Introduction to Greek Myth

KEY TOPICS/THMES

An integral component of ancient Greek religious, political, and social culture, Greek myth originated in anonymous storytellers who created tales about gods and heroes that were transmitted orally for many generations before being crystallized in written form. The oldest surviving myths, from the Archaic period, are preserved in the epic poems of Homer and Hesiod (mid-eighth to early seventh centuries B.C.), who portrayed the gods as resembling idealized human beings in appearance, psychology, and behavior. Paralleling human social organization, the Homeric deities constitute a multigenerational family, headed by Zeus, king of the Olympian gods. The Athenian dramas of the Classical period (fifth century B.C.), a second major source of myth, similarly emphasize the distinctive qualities of anthropomorphism, humanism, competitiveness, and individuality. A fluid synthesis of ancient Near Eastern and Indo-European Bronze Age elements that evolved into disparate traditions during the Mycenaean, Archaic, and Classical periods of Greek history, Greek myths were further modified by Roman authors, who typically adapted them for political and didactic purposes.

Almost twenty-five hundred years ago, the people of Athens built a new marble temple to honor Athene [uh-THEE-nuh], the goddess of wisdom after whom their city was named. Dedicated to Athene Parthenos (the virgin), the Parthenon (Figure 1-1) was designed to house a colossal statue of Athene by the sculptor Phidias. Phidias also decorated the temple’s two pediments, triangular gables under its peaked roof, with sculptures representing key scenes from Athene’s myth.

The east pediment, over the Parthenon’s main entrance, depicted one of the crucial moments in Greek myth—the birth of Athene from Zeus, king of the gods. A
modern reconstruction of this scene shows an enthroned Zeus contemplating the daughter who has just sprung, clutching a warrior's spear and shield, from his head metal crafts, Hephaestus [hee-FES-tus], who recoils from the ax blow he has boldly Zeus's right is his wife and sister, Hera [HEE-ra], who keenly observes her husband's latest display of power—his usurpation of the female's reproductive functions.

Although Athene is born from the male rather than the female parent, myth provides her with a mother of sorts, the goddess Metis, an embodiment of cunning intelligence who was Zeus's first wife. When Metis was already pregnant with Athene, Zeus, fearing fulfillment of the prophecy that she would eventually bear his own child, swallowed her. Assimilating Metis's intelligence into his own nature, Zeus then produced from his own body a child manifesting divine wisdom, a powerful daughter who supports her father's rule. Athene is not only Zeus's wise counselor, she is also the goddess of victory in war, the divine being who triumphs through clever strategy and ingenious planning (Figure 1-3).

Despite his position as king of the gods, Zeus's anxiety about being replaced by a younger, stronger rival is well founded, for at the time of Athene's birth Zeus only recently had overthrown an older generation of gods, the giant Titans, who had been led by Zeus's father, Cronus. (See Chapter 3 for Hesiod's account of the older deities who preceded Zeus as rulers of the universe.) Myth also credits Zeus with giving birth to a second child, his son Dionysus [dee-oh-NYE-tus], god of wine, intoxication, and emotional freedom (Figure 1-4). In contrast to Athene, who is literally Zeus's brainchild, a rational force for civilized

![FIGURE 1-1 A Drawing of the Parthenon and Associated Structures on the Acropolis. The conviction that the goddess Athene presided over and defended their city inspired the Athenians of the mid-fifth century B.C. to create an extraordinary work of classical architecture, the temple dedicated to Athene Parthenos (the Virgin).](image)

![FIGURE 1-2 The Birth of Athene. In this modern reconstruction of the Parthenon's east pediment, the central figures of Zeus and Athene confront each other immediately after Athene, bearing a warrior's spear and shield, has burst from her father's head. Zeus's entire Olympian family has gathered to witness the prodigy, including his disapproving wife Hera, who sits holding a royal scepter, indicating her position as queen of heaven. Partly visible behind Athene's shield is the figure of Hephaestus, god of fire and the forge, who has just split Zeus's skull with his ax and now appears torn between his satisfaction at having struck Zeus and his fear of Zeus's reprisal. The scene is rife with family resentments: Hera is outraged by her husband's preemption of her maternal function. According to Hesiod, she, without male aid, gave birth to Hephaestus, who is entirely her son and who typically takes his mother's part in her endless quarrels with Zeus. To the viewer's right is the seated figure of Zeus's powerful brother Poseidon, god of sea and earthquakes. At the extreme right: Apollo, god of light and prophecy, appears with his lyre, a musical instrument symbolizing his patronage of music, harmony, and the creative intellect. (Acropolis Museum, Athens)](image)

![FIGURE 1-3 A Drawing of the Madrid Patera. This circular bas-relief, thought to depict the scene of Athene's birth that Pheidias created for the Parthenon's east pediment, shows Hephaestus recoiling behind Zeus's throne and Athene being crowned by the winged figure of Nike (Victory). As defender of the polis (city-state), Athene is also goddess of military victory through intelligent planning and strategy. Note that Zeus and Athene meet each other's gaze at the same eye level. The king of the universe is ensnared by the daughter he has just produced—a brilliant image of the divine consciousness. For the Athenians, Zeus's unique relationship to Athene enhanced their prestige: the chief god's firstborn child was also their special protector and patron. (Archaeological Museum, Madrid)](image)
order, Dionysus represents the nonrational forces of both physical nature and human emotion. Derived not from Zeus's head but from his thigh, he is a god who combines joyous sensuality with amoral aggression (see Chapters 8 and 17). As a son of Zeus, Dionysus is half-brother not only to Athene but also to Zeus's other divine offspring, including Apollo, who, like Athene, exemplifies the abstract intellect. A god of light, health, prophecy, and the creative arts, Apollo also presents a striking contrast to the emotional extremes of Dionysus (see Chapters 2 and 8).

These two images of Athene and Dionysus reveal much about Greek myth's preoccupation with the gods' complex, often contradictory, natures. That a single deity can produce, by himself, two such different offspring—a virgin goddess of form—suggests myth's power to integrate polar opposites. Among its many functions, myth composes and defines tensions such as those between Athene's cerebral control and Dionysus's wild abandon, recognizing that these seemingly irreconcilable opposites express the contradictions and conflicts inherent in human concept of the divine.

Greek Religion and the Nature of the Divine

The Parthenon sculptures depicting Athene's miraculous entrance into the world offer a good introduction to some distinctive characteristics of Greek myth, including its relationship to ancient Greek religion. For the Greeks, religion was very different from modern concepts of it. The Greeks had no sacred texts, such as the Judeo-Christian Bible or Islamic Qur'an (Koran), that purported to reveal ultimate truth, nor was it expressed in creeds or doctrines that officially articu-

lated essential beliefs about the gods. Instead of utilizing a professional clergy or a dominant class of hereditary priests—in most cases, ordinary individuals performed the necessary rites and sacrifices—the Greeks acted out their sense of the numinous, the perceived experience of divine or sacred forces present in the world, by honoring ta hiera, "holy things." Operating without a supernatural revelation of the divine will, such as the Torah (Divine Instruction) that Israel's God disclosed to Moses at Mount Sinai, the Greeks communed with numinous entities through ritual and other time-honored practices. They learned of "holy things" through witnessing or participating in customary rites at home and at public festivals, as well as through hearing stories about the gods—myths that were also vividly rendered in the paintings, sculpture, architecture, and poetry that were part of their daily environment.

Phidias's representation of Athene's birth captures a climactic moment in the history of the cosmos, the Greek term denoting a stable, harmonious world order. The goddess's sudden appearance, leaping fully armed from Zeus's head, is a sacred event, a prodigy to which all the major gods are pictured as witnesses (Figure 1-5).

FIGURE 1-5 A Drawing of Phidias's Athene Parthenos. The Parthenon was built to house a cult statue of Athene that the sculptor Phidias created in ivory and gold. Approximately thirty-seven feet high, Phidias's rendition of Zeus's most formidable child, an embodiment of intellect and martial prowess, dominates the temple's lavish marble interior.
For the Greeks, it is an event of universal significance, causing heaven and earth to tremble and run:

Great Olympus itself [the mountain home of the gods] started to reel,
Dazed by the might of the gray-eyed newcomer, and earth all around
Cried out in fear, while the sea heaved, throwing up
Purple billows and spewing forth sudden foam.

The brilliant son of Hyperion [Helios, driver of the sun's chariot] halted his swift-footed horses,
Forgotten in time...

—Homeric Hymn to Athene, trans. Thelma Sargont

Athene's arrival temporarily suspends the normal operations of nature—the earth swells aloud, the sea roars in agitation, and the sun pauses in its orbit, struck with wonder at what the gods have brought forth.

In Phidias's artistic re-creation of this divine mystery, several distinctive aspects of Greek religion stand out. The gods are not one, but many; they have human shape and form, and they—as brothers, sisters, wives, children, or mistresses of Zeus—constitute a family. Whereas modern Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are characterized by monotheism, belief in one God, ancient religions (excepting that of Israel) embraced polytheism, belief in a multiplicity of gods. The monotheistic (all-powerful, omniscient, omnipresent everywhere) by contrast, Zeus and his fellow Olympians, named for their dwelling place but not eternal. As the myth of Athene's birth demonstrates, they did not always exist. Because Olympian rule has a beginning in time, it may also come to an end, eventually that on occasion causes Zeus some worry.

In some myths, the gods are also restricted by limited knowledge: at least in his reign, Zeus cannot perceive other gods' thoughts, nor can he always see clearly into the future (see Zeus's conflict with Prometheus in Chapter 4). Although poets clearly liquid called ichor [IH-koahr], despite their superhuman strength, some gods confine in the Underworld. They can also be misted or deceived, as when Hera beguiles Zeus when Hefestus tricks Her. (see Chapter 6).

Social and Political Functions of Myth

Although myth is closely related to Greek religion, it also serves social and political functions, as exemplified in the tradition explaining how the city of Athens took habitants became the Athenians, identified as the special people of Athens, was the subject of the Parthenon's west pediment. At this end of the temple, Phidias carved [poh-SYE-duhn], god of the sea and earthquakes, for the city's allegiance. In this competition for divine patronage, Athene offered the gift of a domestic olive tree, the fruit and oil of which eventually became the city's chief exports and source of economic prosperity, whereas Poseidon, somewhat cluelessly, produced only a saltwater spring. When the citizens' vote went to Athene, an angry Poseidon retaliated by flooding the city.

Besides granting Athens a unique relationship to the firstborn child of Greece's chief god, this tradition also explains why Athens, even after it became the world's first democracy, denied suffrage to its women. According to a late version of the myth recounted by the Christian theologian Augustine (fifth century a.d.), Athene triumphed over Poseidon by a single vote—at that of a woman [Augustine, City of God, Book 18, Chapter 9, citing the Roman writer Varro, c. 116–27 B.C. as his source]. While retaining Athene as their divine patron, the males Athenians attempted to assuage Poseidon's wrath by punishing the women, depriving them of their right to vote, to pass on their names to their own children, or even to be called Athenians.

Inherently paradoxical, this myth, establishing the foundation or justification for a restrictive political policy, credits women for making Athens the favorite city of a powerful goddess but at the same time blames them for a male god's violent behavior and strips them of their former participation in the democratic process.

A second myth linking Zeus's immortal daughter to Athenian origins is even more paradoxical. According to this tradition, Athene can remain perpetually virgin, in a sense, become the mother of one of the city's earliest rulers and hence a divine ancestor of the Athenian people. As austere and emotionally remote as she is wise and beautiful, Athene is nonetheless—on one recorded occasion only—the unwavering object of sexual desire—oddlly enough, that of the same god whose. As Phidias's portrait brought her into the world. While visiting Hephaestus's forge to order new weapons, Athene unexpectedly finds herself feeding off the god's passionate advances. During the struggle, Hephaestus ejaculates on Athene's thigh. Perhaps because Hephaestus's attempted rape is both clumsy and unsuccessful, Athene behaves with remarkable coolness; she neither recriminates nor plots revenge. Instead, she calmly takes a wool cloth to wipe the semen from her thigh and tosses the moist rag aside.

Because a god's seed always bears fruit, when the eneminated wool falls on Mother Earth, a child, Erichthonius, is born. Accepting responsibility for the baby, Athene places Erichthonius in a basket and entrusts his care to the daughters of Cecrops, the mythical first king of Athens. Ignoring Athene's instructions, the young women look into the basket and are driven insane by the sight: either Erichthonius has the lower body of a serpent, a characteristic of earth's offspring, or he is guarded by frightening snakes. Athene then takes Erichthonius to her sacred precincts atop the Acropolis (the steep hill upon which the Parthenon and other public buildings stood), where he grows up to become Athens' king. Under Athene's guidance, Erichthonius is said to have invented the first four-horse chariot and founded the Panathenaea [pan-ath-uh-NEE-uh], an annual festival held in the goddess's honor. Other myths ascribe these accomplishments to Erechtheus [e-REK-thee-uh], another mythic ruler who is variously identified as the son or grandson of Erichthonius. The Erechtheum, a small temple famous for its porch roof supported by statues of young maidens, was built to accommodate Poseidon's salty spring, Athene's original olive tree, and the oldest wooden statue of the goddess. It still stands near the Parthenon.
Athene's contributions to the Athenian polis (city-state) include the establishment of a legal system to try cases of homicide, the inauguration of which is dramatized in Aeschylus's play the *Eumenides* (see Chapter 15). In inaugurating the rule of law to replace earlier chaotic practices of personal vengeance, Athene unequivocally champions the *cause of civic order and harmony*. In casting her vote to break a deadlock in favor of a young man accused (rightfully) of murdering his mother, Athene announces that she, born without a mother, inevitably takes the male role in any controversy between the sexes, a position that helps to reinforce the Athenian social hierarchy in which women are subordinate to men. Aeschylus’s drama, which raises crucial political and social issues embodied in a male-female conflict, is but one example of the many ways in which Greek myth explores the polarities of existence in terms of gender conflict. For the Greeks, some of their deepest concerns about human nature and society are expressed in myths that present male and female figures locked in constant struggle (see the myths of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra in Chapter 15 and of Jason and Medea in Chapter 17).

Although myth intimately associates Athene with her beloved Athens, which she defends against foreign invaders such as the all-female army of Amazons and other representatives of barbarism, she was also worshiped throughout Greece. We encounter the goddess in almost every tale of heroic myth, whatever the hero’s name and stage of development. The early king of Athens (see Chapter 10). An important force in the *Iliad*, she is also the central deity in the *Odyssey* of Homer's epic of the Greek war against Troy, she is also the central deity in the *Odyssey*. (Ulysses) (see Chapter 13).

**Anthropomorphism**

In both art and literature, the Greek gods resemble supremely privileged human beings, only incomparably stronger, more beautiful, and more powerful, blessedly immune to sickness, old age, or death. When not engaged in manipulating human beings for their own purposes, the Olympians frequently gather at heavenly banquets, where they dine on ambrosia and drink nectar, food that sustains their perpetual youthfulness.

Because they resemble humans not only physically but also psychologically, the gods bear character flaws typical of ordinary mortals, engaging in conspiracies and competitions for power and prestige, as well as sexual escapades of every description. Unlike the Judeo-Christian God, they do not jealously demand to be worshiped exclusively; they do, however, punish and destroy mortals who deny them their due recognition, honor, and sacrifice. They typically favor individuals who, like Odysseus, properly acknowledge their importance by regularly offering prayers and animal sacrifices.

*The Divine Family*

Just as the Greeks visualized the gods in their own idealized image and built earthly homes for them, so they ascribed to them the basic unit of their own social structure—the family. In Greek myth, all the gods are related, descending from the original divine couple Gaia (the earth) and Uranus (the sky). (See Hesiod's *Theogony* in Chapter 3 for a genealogy of the Olympian family.) A grandson of Gaia and Uranus, Zeus heads a divine patriarchal family, a social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in a clan or family and a sociopolitical arrangement in which male leadership and values dominate. Wielding the thunderbolt to enforce his will, Zeus brooks no challenge to his supreme authority; he presides over the gods' councils and demands strict obedience from his sometimes fractious Olympian family. Although Zeus firmly maintains control of the universe, both material and spiritual, he shares his administration with other family members, assigning each of his siblings and divine children some function or sphere of activity.

*The emotional ties, tensions, hostilities, and rivalries inherent in intergenerational human families, with older and younger generations often in conflict, characterize Zeus's Olympian household. Zeus's untamed sexual appetite, which drives him to begot children by mothers both human and divine, and Hera's consequent jealous rages add to the family's psychological stress. (See Chapters 3 and 6 for a discussion of some myths relating to the principal members of the Olympian family of Zeus.)*

Although the Greeks honored their gods as potent forces that could either help or destroy them, they also found much to laugh at in their myths' projection of human foibles and family squabbles onto the divine realm. In the hands of some Greek poets, Zeus's adulteries, Hera's devious schemes, and Hephaestus's physical clumsiness were irresistible sources of humor. At the same time, Greek myth recognizes the enormous gulf between divinity and humanity—and humanity's inferior place in the cosmos. The gods typically assume human shape, but it is only the appearance of a mortal form: at will, Zeus can transform himself into a bolt of lightning, a raging bull, or a cosmic serpent. For all their anthropomorphism, the Greeks realized that their gods belonged to the *Other*, a dimension of reality profoundly different from the material realm to which humans are bound. Mysterious and unpredictable, the gods represent forces beyond human ability to control or comprehend. Greek deities may command themselves to appear in human likeness—and Greek artists delighted in so picturing them—but they belong to an unknowable mode of existence intrinsically different from that of humanity.
The Literary Quality of Greek Myth and Its Association with Communal Observances

Although a component of virtually every world religion, myth—which typically conveys traditions about supernatural powers, cosmic origins, and the divine-human relationship—is notoriously hard to define. The word "myth" is taken from the Greek word μῦθος (mythos), literally means "utterance," or "something one says"—a traditional story commonly set in the remote past and involving the actions of divine beings and/or human heroes. As in other cultures, Greek myth was originally an oral phenomenon created by anonymous storytellers and transmitted by word to the individual speaker's changes at every retelling. Even after myths were codified and written, Greek poets felt free to create new versions of old stories, particularly in interpreting and revising myth to heighten the onstage drama, as when Euripides has Medea kill her own children (see Chapter 17). This suggests that the various versions of Medea's story, as a result, most myths survive in at least several different, even contradictory, versions.

In ancient Greece, these differences were reinforced by the region's rugged terrain and the geographical isolation of the polis. Because many Greek settlements were separated by steep mountain ranges or inhospitable coastlines, each polis tended to develop its own version of popular myths, commonly attaching them to tales about the gods who favored their particular city, as Athene championed Athens, or about local heroes whose exploits enhanced the polis's reputation. Leading families of a given polis typically compiled genealogies linking members to famous leaders of the mythic past, thus boosting their local prestige while perpetuating the ancestral hero's story. Collectors could point out to visitors where heroes such as Heracles (Hercules), Orestes, or Oedipus had slain monsters, had died, or were buried. Whereas some tales remained of purely local interest, many others, spread abroad by sailors, traveling merchants, and itinerant poets, eventually became part of the national tradition. Stories of gods serving similar functions and heroes performing similar feats commonly merged, as when the myth about Heracles gradually
incorporated the stories of innumerable strongmen. Only by slow degrees were Hercules’ labors fixed at twelve—a popular number in Greek mythology, as well as in the Judeo-Christian Bible—and only over long spans of time were the identities, attributes, and number of the twelve Olympians also agreed on. The form in which Greek myth comes to us is thus the end result of a long evolutionary process.

Myths are categorized as traditional tales because they are passed on from one generation to the next as part of a particular people’s cultural legacy. They are preserved and transmitted over time because they are seen as meaningful to the society that transmits them, helping to express a community’s distinctive worldview—its values and its goals. Although no universally accepted definition of myth exists, Walter Burkert provides a useful generalization: a myth is “a traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance” (see Burkert in the Selected Bibliography).

In the Greek city-state, myth’s ‘collective importance’—its persuasive role in the communal life of the polis—was demonstrated by the prominence given it at public festivals. Greek festivals were religious celebrations in which the community expressed its beliefs about the gods through observance of religious rites and with ship with humanity. Among its many religious holidays, Athens held two annual ones—that featured public performances of myths—events at which Athenians heroes performed at these two festivals were eventually written down, preserving dramas of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Because these writers took their myth is preserved chiefly in written form, mythic scenes are preserved in Greek sculpture and vase painting, an important part of myth’s legacy, but only in literary form do complete stories survive.

The Panathenaeae

At the Panathenaeae, held every July to celebrate Athene’s birth, professional reciters of poetry, the rhapsodes, declaim Homer’s long narratives about the Trojan War; the Homeric epics were composed and transmitted orally for an extended period committed to writing no later than the sixth century B.C. (See Chapter 12 for a of the epic.) The Iliad and the Odyssey, which many critics regard as the foundation files out Greece. The Homeric epics were panhellenic—belonging to all Hellas (the To an incausal extent, they defined Greek concepts of both divinity and human and Hesiod (c. 675 B.C.), who definitively fixed popular ideas about the gods’ individual personalities, physical appearance, and functions (Histories, Book 2, Scholars do not agree on the precise definitions of myth, legend, folklore, and saga, or on the precise distinctions between them. Some scholars argue that attempts to differentiate between myth and other categories of traditional tales are misleading and that all traditional Greek narratives should be classed as myths. Others use folklore as the more comprehensive term, viewing it as encompassing the totality of traditionally derived and orally transmitted literature. Many critics, however, believe that it is possible—and helpful—to suggest more precise definitions, that the different terms represent closely related but separate categories. Given the lack of consensus, proposed definitions must be regarded as tentative, mere starting points for a study of traditional material and inevitably subject to debate and revision.

Most current definitions of myth (Greek, mythos) are extremely general. Walter Burkert proposed that it is a “traditional tale,” a story passed on from generation to generation, that, as a secondary component, had a “collective importance” to the life of the community that preserved and transmitted it. Whereas myths typically originate orally during a preliterate period, Greek myth is primarily literary, surviving in written records of great artistry, such as the epics of Homer and the tragedies of Sophocles. Some Greek tales are often characterized as “divine myths,” stories dealing with creation, the birth of the gods, and the relationships between divinity and humanity. Other myths focus on the deeds of mortal heroes and heroines, presenting human models of courage to be imitated or examples of wrongdoing to be avoided. Both types commonly use myths to express social values, norms of behavior, and the consequences of deviating from them. For a discussion of different methods scholars use to interpret myth, see Chapter 2.)

The term legend is variously defined, with some critics using it to denote stories about humans, such as Jason’s quest for the Golden Fleece, and others restricting its use to denote traditional tales that have some basis, however tenuous, in historical events. If the Mycenaeans did lay siege to Troy, stories about the war may be legendary rather than strictly fictional. Collections of narratives about a particular enterprise, city, or family, such as the many interconnected tales about Troy, Thebes, or Argos and their ruling dynasties, are called sagas. A term originally used to describe Scandinavian tales dating from the twelfth through the seventeenth centuries A.D., saga typically refers to long, detailed narratives involving both gods and heroes that blend historical and fictional elements. Whereas legends and sagas commonly recount the exploits of a military aristocracy (a Greek term referring to government by the “best people”), folktales relate the activities of more humble persons. In contrast to myths, which feature major gods of sky and earth and which place heroes at a particular time or location, such as the Greek assault on Troy, folktales deal with lesser figures of popular imagination, such as witches, elves, giants, and fairies. Folklore, as the word implies, concerns the experiences of folk in a vague, undefined era—fairy tales usually begin with “Once upon a time” or “In a kingdom far away”—and ordinarily does not include myth’s characteristic preoccupation with the human spirit struggling against the limitations of its own mortality. Some literary works based on myth, such as the Odyssey, also contain elements of folklore—giant cannibals, sorceresses, magic spells, and assorted half-human monsters—as do tales of dragon-slaying heroes like Perseus.
Section 55. Even while allowing for Herodotus's rhetorical exaggeration, the Homeric epics indisputably provided the Greeks with their most persuasive models of heroic behavior and the interaction of gods and mortals. In the education of Greek boys, Homer's epics constituted the chief textbook.

Myths about the Homeric deities belonged to all the many city-states of Greece, but they could also be adapted to serve the interests of a particular polis. In adorning the Parthenon, Phidias combined portraits of the Homeric gods with scenes from his own city's unique festival, the Panathenaea, emphasizing Athene's special connection with Athens. Every fourth year, at the Great Panathenaea, celebrations were especially elaborate besides extended recitations of the Iliad and the Odyssey, there were horse races, athletic games, and musical contests. The festivities climaxed in a solemn procession of Athens' leading citizens, as well as allies and visiting dignitaries, across the agora (marketplace) and up the high hill of the Acropolis, on which Athene's temple stood. Phidias made this ritual procession the subject of the Parthenon frieze, a long band of bas-relief sculptures running horizontally along the top of the walls inside the temple's exterior colonnade (Figure 1-6).

![Figure 1-6 The Location of the Sculptures on the Parthenon. This cross section of Athene's temple shows the positions of the pediment sculptures, the frieze featuring scenes from the Parthenon process, and the metopes (architectural panels decorated with bas-reliefs).]

The east frieze depicts a panorama of Athene's chief worshipers, including those especially honored in carrying out one of the main purposes of the procession—a group of young Athenian women carrying the peplos, a sacred garment lavishly embroidered with pictorial episodes from the goddess's myth—to clothe Athene's oldest cult statue on the Acropolis. (British Museum, London)

![Figure 1-7 Young Women Carrying the Peplos. In this scene based on the Panathenaea procession, aristocratic Athenian women carry the peplos, a sacred garment lavishly embroidered with pictorial episodes from the goddess's myth—to clothe Athene's oldest cult statue on the Acropolis. (British Museum, London).]

The east frieze depicts a panorama of Athene's chief worshipers, including those especially honored in carrying out one of the main purposes of the procession—a group of young Athenian women carrying the peplos, an intricately embroidered robe to be placed on the goddess's ancient statue in the Erechtheum (Figure 1-7). Like the Parthenon itself, the peplos was decorated with mythic motifs featuring Athene's triumphs—in this case, her defeat of the giants who had dared to attack Olympus (see Chapter 3). Other architectural sculptures of the Parthenon represent similar victories of civilization over savagery: a band of Lapiathy, mountain tribesmen in Thessaly, overcome centaurs, male figures whose bestial nature is indicated by their horselike anatomy from the waist down (Figure 1-8). In another scene, heroes battle Amazons, female warriors who invaded prehistoric Attica, the territory governed by Athens, further emphasizing Athene's role in protecting civilized values.

In contrast to scenes depicting violent conflict on earth, the east frieze of the Parthenon presents the gods—invisible participants in the Panathenaea—as utterly calm and relaxed. Having demonstrated their ability to vanquish all opposition, the Olympians exhibit the serenity born of supreme confidence. The seated Apollo leans casually toward his uncle Poseidon, the tempestuous sea god, now in a calm mood, to exchange a private word; his twin sister, Artemis, patron of wildlife and the hunt, modestly adjusts the body-clinging folds of her diaphanous gown (Figure 1-9). In another Olympian group, even fierce Ares [AR-ez], god of war and bloodshed, exhibits total repose. His hands grasp the knee of a crossed leg while he shares a conversation with his aunt Demeter [de-MEE-tor], goddess of earth's fertility, and his two half-brothers, Hermes and Dionysus (Figure 1-10). Although probably already somewhat drunk (Dionysus's hand originally may have held a beaker of wine), the god of unbridled freedom—whose frenzy can elicit either joy or terror—is mellow.


FIGURE 1-8 A Centaur and a Lapith in Hand-to-Hand Combat. In this Parthenon metope, agents representing barbarism (the half-animal centaur) and civilization (the unarmed human warrior) battle for dominance. As defender of the civilized values of the polis, Athena champions the forces of rational order against savagery. (British Museum, London)

FIGURE 1-9 Olympian Gods, East Frieze of the Parthenon. A visible symbol of Athens’ triumph over barbarian invaders (the Persians, who invaded Greece in 490 and 480-479 B.C.), this metope embodies principles of cosmic order, a mythic turn toward the highest gods as present in Athena’s sanctuary. Apollo, god of medicine, patron of woman, wildlife, and the hunt, is at the right. (British Museum, London)

FIGURE 1-10 A Gathering of the Olympian Family, East Frieze of the Parthenon. (a) Although their faces have been obliterated, this seated quartet of gods still exhibits a divine grace and repose. With his arm raised, the wine god Dionysus leans confidentially against his half-brother Hermes (left), god of merchants, travelers, tricksters, gamblers, and thieves. Zeus’s sister Demeter, great goddess of earth’s fertility, turns an interested gaze on the tipsy Nereus. (b) In this close-up of Ares, the god of war manifests an uncharacteristic serenity; his relaxed presence at the Panathenaic marks a time of peace. (British Museum, London)
Dionysus’s right arm embraces the shoulders of Hermes [HER-meez], the ever-mobile trickster, god of travelers, thieves, and businessmen—and Zeus’s trusted messenger.

Looking much as Homer describes them, the Olympian gods are assembled to observe the Panathenaea games, savor the fragrance of burnt-animal sacrifices, and offer favored humans the comfort of their presence and protection. Like all the Parthenon sculptures and friezes, Phidias’s representation of Homeric divinities illustrates the close bond between myth and Greek society. The rituals of the Panathenaea, as well as the art and architecture of the Parthenon, serve multiple religious, social, and political purposes. Athens’s preeminence among the gods and her unique link to Athens are consciously exploited to affirm the Athenians’ identity as a divinely favored people and to validate both their distinctive customs and their right militarily to dominate less powerful Greek city-states.

The City Dionysia

The narrative poems of Homer and Hesiod, our oldest extant source of Greek myth, were composed during the Archaic period of Greek history (c. 800–480 B.C.). Some historians bracket the Archaic period by two epochal events: the founding of the Olympic Games in 776 B.C. and Greece’s successful conclusion of the Persian Wars in 479 B.C. (see Chapter 14). The tragedies produced at the City Dionysia, the second major source of Greek myth, date from the Classical period, the Persia’s invading armies from their shores, to 323 B.C., the year in which Alexander an era characterized by the widespread dissemination of classic Hellenistic through the region of the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East. Established as an important Athenian festival in the sixth century B.C., the annual City Dionysia (also called the Great Dionysia) was dedicated to Dionysus and figure, such as Oedipus or his daughter Antigone. Like the epic poems Homer and figure, such as Oedipus or his daughter Antigone. Like the epic poems Homer and tion took myth as their primary subject, freely revising traditional stories for the classical Athens. Along with the older epic poetry, the surviving plays by Aeschylus, mythologies (see Chapters 14–17).

Other Literary Sources

In addition to our two main sources of Greek myth—archaic narrative poetry, such as Homer’s Iliad and Hesiod’s Theogony, and classical drama by Athenian playwright-Greek authors employed other literary genres in which myth is the chief composed a series of hymns praising the twelve Olympians. Known collectively as the Homeric Hymns, they preserve important myths about the mother goddess Demeter, her daughter Persephone, the volatile Dionysus, the cunning Hermes, and
popular beliefs not usually addressed by the great poets in his "On the Cessation of Oracles," which contains a discussion of demons (daimones), invisible beings intermediate between gods and men.

**Distinctive Qualities of Greek Literary Myth**

Poets writing in the three major literary categories in which Greek myth survives—epic narratives, lyric poetry, and tragic drama—imbue the myths with several distinctive qualities. Besides promoting such traits as anthropomorphism and consistently emphasizing family dynamics, Greek authors transmit a mythology that is characterized by humanism, individualism, competitiveness, and a modified pessimism based on their keen awareness of human mortality.

**Humanism**

In contrast to many other mythologies of antiquity, the majority of Greek myths ultimately focus on human heroes, a fact the Greeks themselves noted. Divine beings are important in most heroic tales, but their presence is typically intermittent and their influence indirect. Gods may operate invisibly behind the scenes, but it is the heroes' own struggles and suffering that occupy the foreground. Greek myth consistently expresses an anthropocentric (human-centered) cosmos. A worldview that places human consciousness squarely at the center of the universe, humanism is the measure of all things. "Man is the measure of all things," asserted fifth-century B.C. philosopher Protagoras, and it is the human perception—guided by logic and moral principle—that defines the human element is so fundamental to the Greek perspective that it could not conceivably exist in a world without men—though he easily imagines one without women.

Although Hesiod does not include an account of human origins in the Theogony, he does allude to a tradition that gods and humans have a "common descent"—all deities for gods and men. Pindar even asserts the divine-human affinity: in intellect and physical skill, men can perform deeds worthy of gods.

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Single is the race, single
Of men and gods;
From a single Mother [Gaia] we both draw breath;
But a difference in power in everything keeps as apart;
For one is nothing, but the breasted sky
Stays a fixed habitation for ever.
Yet we can in greatness of mind
Or of body be like the immortals,

—"Nemean VI," The Odes of Pindar, trans. C. M. Bowra

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The poets' insistence that, through creative thought and heroic action, men can compete with gods, coupled with a grim awareness that even the greatest human accomplishments are eventually nullified by death, produces an almost painful tension in Greek myth. Greek humanism, particularly during the Classical period, exalted human achievements, but at the same time maintained a realistic view of human frailty. Although humanity's potential seems almost unlimited, and heroic ambition inspires men to strive with gods, both Homer and the tragic poets unanimously agree that humans betray a lamentable tendency to overreach and make fatal errors in judgment. Greek poets thus advocate a prudent self-discipline and reverence for the gods, reminding their audiences that implacable forces—fate and the sometimes unfathomable divine will—circumscribe human existence. As the example of Oedipus demonstrates, no human, no matter how lofty his status, can avoid fulfilling what the gods have decreed (see Chapter 16).

**Individualism and Competitiveness**

While recognizing the paradoxical tension between human assertiveness and human vulnerability, both Archaic and Classical myth emphasize a distinctively Greek focus on competitiveness and individual achievement. The Homeric heroes strive to surpass their peers and attain the foremost place—as judged by an admiring public—as the bravest, strongest, most skilled, and most eloquent. The Homeric warrior, such as Achilles or Ajax, prefers single, hand-to-hand combat with individual opponents of equal social rank to a mass assault on the enemy in which he might be lost in the crowd. Only in solo confrontations with another aristocratic fighter can he effectively demonstrate his superiority.

The career of Achilles, the Iliad's leading character, illustrates both the glory and the enormous cost of unrestrained individualism: Achilles recognizes no equals and adamantly refuses to cooperate with his fellow Greek soldiers after Agamemnon unwisely appropriates his captive slave girl. By seizing Achilles' concubine, a living trophy of the hero's valor in battle, Agamemnon calls into question Achilles' status and reputation, subjecting him to public shame. When Hector, Troy's chief defender, slays Achilles' beloved comrade Patroclus, Achilles insists on avenging his friend, even though he knows that killing Hector will hasten his own death. The epic hero, represented by Achilles, unhesitatingly sacrifices everything, including life itself, to vindicate his honor and thereby earn undying fame (see Chapter 12).

Writers of tragedy similarly concentrate on single heroes caught up in circumstances that almost invariably bring about their destruction. Whereas the epic hero is typically a man of physical action who proves his worth by demonstrating indomitable courage and fighting skill, the tragic hero, such as Oedipus, explores the meaning of pain and defeat, plumbing depths of thought and feeling typically beyond those that epic warriors express.

Greek society routinely institutionalized the principle of individual competition: at virtually every public festival, poets, dancers, athletes, and musicians competed for prizes that were communal affirmations of their personal worth. Greece's most celebrated contests were held at the Olympic Games, which perpetuated the heroic ideal of a single competitor triumphing over all rivals. Awarding only a first prize,
the Olympic judges acknowledged no second- or third-best entrants in such sports as foot racing, wrestling, boxing, discus throwing, and chariot racing. The winning athlete and the mythical hero, such as Achilles, Odysseus, Oedipus, or Antigone, share a common destiny: they stand alone, willing to risk all to accomplish feats that will elevate them over lesser mortals. As the myths never tire of saying, this obsessive quest for godlike preeminence is a noble goal, but it inevitably exacts a crushing toll.

In the universe posited by Greek myth, humans are permanently barred from the divine enjoyment of everlasting life, a condition that threatens to rob individual lives of real meaning (compare Chapters 9 and 10). According to Homer, even the greatest heroes are condemned to spend eternity in the darkness of the Underworld, where significant action is no longer possible. Given the view that death ends all that makes life valuable, a belief well illustrated in the Homeric account of Odysseus’s journey to the realm of the dead (Odyssey, Book 11), the high-risk environment in which the hero labors makes his efforts to excel all the more remarkable. Seeking his destiny on the battlefield or in other dangerous ventures, the hero dies. Dealing with themes of warfare, rage, murder, family strife, sexual aggression, and other acts of violence, many Greek myths are uncompromising in their insistence on the inevitability of human suffering and ultimate loss. Despite their repeated portrayals of noble heroes defeating evil adversaries, not many contain happy endings.

The world of Greek myth thus reflects the tensions, perplexities, and disappointments of Greek society. The gods possess everything that the Greek male desires or admires—eternal youth, good looks, honor, reputation, power, and the uninhibited assertion of individual selfhood. For all their superiority to mortals, however, the gods are driven by the same kinds of competitive ambition and jealous regard for being who were largely projections of their own idealized (and fallible) selves, the Greeks created myths in which the gods are almost as fascinated by human activities as their mortal subjects are intrigued by the gods.

Myth and History

For the ancient Greeks, not only was myth a component of religion and a regulator of social norms, but it also took the role of prehistory, providing traditions about their supposed ancestors in the distant past. In the Greek view, the mythic past was indistinguishable from the historical past and included everything from the world’s beginnings to the aftermath of the Trojan War. Having few historical facts about this ancient era, Greek storytellers typically regarded it as an almost magical period, qualitatively different from their own mundane time. It was an epoch in which gods communed freely and openly with humans, lending mortals to their favors and matching them with mortal women. Zeus sired many of the greatest heroes and heroines, including Perseus, Hercules, and Helen. The incomparable strength and beauty of the children thus produced was proof of their divine parentage. Even goddesses occasionally designed to bestow their love on young men: Thetis, a beautiful sea nymph, bore Achilles to the mortal Peleus; and lovely Aphrodite seduced the Trojan shepherd-prince Anchises to produce Aeneas, who attained enormous prominence in later Roman myth (see the Aeneid in Chapter 19).

After the sons of heroes who had fought at Troy died, however, the mythic era came to an end, and the divine—human relationship changed forever. Zeus and the other Olympians no longer took mortal lovers, thereby precluding a new generation of heroes who could kill lions with their bare hands or descend to the Underworld and return unscathed. The Olympians withdrew permanently to Mount Olympus, thereafter communicating with humanity only through dreams, visions, or oracles delivered at propitiorous shrines such as Delphi. Most commonly, the gods remained silent or sent highly ambiguous "signs" of their intentions, in the form of the flight of birds, the rustling of leaves in a sacred oak, or the appearance of the entrails of a sacrificial animal. (See Chapter 7 for a discussion of the Delphic Oracle.)

In contrast to the Greeks’ view of myth as prehistory, modern scholars hotly debate whether myth has any connection with historical fact. Whereas some scholars believe that myth is entirely fiction, albeit fiction that conveys important truths about the nature of human experience, others think that some mythic events, such as the Trojan War, have a basis in actual events. During the nineteenth century, when most scholars insisted that the Trojan War was entirely fictional, the amateur German archeologist Heinrich Schliemann (1822-1890) excavated the traditional site of Troy, near the modern village of Hisarlik in northwestern Turkey. He discovered that the site contained the ruins of a series of Bronze Age settlements, each built atop the rubble of its predecessor. Schliemann concluded that the ruins labeled Troy VII-A was the citadel Homer described in the Iliad. Some later archeologists argued that Troy VII-A was too puny to fit the Homeric description; however, recent surveys of the site indicate that a slightly earlier city, Troy VII, was much larger and more impressively fortified than Schliemann’s Troy VII-A. Troy VI, with its massive walls, was destroyed and burned about 1270 B.C.E., whereas Troy VII-A fell about 1190 B.C.E., when Mycenaean civilization was already in decline (Figure 1-11).

Having "found" Troy, Schliemann next excavated the site of Mycenae [my-SEE-nee], a late Bronze Age city that Agamemnon, leader of the Greek forces against Troy, was said to have ruled. (See the map in Figure 1-17.) Schliemann discovered that Homer was correct in describing Mycenae as "rich in gold," for its royal tombs contained superbly crafted metalwork, including gold drinking vessels and gold death masks that had been placed over the faces of deceased kings. Referring to a particularly striking mask, Schliemann incorrectly claimed to have "looked upon the face of Agamemnon" (Figure 1-12), although the object in question subsequently was dated to a period considerably before the Trojan War. Recent studies accuse Schliemann of both careless error and outright deception in some of his claims, but his work stimulated other archeological investigations of prehistoric Greece that have enabled us to understand some of the major developments in Greek history. If future discoveries produce evidence that prehistoric Greeks did indeed capture Troy, the famous war may prove to be legendary rather than purely mythic. (Recall that the term legend is commonly used to denote a tradition that has some core of historicity, no matter how embellished by later poetic interpretation.)
The Major Periods of Greek History

Greek culture of the historical period, including its mythology, is a synthesis of many older influences, including that of the ancient Near Eastern civilizations of Mesopotamia. (See Chapter 3 for a discussion of Near Eastern parallels to Hesiod’s Islands indicates that an identifiable Greek culture did not begin to emerge until the term designating an interrelated group of languages, including Greek, Latin, and English, that are spoken in Europe and parts of western Asia. Scholars have discovered that these linguistically related languages are descended from a proto-Indo-European tongue that may have originated in central Asia and, beginning in the fourth millennium B.C., spread to western Asia and then to Europe.

Minoan Civilization

Long before the Indo-Europeans arrived in Greece, a people of unknown origins had already created a highly sophisticated culture centered on the island of Crete. It had already created a highly sophisticated culture centered on the island of Crete. Characterized by huge palace complexes decorated with colorful wall paintings, Cretan society developed during the early and middle Bronze Ages. When Sir Arthur Evans (1851–1941), a British archaeologist, excavated Cretan sites during the early twentieth century, he named the rediscovered culture the Minoan (Mih-NOH-an), after Minos [MYE-nohs], a mythical king said to have reigned at Knossos, the largest of Crete’s palaces. Evans, who partly restored some of Knossos’s grand courtyards, broad stairways, painted colonnades, and brilliant frescoes (Figure 1-13), found that the Minoans had achieved a remarkable level of both artistic and technological development. Besides brightening their rooms with light wells and exquisite paintings, they equipped Knossos with indoor plumbing and flush toilets, a combination of domestic elegance and
Both the Minoan and other Aegean Island cultures appear to have worshiped the feminine principle of divinity. Although no written texts dating from Minoan times have yet been deciphered, an abundance of female figurines and other cult objects associated with the earth, fertility, and regeneration indicate that the “Divine Woman” was central to Minoan and other Aegean religions (see Chapter 5). The bull, a symbol of divine strength, also featured prominently in Minoan art (Figure 1-14).

**Mycenaean Civilization**

When Indo-Europeans arrived in Greece near the end of the third millennium B.C., they brought with them not only horses and an aggressive warrior mentality but also the worship of a male sky god, Zeus, head of the Greek pantheon ( roster of officially recognized deities). is a direct descendant of the Indo-European concept of masculine divinity (Figure 1-15; see the discussion of Zeus in Chapter 6).

Borrowing heavily from the earlier Minoan culture, Indo-Europeans speaking an early form of Greek established a series of fortified cities on the Greek mainland, including Mycenae, after which archaeologists have named the Mycenaean civilisation (c. 1650–1150 B.C.). Whereas the Minoans had constructed enormous palaces without fortifications, the Mycenaeans surrounded their hilltop settlements with massive defensive walls (Figure 1-16). They also appear to have worshiped a number of gods later included in the Greek pantheon. Mycenaean texts, a form of writing of unknown origin, reveal several familiar names, including Zeus and Hera (who were later included in the Greek pantheon) and Dionysus (who was later associated with the wine god).
are linked), Poseidon, Artemis, Athene, Hermes, and Ares. Even Dionysus is mentioned, although some myths suggest that he was an import from Asia, a late arrival on the Greek scene (see Chapter 8). Some Linear B passages feature dedications to "all the gods," indicating a substantial number of recognized deities during the Mycenaean era, perhaps forerunners of the Olympian family.

In his Mycenaean Origins of Greek Mythology, Martin P. Nilsson argued that Greek myth assumed its distinctive qualities during the Mycenaean period. Noting that many of the Homeric and other mythical heroes are associated with specific Mycenaean cities—Agamemnon and Orestes with Mycenae, Heracles with Tiryns, Nestor with Pylos, Oedipus with Thebes—Nilsson concluded that Homer, Hesiod, and other early poets drew on oral traditions from the Mycenaean era in creating their later versions of the myths. Unfortunately, archaeology has revealed only that the Mycenaeans honored some of the same gods worshiped later in Greek history.

Not a single Mycenaean story about gods or heroes has survived; we may infer from Minoan and Mycenaean frescoes and vase paintings that many of the scenes depicted have a religious/mythical significance, but we do not know what myths, if any, they may represent.

Scholars believe that Greek myth evolved gradually over time, perhaps largely from Bronze Age religious practices and other rituals. But it is not until the Archaic period, when the Homeric epics were composed, that we can be sure of the nature or content of any given myth. The earliest surviving representations of identifiable mythic scenes in art, such as Odysseus' blinding of the Cyclops, are roughly coeval with the creation of the Homeric epics (eighth century B.C.). Whatever specific influence Mycenaean lore may have exerted on Greek literary myth must remain conjectural.

The Iron Age (Dark Ages)

As the Minoan civilization crumbled in the mid-fifteenth century B.C., perhaps as a result of Mycenaean assaults, so the great Mycenaean citadels fell about three hundred years later. Historians disagree about the causes of the Mycenaean collapse (c. 1200–1100 B.C.), but it may have resulted from multiple factors, including
## Major Periods of Ancient Greek History

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>APPROXIMATE DATE B.C.</th>
<th>HISTORICAL EPOCH</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>c. 3000</td>
<td>Beginnings of Minoan culture on Crete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 2200–1450</td>
<td>Middle Minoan palace culture on Crete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 2100</td>
<td>Probable arrival of Indo-Europeans in Greece</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1600–1200</td>
<td>Development of Mycenaean palace culture in Greece, initially dependent on Cretan models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1450</td>
<td>Mycenaen take over Minoan Knossos on Crete</td>
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Between 1250 and 1150 B.C., there was a breakdown of settled conditions in the eastern Mediterranean and Asia Minor.

- c. 1190: Destruction of Troy VII-A, the probable event that inspired traditions of the Trojan War and that may represent the last major enterprise of the Mycenaean Greeks.
- 1200–1125: Widespread destruction of Mycenaean sites in Greece; Mycenaen falls c. 1150 B.C.
- 1100–1000: Infiltration of Dorian Greeks (in myth, the return of the sons of Heracles); beginning of DARK AGES
- 1050–950: Migration of mainland Greeks to Aegean Islands and coast of Asia Minor; iron tools in use after 1050; period of crude geometric pottery
- **ARCHAIC PERIOD**
  - Age of Homer (c. 750 B.C.) and Hesiod (c. 675 B.C.); production of epic poems
  - 600: ARCHAIC PERIOD (continued)
  - Renaissance in Ionia (Asia Minor); birth of primitive science and philosophy in Miletus
  - 546: Pisistratus establishes tyranny at Athens
  - 534: First tragedy competition held at Athens
  - 510: Expulsion of Hippias from Athens; establishment of world's first democracy
  - 490–479: PERSIAN WARS: Marathon (490), Salamis (480), Platea and Mycale (479)
  - **CLASSICAL PERIOD**
    - "Golden Age" of Pericles at Athens
  - 431–404: Peloponnesian Wars between Athens and Sparta
  - 406: Deaths of Euripides and Sophocles
  - 338: Philip II of Macedonia conquers Athens and Thebes; end of Greek independence
  - 336–323: Conquests of Alexander the Great, son of Philip II
  - **HELLENISTIC PERIOD**
  - 323: Successors of Alexander rule eastern Mediterranean world and Near East
  - 146: Rome conquers Greece; Corinth is destroyed and Macedonia becomes a Roman province

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### The Archaic and Classical Periods

As the prosperity and material culture of these Ionian settlements gradually improved—largely through sea trade and interaction with the commercial centers of Asia Minor—a new and distinctively Greek civilization began to emerge at Ionian cities such as Miletus, Smyrna, and Halicarnassus. During the Archaic period (c. 800–480 B.C.), Greece was reborn as a network of hundreds of city-states scattered from Ionia in the eastern Aegean to Sicily and southern Italy in the west (Figure 1-17). Important symbols of the Greek renaissance were the founding of the panhellenic Olympic Games (traditionally in 776 B.C.) and the production of the Homeric epics. A possession of all the Greek peoples, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* crystallized ancient oral traditions that helped give the politically fragmented...
Greeks their collective identity. Some scholars even argue that the revival of writing in the mid-eighth century B.C.—with an alphabet borrowed from the Phoenicians—was achieved in order to transcribe the Homeric poems.

Following Greek victories during Persia’s two invasions of Greece (490 and 480–479 B.C.), Athens formed a confederacy of Greek states, the Delian League, and assumed political leadership of Greece. During the half-century after the Persian Wars, Athens celebrated its ascendance in an outburst of creative activity in works of art, architecture, history, philosophy, and drama. Even after it was militarily defeated by Sparta (with Persian aid) at the end of the Peloponnesian Wars (431–404 B.C.), Athens continued to be, as the Athenian leader Pericles had once stated, a “school for all Hellas,” producing sculpture, painting, and literature that established standards of excellence for later generations. Because Greek myth is preserved in works of literature—epics, lyric poetry, and dramas—that stand as models of artistic achievement, it is known as classical, both the fountainhead and the inspiration of the West’s subsequent creative impulses.

Differences Between Greek and Roman Mythology

Although classical mythology is essentially Greek myth, the Romans also contributed extensively to the field. Ovid, a leading Roman poet during the reign of Augustus (27 B.C.–A.D. 14), created the single most important collection of Greco-Roman tales—the Metamorphoses. Ovid’s stories about gods and heroes changing their physical forms, undergoing a metamorphosis, were designed to reflect a later development in the Greek mythic tradition, one that influenced the literary tastes of a sophisticated Roman audience familiar with the Hellenistic poets and scholars of Alexandria, Egypt, the second largest city in the Roman Empire and a center of literary and artistic creativity. Although most of Ovid’s tales were drawn from ancient Greek sources, he retold them in a witty and entertaining manner, a cosmopolitan touch pleasing to his Roman contemporaries. The Metamorphoses, for example, begins in the mythic realm, with stories of creation, gods, and heroes; but ultimately ties the ancient myths to specific events in Roman history, ending with the death and posthumous deification of Julius Caesar, which occurred only a year before the poet’s birth. Taking a more solemnly didactic approach to revising Greek myth, the Roman poet Virgil (70–19 B.C.) celebrated distinctively Roman social, ethical, and political values, particularly the hero’s self-discipline and self-sacrifice in serving gods and state. In his Aeneid, an epic of Rome’s origins, Virgil adapted the tradition of Aphrodite’s affair with the Trojan prince Anchises, which led to the birth of the hero Aeneas (see Chapter 6), to connect the stories of the Trojan conflict with the later founding of Rome by Aeneas’s descendants, the twins Romulus and Remus (see Chapter 19). Because Roman poets such as Ovid and Virgil produced their adaptations of Greek myth not only at a much later time than the Greeks but also for different aesthetic and political purposes, as well as for a different audience, Roman mythology is discussed in a separate section (see Chapters 18–20).

In this text, we explore the major literary works embodying Greek and Roman myths in generally chronological order, beginning with Hesiod’s narrative of creation and the birth of the gods (see Chapters 3 and 4). After surveying the prehistoric
Goddess figures and poetic hymns to various Olympian gods, including Demeter, Hermes, Apollo, and Dionysus (see Chapters 5–9), we examine the defining nature and adventures of representative heroes and heroines (see Chapters 10 and 11). Extended excerpts from Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, epics narrating the Trojan War and the long-delayed homecoming of its most resourceful hero, illustrate both the heroic figure in action and a variety of heroes’ relationships with the gods (see Chapters 12 and 13).

In contrast to the epics of Hesiod and Homer, which were probably composed orally in the eighth and early seventh centuries B.C. and which encompass Archaic traditions shared by all Greeks, the second main source of Greek myth, the tragic dramas of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, were written specifically for an Athenian audience in the fifth century B.C. Commonly expressing the interests and concerns of democratic Athens, such plays as the *Agamemnon*, *Eumenides*, *Antigone*, *Medea*, and *Bacchae* (all given with the complete text) also highlight the roles of women and issues of gender conflict that Greek writers often used to express their sense of life’s challenges and mysterious contradictions.

Readers wishing to explore the different ways in which Greek and Roman mythographers handled similar topics and themes may find it instructive to compare Hesiod’s account of creation and humanity’s decline from a primal Golden Age (see Chapters 3 and 4) with Ovid’s later, more urbane version of the tradition in the *Metamorphoses* (see Chapter 20), keeping in mind that Ovid wrote approximately seven hundred and fifty years after Hesiod and inhabited an entirely different cultural and intellectual environment. Similarly, the contrast between Homer’s pessimistic description of the subterranean realm of the dead (the *Odyssey*, Book 11; and Virgil’s far more philosophically informed portrayal of the Underworld in the *Aeneid* [Book 6; see Chapter 19]) also illustrates the striking evolution of mythic ideas over the course of centuries (see also the discussion of Hades’ kingdom in Chapter 9).

**Questions for Discussion and Review**

1. According to Greek myth, what is unusual about the births of Athene (goddess of wisdom) and Dionysus (god of wine and emotional freedom)? Why do you suppose many ancient traditions tell of events that are literally impossible? Can you see any symbolic meaning in having Zeus, king of the gods, personally give birth to two such different divine children?

2. Suggest some possible definitions for the term *mythos*. What role does oral storytelling play in the origin and development of myth? Why do Greek myths survive in so many different versions?

3. Discuss the literary character of much Greek myth. What are the major written sources of classical myth?

4. Define the Minoan, Mycenaean, Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic periods of Greek history. From which two periods do most of our literary sources of Greek myth derive?

5. Discuss the distinctive qualities of Greek mythology, including its literary character and emphasis on competitive action. Define the concepts of *humanism*, *anthropomorphism*, and *individualism* as they relate to Greek myth.

**Works Cited**


(For a list of recommended readings, see the Selected Bibliography at the back of this book.)