesta and Female Chastity

In part because the Roman goddess Vesta was a virgin, she demanded that her priestesses—the renowned Vestal Virgins—be chaste, too. She and her myths, which dealt mainly with her purity, strongly influenced Roman social customs. Young Roman women were expected to refrain from sexual activities before marriage. The Romans believed that the purity Vesta promoted by example was a virtue that would benefit society as a whole. The reasoning behind that belief was built around a concept called *pudicitia*, loosely defined as “sexual loyalty” for the good of the Roman state. It was thought that when a young woman maintained sexual loyalty to her husband, and *only* her husband, the couple’s fertility, or chances of producing healthy children, would be significantly enhanced. That supposedly made Rome stronger and ensured both its survival and longevity. People commonly viewed society and the Roman state as the sum total of many patriotic families working together for the mutual good of all. Thus, just as it was seen as patriotic for young men to serve in the military and defend the state, it was equally patriotic for young women to be sexually loyal.

doused the flames. What frustrated both Jupiter and Aeneas, however, was that Juno opposed the Trojan expedition. She wanted her favorite city, Carthage (in North Africa), and not Rome, to end up achieving world dominance. Time after time, therefore, she tried to impede Aeneas’s progress.

Predictably, Juno was furious when the Trojans landed in western Italy. Soon afterward, when Aeneas sailed northward to the future site of Rome, the irate goddess sent Alecto, the flying spirit of anger, to sow hatred between the newcomers and local Latin-speaking tribes. Such efforts to stir up trouble ultimately failed, however. Aeneas soon married a Latin princess, Lavinia, and the couple founded the city of Lavinium, named for her. Over time, the union of the Latin and Trojan peoples gave rise to a new and supremely noble race—the Romans. In triumph, mighty Jupiter announced that he hereby granted the Romans “dominion without end.” They were, he ordained, “the master race, the wearers of the toga. So it is willed!”⁹

SOURCE NOTES

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