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# Gods and Goddesses in Greek Mythology

Don Nardo

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# Ancient Greece (Circa 500 BCE)





# Introduction



## Tales of Gods Walking on Earth

**I**t was said that Cadmus, the founder and first ruler of the ancient Greek kingdom of Thebes, had an attractive, well-mannered daughter named Semele. She managed to avoid any sort of trouble throughout her teenage years. But when she was in her twenties she met a handsome man who said he was a well-to-do local merchant, and Semele fell in love with him. She also shared his bed for several months, yet he did not ask her to marry him. So one day she pointedly asked if he really loved her.

The merchant replied that he loved Semele as much as was possible under the circumstances. Thinking this a strange answer, she demanded to know what circumstances he was referring to. It was then that he told her that he was not actually a merchant but rather Zeus, leader of the gods worshipped by all Greeks. She had heard stories about that deity having affairs with mortal, or human, women, and she felt honored that he had chosen her. She was even happier when, shortly after this encounter, she learned that she was carrying his child.

All may have turned out well for Semele had it not been for Zeus's divine sister and wife, Hera. She was extremely jealous of the women—both humans and gods—whom her husband bedded and decided to punish Semele and her unborn child for the affair. Hera disguised herself as an old woman and pretended to become friendly with the Theban princess. When Semele unwittingly told her that she was seeing Zeus, the “old woman” suggested that maybe he was *not*



## Myth-Tellers' Corner: Herodotus

Born in about 484 BCE, Herodotus wrote the world's first-known modern-style history book. Although he was a historian by trade, and therefore tried to deal with facts rather than tall tales, his text does contain references to and summaries of several myths. Herodotus traveled widely throughout the Mediterranean world to collect information for his book, and his descriptions of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia during his time are priceless today.

To his credit, Herodotus did not claim that any of the myths he cited were true. Yet he did admit his belief that the gods existed and intervened in human affairs. "Many things make it plain to me," he writes, "that the hand of God is active in human affairs." In addition to the story of the runner Phidippides's meeting with the god Pan and various episodes from the *Argonautica*, Herodotus wrote about the abduction of Helen and other events from the mythical Trojan War; the exploits of Cadmus, the legendary founder of Thebes; and how the Cretan ruler King Minos kept a flesh-eating monster, the Minotaur, in a maze beneath his palace. Also, Herodotus said, Minos was descended from Europa, a maiden whom the god Zeus, disguised as a bull, carried from Palestine to Crete. Thus, although Herodotus did not necessarily believe that the myths he mentioned actually occurred, he provided details that supplemented the writings of the leading ancient myth-tellers, like Homer and Hesiod.

Herodotus, *Histories*. Trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt. New York: Penguin, 1996, p. 116.

forge." Hephaestos was able to punish his wife and her lover, Homer adds, because "the alert sun-god Helios had tipped him off."<sup>18</sup>

Another dweller of the sky prominent in the Greek myths was Boreas, the purple-winged deity of the north wind. He also served as the god of winter; during January and February he used his icy breath to cool the air across the known world. In one of his myths he mar-

ried Oreithyia, daughter of Athens's early ruler Erechtheus. Among their offspring were Chione, the female deity of snow, and the winged twin warriors Calais and Zetes, two of Jason's Argonauts. (Because they could fly, the brothers chased away the Harpies, hideous winged monsters who had been terrorizing an old man the Argonauts encountered.)

## Divine Nike, Bringer of Victory

Still another sky deity, Nike, started out as one of four divine warriors who guarded Zeus's splendid throne. But over time she emerged as the preeminent Greek goddess of victory. After that, she long remained an invisible but vital presence in Greek life. Indeed, in a sense the classical

*Nike, the goddess of victory, was called upon to help Greek warriors defeat their enemies in battle. In statues and other depictions of the goddess, she typically holds a laurel wreath, the symbol bestowed upon Greeks who won military victories or other nonmilitary contests.*

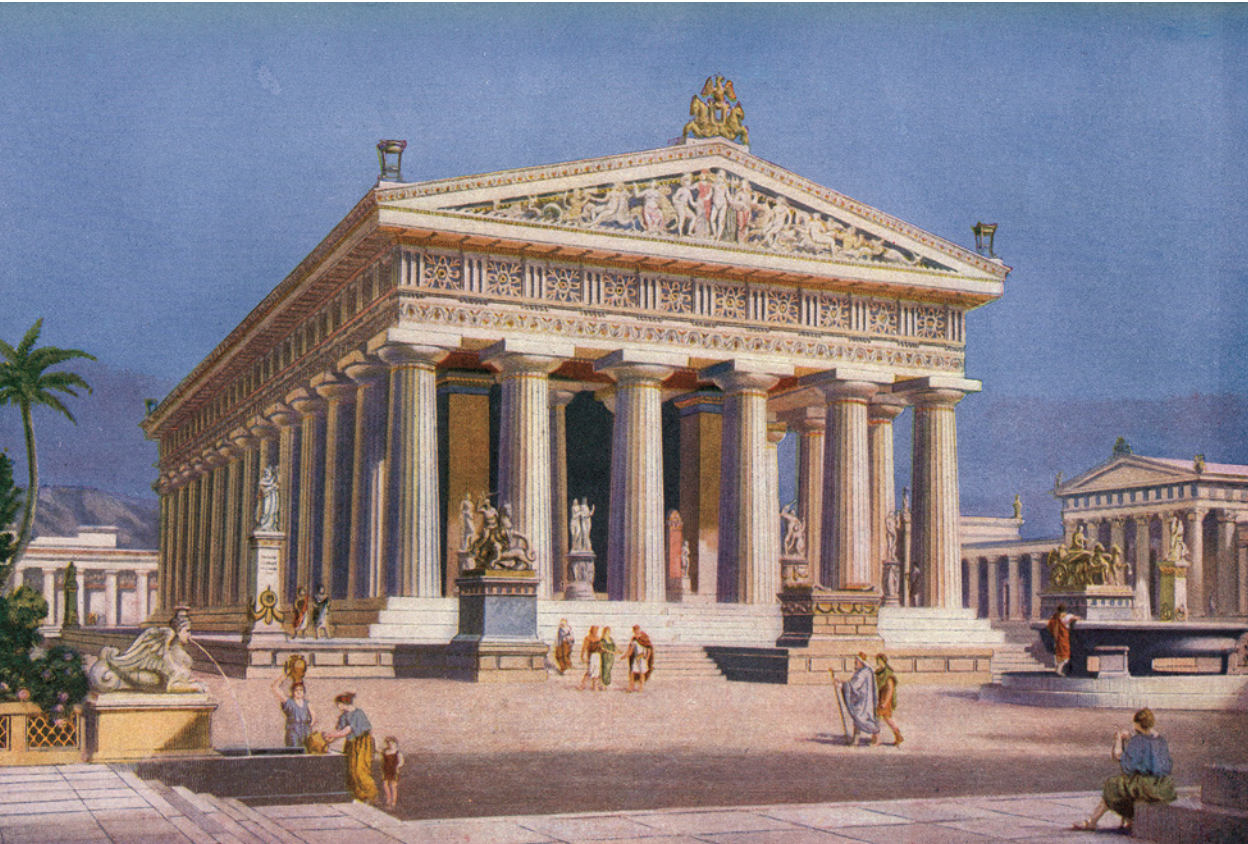


water trade route, it was only natural to have the lord of the seas as its patron. That god was thought to watch over the many Corinthian merchant ships that sailed off, bound for distant ports throughout the Mediterranean and Black Seas.

People thought it was no accident, therefore, that Corinth became one of Greece's premiere maritime and commercial powers during the classical period. Imported products from hundreds of cities—both Greek and non-Greek—poured into the Corinthian agora, its central marketplace, where thousands of people shopped daily. Every city-state had its own agora. But Corinth's was one of the two or three largest in the Greek-speaking world, a reflection of the city's remarkable prosperity.

To thank Poseidon for making that success possible, the Corinthians erected a massive temple to him in the midst of the urban center overlooking the isthmus. Meanwhile, the Athenians built temples to

*The Temple of Poseidon at Isthmia was dedicated to the sea god who both symbolized and watched over the maritime power of the Corinthians. The original temple was built in the seventh century BCE. It was rebuilt and expanded after a fire destroyed the structure in 470 BCE.*





their own divine patron, Athena, a few of which are today the most renowned in Greece. The impulse to create those religious structures, like many other aspects of Greek life, was inspired by myths. One ancient tale in particular strongly influenced the complex evolution of temple building on Athens's Acropolis.

At some point during the Age of Heroes, the story went, Athena produced a loud, piercing cry that surprised and alarmed the town's inhabitants. It became clear that she was calling for their attention, for a few seconds later she sent an object hurtling downward from her vantage in the sky. It landed on the Acropolis's north side. When the leading elders investigated, they found that the object was a simple but beautiful wooden statue of the goddess. Incredibly, it had not been damaged by the impact.

It was no accident that Athena had dropped her divine image on that particular spot, the Athenians decided. The statue was clearly intended to be worshipped. So that spot subsequently became the sacred site of a long succession of temples in which the Athenians kept and venerated the blessed statue. Each of those structures bore the name Erechtheum, after Erechtheus. In mythology, his mother was the so-called Earth Mother—the goddess Gaea—but Athena raised him as her own son and he became a sort of attendant to her.

## WORD ORIGINS

### agora

In ancient Greece: a city's often-crowded marketplace.

In modern life: agoraphobia, meaning fear of being in open or crowded places.

## Athena's Temples

The temples named for Erechtheus were not the only ones constructed on the Acropolis in honor of Athena. During the late 500s BCE the Athenians built one considerably larger than the typical Erechtheum, which was fairly modest in size. The new building was dubbed the Temple of Athena Polias to celebrate her status as the city's protector. Its length was about 100 Attic (Athenian) feet, so people also referred to it as the Hecatompedon, or "Hundred-Footer." (Because a modern English foot is slightly longer than an Attic foot, the structure was about 110 modern feet, or 34 meters, long.)



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