

Twelve Gods of Olympus

This essay is a summary of the information about the twelve principal gods in the Greek mythology taken from both ancient and modern sources.

Here we will discuss the primary Greek gods, their origin, individuality, attitudes towards them their portrayal in the ancient mythology and literature up to the fifth century BC, as well as goals and the purposes of the religion.

Greek religion has no single origin. The Greeks were an Indo-European people who settled in the non-Indo-European Aegean basin. They came into contact with the many advanced civilizations of the ancient Near East and borrowed certain elements of their religion into the Greek society. Greek religion never lost this openness to foreign gods: at the end of the fifth century, for instance, two new gods arrived in Athens, Sabazius from Phrygia and Bendis from Thrace.

Names of around thirty gods and goddesses have been recognized on the tablets from Mycenaean Knossos and Pylos. The number of principal gods, however, was always restricted. Homer shows us ten of them: Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Athena, Apollo, Artemis, Aphrodite, Hermes, Hephaestus, and Ares. These, together with Demeter and Dionysus made up the twelve most powerful gods of the Greek mythology.

The Olympian gods were not the creators of the universe, but rather the offspring of three or four generations beginning with Gaia and Ouranus. In his writings Herodotus says: "Not till the day before yesterday, so to speak, did the Greeks know the origin of each of the gods, or whether they had all existed always, and what they were like in appearance... It was Homer and Hesiod who created a theogony for the Greeks, gave the gods their epithets, divided out offices and functions among them, and described their appearance".

The Twelve were known to dwell either on the heavenly mountain Olympus as the family of Zeus or in their favoured cities. Individual Greek communities paid special honour to particular gods, or gods "took most delight in particular sanctuaries". The choice of the place by gods was not always peaceful procedure. For instance, the west pediment of the Parthenon is picturing contest between Athena and Poseidon over the primacy in Athens.

Zeus was the one to lead the Olympians against Ouranus and the Titans. After they won the battle, "the Twelve" reigned forever over the universe. Zeus himself received control over the heavens and the sky. Being the supreme god of the Greek religion, he is known to be a protector of justice and as a symbol of the father and protector of the family. Accordingly to some historians, Zeus' origin was in the Indo-European part of the world. He is the only god whose name can be interpreted with certainty - "father". His main sanctuary was found at Olympia.

Aphrodite was an example of an ideal, beautiful and attractive woman.

Hera was associated with marriage and royalty and represented an image of a noble woman as a part of her marriage. She was considered a very powerful goddess and was worshiped throughout the Greek world. Her rectangular temple on the island of Samos, constructed in 7th century BC, was the first to make a clear distinction between divine and human houses, which proves her importance in the Greek religion. Her sanctuary was located at Olympia along with her husband's.

Another god, who received a very significant role after overcoming the Titans, was Poseidon. He gained an absolute power over the seas and became in charge of horses and earthquakes. Poseidon is considered to be more unpredictable (as a sea) and much wilder than Zeus is.

Athena represents the sphere of practical wisdom, weaving, carpentry, metalworking and technology in general. She, as a true daughter of her father, is also responsible for justice. For example, in *The Eumenides* she is the one who breaks the jury's tie and makes the decision that the claims of the father are more important than those of the mother, justifying Clytemenestra's death. Despite the fact that Athena never is associated with any male, she is known as a friend and helper of warrior -heroes.

Artemis, a symbol of a pure young girl, like Athena, is a perpetual virgin. In contrast to the goddess of war, she shunned all contact with males, and lived in the forests as both huntress and protector of animals. She was known to be a severe goddess. An example of this is the harsh toughening process of youths that was ritually enacted at her altar in Sparta. During the course of it, the young men would be brutally flogged, sometimes to death. They had to keep silent, however, urged by the priestess of the goddess holding a statue of Artemis. At the same time she was associated with beauty, and her temple in Ephesus was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Apollo, a brother of Artemis, was responsible for healing and purification. He is mainly associated with calm and rational character, even though there is a destructive side to him. Apollo's wisdom extends to music, poetry, and philosophy. His main sanctuaries were: Delphi, which was one of the biggest attractions for the Greeks, and Delos, where he reigned alongside with Artemis. The cult of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, came from the East. She was the most feminine goddess and was worshiped not only by women, but also by men for harmony.

Ares, the god of destructive war, was greatly feared among the Greeks. He was described to be the spirit of blood lust that enters a warrior and makes him eager to kill and destroy his enemy.

Hermes was known as for his tricks and as a thief. He was associated with luck and the roadways. Hermes was the one to guide the souls to the underworld.

Dionysus was associated with humans and animals, male and female, youth and old age, normal and abnormal. He was considered to be the most terrible and the most sweet god. He was not connected with any particular area and was always on the move. He also represented the emotions and the ecstasy of ritual madness. The people were trying to tame those extremes... not very successfully.

The Greeks were quite skilled and artistic in worshipping their gods. They created different ways to acknowledge the divinities, which were related not only to gift-giving, but also to various festivals, celebrations, singing, dancing, and competing in athletics.

The Greeks worshiped their gods out of awe for their power to do them good or harm. The gods demanded their power to be acknowledged not only by gifts but also with other forms of serving them. Olympian religion was much more concerned with the here and now and propitiation of the gods for special favors through formal rituals. The dominant part of the worship of gods in Ancient Greece was festivity and celebration. Herodotus proves this while describing a group who spent their days "sacrificing and having a good time". The common worship processions were very common, ranging from those of a single household to those involving the whole city. Singing and dancing in a chorus was one basic form of worship, and competing at athletics was another. All the rituals were also accompanied by prayer.

Greek gods were known to serve as models of different types of human behaviour. Since the number of principal gods was restricted, they were made to play many various roles. For example, in Attica offerings for Zeus were given on different days as for "Zeus of the city", "kindly Zeus", "Zeus who looks over people", "Zeus of fulfillment", "Zeus of boundaries", "Zeus of mountain tops", etc., etc. He had, in fact, several hundred such descriptions.

The most important part of worship was the sacrifice. The typical victim was an animal, but there were also "bloodless" or "pure" sacrifices of corn, cakes, fruit, and the like. A Greek religious calendar was a list of sacrifices indicating what god or hero was to receive what offering on what day. Commonly, the thighbones of the slaughtered animal, wrapped in fat, were burnt on a raised altar for the gods, the meat was then cooked and eaten by the people. Hesiod tells us a myth to explain the unfairness of the contribution: when gods and people first divided out the sacrificial portions, Prometheus, people's helper, tricked Zeus into taking the wrong share.

It is hard to summarize Greek attitudes to their gods. Even though the gods in Homer do show some concern for fairness and justice a few times, it is often stressed that the gap between the mortals and blessed gods is unbridgeable. The Olympians do not have any concern for humans, and rule the universe for their own convenience. According to Zeus in the *Odyssey*, people are responsible for their own misfortunes. "There was never equality between the race of deathless gods and that of men who walk the earth", says Apollo in Homer. The gods have human form, they were born, they grow up, they experience passion, but they will never age or die.

The goals of religion were practical and this -worldly. Many public festivals throughout Greece had to do with preparing boys to be warriors, girls to be mothers. In addition to this, every Greek was looking for two practical goods he could get from gods: prophetic advice and healing.

The twelve gods of Olympus were being a very significant component of the lives of the Greeks. They not only were serving as an object of worship and adoration, but also defined the people's moral standards of living. Religion is a rather large piece and an inseparable part of the history of Ancient Greece

