

THE GREEK GODS

GODS AND GODDESSES

The ancient Greeks believed in a wide variety of gods and goddesses. The twelve Olympians are the major deities in the Greek pantheon and consisted of Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Demeter, Athena, Apollo, Artemis, Ares, Aphrodite, Hephaestus, Hermes, and either Hestia or Dionysus. These gods ruled over the known universe as well as a host of lesser gods, demi gods, spirits, fantastic beasts and humans.

The gods were thought to have made their home on Mount Olympus, but worship of gods and goddesses took place in formal sanctuaries which usually contained a temple. Gods were also worshiped in sacred places or shrines in the countryside; at home; in the city; or as needed.

This world, where all gods meddled incessantly in the lives of mortals, and were often petty and jealous, taking out their wrath on mortals who had challenged or slighted them in some way - is a world worth getting to know!



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ZEUS

The most powerful of the Pantheon, Zeus was the supreme ruler and Lord of the Sky, whose main weapon, the thunderbolt, was given to him by the Cyclopes in thanks for his assistance in freeing them from Tartarus. In addition to being King of Olympus and supreme ruler of the gods, he had a series of other roles that emphasised different aspects of his authority. Zeus Horkios, for example, identifies Zeus in his role as the upholder of oaths; and Zeus Xenios was the patron of hospitality and guests.

Zeus was the father of innumerable children, many of which were gods, demigods and heroes.

His symbols were the eagle and the oak. His Oracle was at Dodona, and priests would interpret the rustling of oak leaves to learn his will.



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HERA

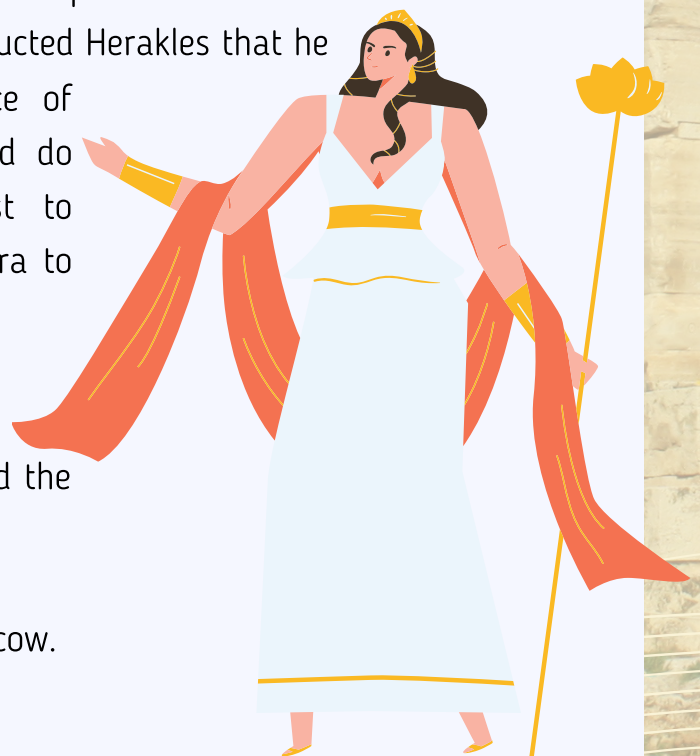
Hera was the Queen of the gods, wife and sister to Zeus, and the goddess of marriage, women, the sky and the stars of heaven. She was usually depicted wearing a crown and holding a royal, lotus-tipped sceptre.

A jealous woman, and angry at her husband's many infidelities, she often made the life of Zeus' offsprings very difficult. Hera's continued persecution of Herakles is a good example of this.

During Herakles' infancy, Hera sent snakes into his crib. Already an exceptional child however, Herakles strangled the snakes, thwarting her plan. Undeterred by this, she waited until Herakles was a man, married with children. Hera drove Herakles into a fit of madness compelling him to kill his entire family. Once he awoke from this madness, Herakles appealed to the Oracle of Delphi in order to find out how to redeem himself from his sins. The Oracle instructed Herakles that he would have to put himself into the service of Eurystheus, King of Argos, for 10 years and do whatever was asked of him. Unbeknownst to Herakles, the Oracle had been directed by Hera to further punish, and potentially kill, Herakles.

In the story of the Quest for the Golden Fleece, she is portrayed as the protector of heroes and the inspirer of heroic deeds.

Her sacred symbols were the peacock and the cow.



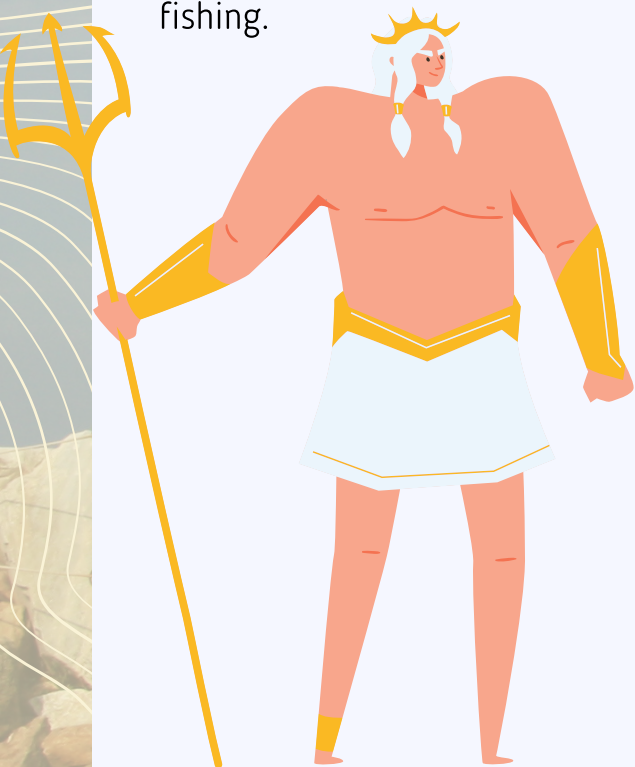
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POSEIDON

Poseidon was the Olympian god of the sea, earthquakes, floods, drought and horses. This last attribution was a result of a contest he entered into with Athena to determine who would name the capital of Attica. The gods decided that the one to create the most useful gift should be the one to give their name to the city.

To win the favour of the people, Poseidon created the first horse for them, however the King of Athens refused the prize, instead choosing Athena's gift of the first olive tree. In his fury, Poseidon afflicted the land with drought!

Poseidon's most distinctive attribute was his three pronged trident. It was said to be the way he controlled the sea; created water sources and earthquakes; and brought forth storms. Tridents with their barbed spikes were, and continue to be, used for fishing.



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HADES

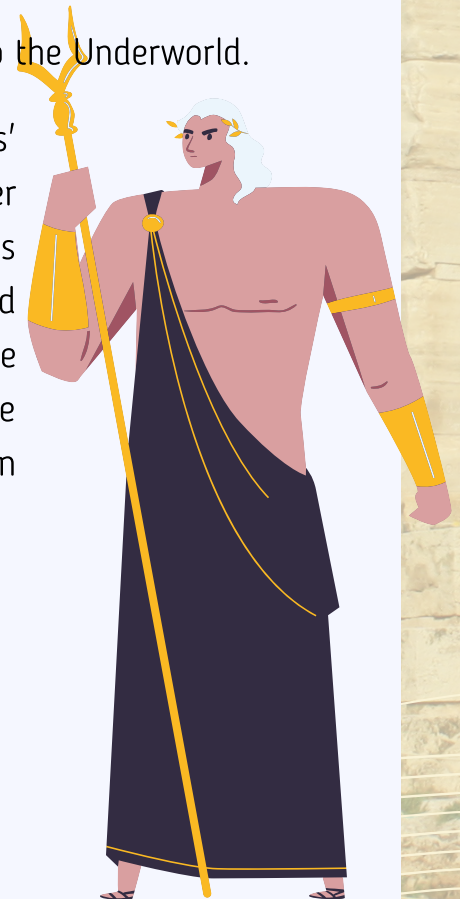
Hades was the third brother of Zeus and Poseidon and, when they three drew straws to see who would have control over which domain, Hades the underworld and the rule over the dead. Although he ruled over the dead, he was not Death himself; that role went to Thanatos.

Hades rarely left the Underworld and was not considered a welcome visitor when he did. He was not an evil or terrible god, only stern and unpitying.

He wore a cap or a helmet that made whoever wore it invisible.

He is most famous for abducting Persephone and taking her to the Underworld.

Persephone's mother, the goddess Demeter and one of Hades' sisters, neglected her duties following the abduction of her daughter and crops began to fail. Zeus, realising that if this continued it would result in a lot of human death, intervened and Persephone was returned to Demeter. However, while she was in the Underworld, Persephone swallowed pomegranate seeds which meant that she would spend part of the year in the Underworld with her husband, Hades, and part on earth.



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DEMETER

Demeter was the Olympian goddess of the harvest and agriculture; she oversaw grains and the fertility of the land. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, she is known as the Corn-Mother, who blessed the harvesters and was the giver of grains. Her greatest gift to humanity was agriculture and, in particular, cereals.

She and her daughter, Persephone, were the two central figures of the Eleusinian Mysteries, an annual initiation based on an old agrarian cult. The Mysteries focused on and represented the abduction of Persephone by Hades, god of the Underworld, in three phases: the descent, the search and the ascent, with emphasis on the ascent.

When Persephone was abducted by Hades, Demeter, lost in sorrow and anger, made the world barren and nothing grew from the land. With humanity facing famine and extinction, Zeus intervened and told Hades he must relinquish Persephone. Upon being reunited with her daughter, Demeter made the lands fruitful once more.

Her symbol is the poppy.



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HESTIA

Hestia was the goddess of the hearth and the symbol of the home. Newborns would be carried around the hearth so that they could be accepted into the family. She is sometimes considered to be one of the twelve Olympians, although the position is somewhat shared with Dionysus.

Hestia plays no role in myths, unlike the other gods, and doesn't have a very distinct personality. Meals were begun and ended with an offering to her and a public hearth sacred to Hestia was located in each Greek city - the fire in this sacred hearth was never allowed to go out. When colonies were founded, the colonists would take fire from the hearth of the mother-city and use it to kindle the fire in the new hearth.

In ancient Rome, Hestia was known as Vesta, her fire was constantly maintained by six priestesses known as 'Vestals' - if the fire ever went out, then it signified the goddess abandoning the protection of the city.



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ATHENA

Athena was the goddess of wisdom, military victory, the defence of towns, heroic endeavour, weaving, pottery and other crafts. According to the poet Hesiod, on the advice of Gaea and Uranus, Zeus swallowed his first wife, Metis whole to prevent her from giving birth to a child who could challenge his power. Instead, Athena burst fully formed from Zeus' head clad in her armour. In other versions, she had no mother at all and sprung from Zeus' head when Hephaestus used his axe to split it open to help alleviate Zeus' terrible headache.

As the wise goddess of warfare, she was the protectress of all heroes who were distinguished for shrewdness and pragmatism, as well as for their strength and valour such as Heracles, Perseus, Bellerophon, Achilles, Diomedes, and Odysseus.

Her sacred symbols were the olive tree and the owl.



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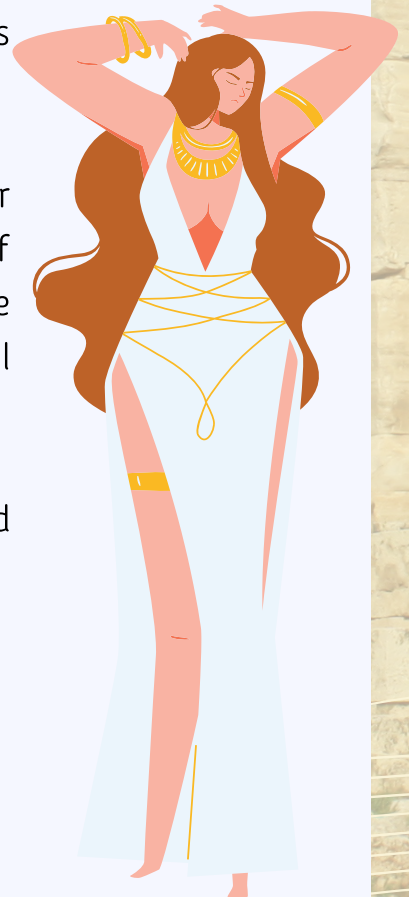
APHRODITE

Aphrodite was the goddess of love, beauty, pleasure and procreation. Her origin story varies, in Homer's *Iliad*, she is the daughter of Zeus and Dione, but the best known asserts that she was born from the sea foam, *aphros*, off the coast of Cyprus. When she came ashore, all the gods were captivated by her beauty and each wanted her for a wife.

Despite fierce competition Aphrodite was given in marriage to the smith Hephaestus, god of metallurgy and fire, in payment for release of Hera. This was not an ideal match, and Aphrodite had numerous affairs, most notably with Hermes, Dionysus, Poseidon, Adonis and Ares (to whom she had three children). According to Homer, this last affair ended Aphrodite's marriage with Hephaestus demanding a divorce.

Aphrodite is also known for helping instigate the Trojan War when she, Athena and Hera asked Paris which of the three of them were most beautiful, with each offering him a prize if he picked them. Aphrodite offered to give him the most beautiful woman in the world (Helen) - and Paris chose Aphrodite.

Her sacred symbols were the myrtle tree and the dove, and sometimes the sparrow and swan.



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HEPHAESTUS

Hephaestus was the god of fire, metalwork, forges, blacksmiths, carpenters, artisans and volcanoes. He is said to be either the son of Zeus and Hera or Hera alone, who bore him in retaliation of Zeus bearing Athena. Of all of the Olympians, he was the only one said to be ugly and also lame.

In some accounts, either Zeus or Hera threw him off of Olympus. Hera threw him off once she saw what she had given birth to a less than perfect baby, while Zeus threw him off when Hephaestus came to Hera's defence.

Hephaestus was the smith and armorer of the gods and was honoured for his craft and skills. It was he who made Hermes' winged sandals.

His symbols were the hammer, anvil and tongs.



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A R E S

Ares was the god of war, battle-lust and courage. In contrast to his half-sister Athena, he represents the violent physical aspects of war. Ares delighted in the tumult and confusion of battle, and revelled in death and destruction. As a result, he was disliked by almost all the gods, including his parents, Zeus and Hera.

Worship of Ares was relatively uncommon in ancient Greece, but when cult sites and temples were dedicated to Ares they were usually located outside the city walls, possibly to stop enemies approaching. He was more so a symbol of war rather than a distinct personality like the other gods.

Ares was thought to dwell in Thrace, considered by the Greeks to be a warlike state, and he was particularly esteemed in Sparta with its strong militaristic culture.

His symbols were the vulture and dog.



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APOLLO

Apollo was the son of Zeus and Leto and the twin brother to the goddess Artemis. He was the god of music, archery, dance, prophecy, poetry, diseases, and the Sun. He was seen as the most beautiful and the "most Greek of all the gods".

Apollo was the patron god of Delphi and it was here that his Oracle was located. It was considered to be the centre of the world and pilgrims would come from all over to consult the Oracle over their fate.

He was associated with both medicine and healing, being capable of both delivering people from illness and bringing on plague. Apollo is also said to have invented string music and is commonly depicted with a lyre.

His sacred symbols were the laurel tree, the dolphin and the crow.



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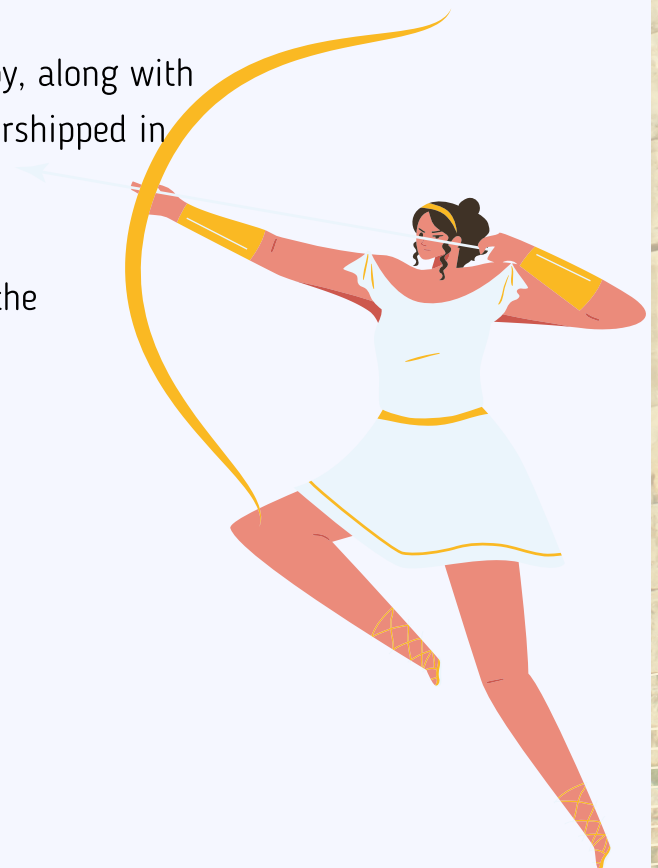
ARTEMIS

Artemis was the daughter of Zeus and Leto and the twin sister of the god Apollo. Artemis was the lady of wild things, the goddess of the hunt, wilderness, wild animals and the Moon, and was the protector of young girls.

Artemis features in a number of stories and is associated with many figures. Her hunting companion Orion was killed either by her or Gaia and was then placed in the heavens as a constellation. In some versions she sends a wild boar after Adonis when he boasts of being a better hunter than her, while in others she kills him in retaliation for the death of Hippolytus. When the hunter Actaeon saw her bathing, she turned him into a stag and had him devoured by his own hunting dogs.

During the Trojan War, Artemis sided with Troy, along with her mother and brother, as she was widely worshipped in the city.

Her sacred symbols were the bow and arrow, the cypress tree and deer.



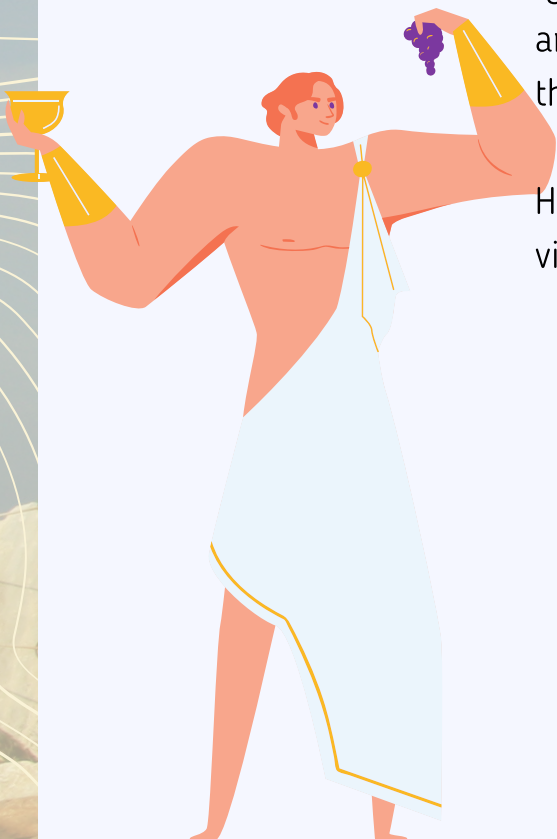
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DIONYSUS

Dionysus was the god of wine, vegetation, pleasure, festivity, theatre, madness and wild frenzy. Dionysus was born to the mortal Semele after an illicit affair with Zeus. Hera, enraged by Zeus' infidelity sought to destroy any remnants of the affair. Zeus ordered Hermes, his messenger, to hide the newborn from his jealous wife by taking him to live with the mountain nymphs. Under their care, the infant Dionysus grew to maturity.

The female followers of Dionysus were known as Maenads, from the Greek maenades, meaning mad or demented. During the rites of Dionysus, Maenads were inspired to a state of ecstatic frenzy through a combination of dancing and intoxication. While under the god's influence they roamed mountains and forests and were supposed to have unusual strength, including the ability to tear animals or people to pieces.

His sacred symbols were the *thyrsus* (a fennel staff), vines and goats.



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HERMES

Hermes was the son of Zeus and Maia, a daughter of Atlas. He was the herald of the gods and the protector of traders, human heralds, thieves, travellers and merchants. He was the shrewdest and most cunning of the gods and was also the guide of the dead, leading souls to the afterlife.

Hermes invented the lyre and gave it to Apollo, in forgiveness for stealing Apollo's herd. He appears most often in the myths compared to the other gods.

His sacred symbols were the palm tree and goat.

