

MYTHOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

A **myth** is a story—usually involving supernatural elements—that conveys a moral idea, explains a natural phenomenon, or unravels the mysteries of the past. The ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome left behind a tradition of myth that represents their ideas about religion, history, and the world. Two millennia later, we have inherited these myths in the form of art and literature. The characters and myths summarized in this chart can be found richly rendered on ancient vases and statues and in the works of the following poets, playwrights, historians, and philosophers.

GREEK

Homer: *The Iliad*, *the Odyssey*
Hesiod: *Works and Days*, *Theogony*
Pindar: *Odes*
Herodotus: *Histories of the Persian Wars*
Aeschylus: *The Oresteia*
Sophocles: *Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*, *Oedipus at Colonus*
Euripides: *The Bacchae*
Aristophanes: *The Birds*, *The Clouds*, *The Frogs*
Plato: *The Republic*, *Symposium*, *Gorgias*
Apollonius of Rhodes: *The Argonautica*

ROMAN

Catullus: *Poems*
Horace: *Odes*, *Epodes*
Virgil: *The Aeneid*
Livy: *Histories*
Propertius: *Love elegies*
Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, *The Art of Love*

In modern times, **Thomas Bulfinch** and **Edith Hamilton** both have written volumes in English that compile and attempt to sort through the myths of Greece and Rome. The *Oxford Classical Dictionary* is an excellent reference on the subject.

BEGINNINGS

THE FIRST BEINGS

The first being in the universe is **Chaos**—a swirling mass of disorganized matter. After Chaos comes **Gaia** (the Earth); the lower realm of **Tartarus**; and the fairest immortal, **Love**. From Chaos, **Erebus** (a realm below the Earth) and **Night** are born. In union with Erebus, Night gives birth to **Day** and **Aether** (the upper air of the Earth's atmosphere). Gaia appears in the light of Day and gives birth to **Uranus** (Heaven) to cover her on all sides. Gaia also generates hills, mountains, and **Pontus** (the deep sea).

THE CREATION OF MONSTERS AND TITANS

The coupling of Gaia and Uranus produces the one-eyed **Cyclops** race and other monsters, as well as the twelve **Titans**. The youngest and most violent of the Titans, **Cronus**, conspires with his mother, Gaia, to castrate and kill his father, Uranus. Cronus then assumes leadership over the rest of the Titans and, with them, over the entire universe. The **Giants** and the **Furies** are born from the blood of Uranus's discarded testicles.

THE TITANS VS. THE OLYMPIANS

After Cronus comes to power, he learns that one of his children is destined to overthrow him, just as he dethroned his own father. To avoid this fate, he swallows each of his children as they emerge from the womb of his wife, **Rhea**. Deceiving her husband by feeding him a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes, Rhea conceals her sixth child, **Zeus**. When Zeus reaches maturity—after a youth spent hiding in a cave in Mt. Ida on Crete—he violently confronts Cronus and forces him to vomit up his siblings. Together, the children of Rhea and Cronus challenge the Titans for control of the universe. Zeus and his siblings win the war, banish the Titans to the pit of the volcano **Mount Aetna**, and assume control of the universe from their new abode atop **Mount Olympus**. The brothers Zeus, **Poseidon**, and **Hades** draw lots to determine who will rule. Zeus wins rule of the gods and the heavens, Poseidon gains sovereignty over the sea, and Hades becomes master of the underworld.

THE CREATION OF MAN

Prometheus is a son of Iapetus, one of the Titans whom Zeus and his siblings defeat. Zeus, however, spares Prometheus because Prometheus allies himself with the Olympians in their battle with the Titans. Prometheus is a master craftsman, so the Olympian gods commission him and his brother **Epimetheus** to create mankind and the beasts of the Earth. Epimetheus expends the best gifts—swiftness, cunning, protective fur, and physical strength—in creating the beasts, but Prometheus makes mankind of a nobler shape, bearing closer resemblance to the gods.

THE GIFT OF FIRE

To compensate mankind for its lack of natural gifts, Prometheus approaches the sun and lights a torch made of fennel reeds. He then brings the torch down to Earth and shares the knowledge of fire with mortal men. Zeus is furious, for he intended to keep fire a secret from mortals. As punishment, he chains the immortal Prometheus to a rock in the Caucasus Mountains. Each day, an eagle swoops down and eats Prometheus's liver, which regenerates each night, only to be devoured again the next day. Prometheus remains chained in this torture until the hero **Heracles** (Roman: Hercules) rescues him.

THE CREATION OF WOMAN

To punish mankind for its newfound knowledge of fire, Zeus orders the metalsmith god **Hephaestus** to create the first mortal woman, **Pandora**. Before she is put on Earth, Pandora is given a box containing all forms of evil and suffering, previously unknown to mankind, and is told never to open it. Epimetheus, despite his brother Prometheus's warnings, marries Pandora. Overcome by insatiable curiosity, Pandora opens the box and releases the catalog of plagues upon mankind. After all of these evils escape into the world, hope floats up from the box to ease mankind's suffering.

THE PANTHEON OF OLYMPUS

Greek Name	Roman Name	Divine Realm
Aphrodite	Venus	Love, beauty, fertility
Apollo	Apollo	Archery, music, prophecy, healing, light
Ares	Mars	War
Artemis	Diana	Hunting, the moon
Athena	Minerva	Wisdom, war
Demeter	Ceres	The harvest, grain, corn
Dionysus	Bacchus	Wine, festivity, the theater
Eros	Cupid	Love, sexual desire
Hades	Pluto	The underworld, the dead
Hephaestus	Vulcan	Fire, the forge, smithery
Hera	Juno	Marriage, queen of immortals
Hermes	Mercury	Messenger, commerce, science, doctors
Hestia	Vesta	The hearth
Pan	Pan	Wild beasts, the forest
Persephone	Proserpine	Queen of the underworld
Poseidon	Neptune	The sea
Zeus	Jupiter	Thunder, the heavens, king of immortals

APHRODITE

Aphrodite emerges fully formed from the sea foam off the coast of the island of Cyprus. The goddess of beauty, love, and fertility, she is forced to wed the least sexually attractive of the gods—the divine metalsmith, Hephaestus. Unsatisfied with her lame husband, Aphrodite takes many lovers, most notably Ares, the god of war. Her children include **Eros**, the boy god who incites romantic desire with his arrows, and the Trojan hero **Aeneas**, whose birth results from an affair between Aphrodite and the Trojan shepherd **Anchises**. The goddess seduces Anchises as he is tending to his flock but forbids him to tell anyone of their affair. When Aphrodite catches Anchises bragging to his friends about his exploits with the goddess, he is struck by lightning, blinded, and lamed. Nonetheless, their son, Aeneas, remains dear to Aphrodite, and she aids the Trojans in the Trojan War and in their exodus to Italy after the sack of Troy.

APOLLO

Zeus sires Apollo on the island of Delos. Apollo's mother, the Titaness **Leto**, suffers an agonizing nine-day labor to deliver him and his twin, the divine virgin huntress Artemis. Apollo is the patron of herdsmen and the god of archery, music, healing, and light. Prophecy of the future also falls under his realm, and he inspires the prophetess who serves as the **Oracle at Delphi**. During the Trojan War, Apollo favors Troy and personally guides the arrow of the Trojan warrior Paris so that it cuts down the mighty Greek hero Achilles. To the ancient Greeks, Apollo embodied the ideal of youth and masculinity, and stories of his love affairs with mortal women abound. The women in these stories who spurn his advances inevitably pay the price. While wooing **Cassandra**, a daughter of the Trojan king Priam, Apollo bestows on her the gift of prophecy, but when she rejects him, he curses her to make prophecies that are always correct but never believed. While courting the **Cumaeen Sibyl**, Apollo offers to grant her any wish, and she asks to live as many years as she can hold grains of sand. The god allows the Sibyl her wish, but after she refuses him, he denies her the gift of eternal youth. She withers with each passing year and, before long, comes to wish in vain for her own death.

MYTHOLOGY

ARES

The god of war and a son of Zeus and Hera, Ares incites violence and behaves brutishly, drawing the ire and disdain of the other gods, including his parents. Ares never marches with a particular army into battle but merely inspires various combatants to fight each other with savage aggression. In the Trojan War, he assists the Trojans. Ares fathers warriors by many mortal lovers and pursues a long love affair with Aphrodite. By the vestal virgin Rhea Silvia of Alba Longa he sires the twins **Romulus** and **Remus**, who are expelled from their home and raised by a she-wolf. In their maturity, they found Rome, and the Romans attribute their success in martial affairs to the twins' divine father.

ARTEMIS

Daughter of Zeus and the Titaness **Leto**, Artemis is the twin sister of Apollo and a patroness of women, especially athletic, warlike women such as **Atalanta** and the **Amazons**. Artemis rules over the forest and the hunt and aggressively protects her virtue and virginity. Suffering an insult, she murders the handsome, gigantic hunter **Orion**, who assumes a place among the constellations in the night sky.

ATHENA

When Hephaestus strikes Zeus's skull with an ax to relieve him of a headache, motherless Athena springs forth, fully armed for battle and uttering a war cry, from the skull of her father. The goddess of wisdom and craftsmanship, Athena sometimes assumes the form of an owl. She often leads armies into battle and assists warriors in combat, as she does Odysseus and Achilles in the Trojan War. The city of **Athens** is under Athena's rule as a result of her victory in a contest with Poseidon for stewardship of the city. Zeus declares that the one who presents the city with the more useful gift will win its devotion. Poseidon causes a spring to well up, but it yields only salt water; Athena counters with an olive tree, which provides food, oil, and wood.

DEMETER

A sister of Zeus and daughter of the Titans Cronus and Rhea, Demeter reigns over agriculture, especially grain and corn. Hades kidnaps Demeter's daughter, **Persephone** (Roman: Proserpine), to the underworld to be his bride. Mourning the loss of her child, Demeter flees Olympus and wanders the Earth in the guise of a mortal woman, allowing the fields to fall into drought and causing the Earth's population to suffer famine. To appease Demeter and return fertility to the fields, Zeus plucks Persephone from Hades and returns her to her mother. However, because Persephone ate the food of the underworld—though just a few pomegranate seeds—she is bound to dwell in Hades several months of the year. Persephone's annual absence from her mother explains the Earth's cycle of seasons and the barrenness of winter.

DIONYSUS

When the mortal princess **Semele** of Thebes arouses the amorous attentions of Zeus, Hera, ever jealous of her husband's mortal lovers, approaches Semele in disguise and tells her to ask her immortal lover to appear before her in his true, undisguised form. Zeus obeys the request and appears to Semele as a frenzy of lightning bolts, which fatally scorch her and engender a divine seed in the process. Zeus preserves the fetus by implanting it in his thigh, where it gestates and eventually emerges as the god Dionysus. The newborn god of wine and festivity seeks his mother in the underworld and delivers her to Olympus, where she is rendered immortal. To the ancient Greeks, Dionysus was the object of intense religious devotion, especially among a cult of women called **Maenads**. Their celebrations of Dionysus involved excessive drinking of alcohol, the whirling of torches or *thyrsi* (staves wrapped in vines or leaves), and sometimes the dismemberment of animals or even human children.

EROS

Armed with a bow and a quiver of arrows, the boyish, winged son of Aphrodite inspires erotic desire in the hearts of his victims, his love darts causing knees to tremble with longing. When the mortal princess **Psyche** gains so much renown for her beauty that she incurs Aphrodite's jealousy, the goddess dispatches her son to strike Psyche with desire for the basest of mortal men. By accident, Eros wounds himself with his own arrow when he comes upon Psyche sleeping. Stricken with desire for the princess, Eros visits her only by night and never allows her to see his face. One night, she lights a lamp and catches a glimpse of his face, so he ceases his visits. Aphrodite, still jealous of the princess, forces Psyche to perform several difficult tasks to win Eros back. One of these tasks requires her to descend to the underworld to fetch a box of beauty from Persephone. Foolishly, Psyche opens the box before she brings it to Aphrodite, and within she finds intoxicating sleep. Eros plunges to the underworld to rescue his beloved, wakes her, and pleads his case to Zeus. Ultimately, Zeus convinces Aphrodite to forgive Psyche and then welcomes the princess to Olympus as an immortal.

HADES

The Greeks and Romans believed that souls descended below the Earth after the death of the body. Hades, a brother of Zeus and Poseidon, is the ruler of this underworld—often called "the house of Hades." Mortals fear Hades, who is reputed to possess enormous wealth. His realm is divided into regions corresponding to the character of the souls that dwell within them, including **Elysium**, the delightful plain of the blessed, and **Tartarus**, the gloomy terrain where the wicked are punished. When the dead arrive, they cross the river **Styx** under the guidance of the ferryman **Charon**. On the other side, they are greeted by **Cerberus**, Hades' ferocious three-headed watchdog.

HEPHAESTUS

To the dismay of his parents, Zeus and Hera, Hephaestus is born weak and physically lame. He redeems himself through his work as the god of fire and smithery. With the help of his apprentices, the Cyclopes, at his workshop below the volcano **Mount Aetna**, Hephaestus forges the armor of Achilles, the scepter of Agamemnon, and the armor of Aeneas. Although Hephaestus never takes sides in the conflicts of mortals, the weapons and armor he shapes have the power to turn the tide of battle. Hephaestus is married to Aphrodite, who is frequently unfaithful to him with Ares and others.

HERA

Hera, the queen of the Olympian gods and the goddess of women and marriage, is a daughter of Cronus and Rhea and becomes Zeus's wife after the overthrow of their Titan father. Hera is famous for her jealousy of her husband's mortal lovers and her ire at the children spawned in his affairs, especially **Heracles**. The Trojan prince **Paris** incurs Hera's wrath when he judges Aphrodite to be more beautiful. Hera's grudge against Troy drives her to favor the Greek side in the war and, after the war, to place innumerable obstacles in the way of the Trojan hero Aeneas on his quest to found Rome.

HERMES

The mischievous Hermes displays talent and cunning from the day he is born. Soon after he springs from the womb of **Maia**, who bears him to her lover, Zeus, Hermes finds a turtle on the threshold of his cave, chops off its limbs, hollows out its shell, and stretches strings across the shell to create the world's first **lyre**, a musical instrument and ancestor of the modern guitar. Later, little Hermes steals the sacred cattle of his brother Apollo, burns them in ritual sacrifice, and then sneaks back to his cradle and wraps himself in swaddling clothes. Maia, and then Apollo himself, confront Hermes, but he denies his crime. The two gods bring the matter before Zeus, who chuckles at his newborn son's deviousness. Hermes further lightens the mood by playing a song on his lyre, which enchants Apollo. Offering his brother the lyre as a form of reconciliation, Hermes enters the gods' good graces and assumes a place on Mount Olympus. He serves as the gods' messenger, descending to Earth wearing winged sandals and carrying a staff entwined by two snakes (called the *kerykeion* in Greek, the *caduceus* in Latin).

HESTIA

A daughter of Cronus and Rhea, Hestia is the goddess of the **hearth**, the fireplace at the center of every ancient household. She refuses offers of marriage from both Poseidon and Apollo, choosing instead to remain a virgin and to tend to the hearth of Olympus. Hestia is the most minor of the Olympians in ancient mythology, but she held an important place in the religious practices of ancient Greece and Rome. Every family honored her at the birth of a child, and every meal began and ended with a service for her.

PAN

Pan is the chief of the lesser gods of nature. With the torso and head of a man and the legs, horns, and ears of a goat, he dwells in woods, mountains, and caves. Pan, a son of Hermes, is famous for his love affairs with nymphs. He grants fertility to flocks, avenges cruelties perpetrated against animals, and has the power to incite panic in men and beasts. The Greeks held noon to be a sacred hour because they believed that Pan slept at that hour and would become angry if he were roused.

POSEIDON

When the brothers Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades draw lots for dominion over the sky, the sea, and the underworld, Poseidon becomes ruler of the sea. The ancient Greeks called him "earthshaker" and believed that he caused earthquakes, tidal waves, and tempests at sea. Among Poseidon's sons are brutal men and monsters like the Cyclops **Polyphemus**, as well as horses and bulls. Poseidon earns a reputation as the most vengeful of the gods for his torment of **Odysseus** during the ten years of Odysseus's wanderings from Troy home to Ithaca. With the Gorgon **Medusa**, Poseidon sires the winged steed **Pegasus**. With Poseidon's aid, the hero **Bellerophon** tames the flying horse and fights on its back victoriously against the **Amazons**, a race of warrior women, and the **Chimera**, a fire-breathing monster with a lion's head, goat's body, and snake's tail. When Bellerophon tries to fly Pegasus to the heavens, the horse throws him to his death—a common fate for mortals who display **hubris**, the Greek term for excessive pride or arrogance toward fate or the gods.

ZEUS

Zeus rules over the heavens and all the gods of Mount Olympus as the "father of gods and men." When he is born, his mother, Rhea, spirits him away to a cave on Crete to save him from his father, Cronus, who, fearing that his children will overthrow him, swallows each of them as he or she is born. Rhea tricks Cronus by feeding him a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes in place of the baby Zeus. When Zeus grows up, he returns from Crete, rescues his siblings from their father's belly, and defeats Cronus to take control of the universe. Armed with thunderbolts crafted for him by his son Hephaestus and his Cyclops servants, Zeus exerts supreme control over the heavens and Earth. Although Zeus often allows mortal and divine affairs to play out themselves, his intervention in any matter is decisive. By his wife, Hera, he fathers the gods Ares and Hephaestus. His children by other lovers include the gods Apollo, Artemis, Athena, Dionysus, and Hermes, as well as the mortal hero Heracles. Assuming the form of a swan, Zeus impregnates Princess **Leda** of Aetolia with **Helen**, the wife of Menelaus and the woman for whom the Trojan War is fought, and **Clytemnestra**, the wife of Agamemnon.

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