

Greek and Roman Religion

Some things to remember when teaching Greek and Roman religion:

- This list of deities is by no means exhaustive. Sometimes gods were also given epithets which highlighted a specific part of their nature, eg, Athena Parthenos (the virgin) whose statue stood inside the Parthenon, and Athena Promachos, (Athena-who-fights-on-the-front-lines) whose statue stood right after the entrance to the Athenian Acropolis, right before one reached the Parthenon.
- The way the gods were depicted and characterized changed over time and could be different depending on location. Attributes do not always appear in art and vary greatly. Many different places claimed gods as their own, for example there are at least two different birthplaces for Aphrodite.
- The Romans did not simply copy the Greek gods. Ancient Italy had its own mythology which, with trade, warfare, and cultural exchange, over time overlapped with the Greek pantheon. The Greek and the Roman versions of the gods had some differences as well, for example Bacchus was a combination of Dionysus and the Italian god Liber who was connected to agriculture and Jupiter was a much more military god than Zeus. Venus was especially important to Rome because she was believed to be their ancestor (as the mother of the founding hero Aeneas) in a way that Aphrodite was not characterized in Greece. Similarly, Mars was more important to the Romans as a leader and protector and not as commonly characterized as violent and unpredictable like Ares.
- The Etruscans (from modern Tuscany and surrounds) were a third ancient Mediterranean culture which had a very similar pantheon. Some of their names for the gods were similar (eg. Roman Juno = Etruscan Uni), while others were entirely different (eg. Roman Bacchus = Etruscan Fufuns). The Romans claimed that they got many of their beliefs about augury and divination from the Etruscans, as well as other customs.
- The Greeks and the Romans knew that many of their ideas about their gods came from other cultures, namely those of ancient Egypt and the ancient Middle East. For example, Dionysus was thought by some to have his origins in the ancient Egyptian god Osiris. As the Roman Empire expanded, the gods were combined or equated with those from other local traditions through a process called syncretism. For example, the Gallic (parts of modern France, Germany, northern Italy, and surrounds) goddess of fertility Rosmerta was depicted as the wife of Mercury and the healing god Lenus was associated with Mars.
- Not everyone believed in the gods. Much of ancient Greco-Roman religion was about ritual – things people did rather than things they believed. There was variety in belief and practice between the gods associated with the state who had large temples, huge public festivals, and had a political dimension and the gods and rituals of personal devotion in one's household. Ancient texts discuss the nature of the gods, their place in the world, and their relationship to humans. Not everyone agreed and opinions changed over time.

Some Greek and Roman Gods, Heroes, and Mythological Creatures

Zeus – Jupiter – Jove Husband of Hera and the king of the gods. He hurled thunderbolts across the sky when angered (seen as lightning on earth). Known for his many affairs with mortals and immortals, both male and female. His attributes are a scepter or thunderbolt, an eagle, and occasionally a helmet.

Hera – Juno Wife of Zeus and queen of the gods. She oversees young women, marriage, and women's fertility. Often depicted as a jealous and vengeful because of Zeus' many affairs. Her attributes are a peacock, a pomegranate, a scepter with a cuckoo on it, and a diadem.

Apollo Twin brother of Artemis. God of the sun, music, and poetry. He rode the chariot of the sun across the sky from sunrise to sunset. His attributes are a lyre, a bow and arrows, a laurel crown, a chariot and halo when shown as the sun god.

Hades – Pluto Brother of Zeus and Poseidon, the god of the underworld and of the dead. Rarely depicted in art compared to the other gods, but is sometimes shown with his wife, Persephone. Hades abducted her and she spends half of the year with him in the underworld (winter) and half of the year on earth (summer).

Aphrodite – Venus Goddess of love and beauty, Aphrodite was born from the sea. A very powerful goddess, she represents love and lust, both human and divine. Her attributes are the scallop shell, myrtle, doves, swans, dolphins, and a torch either lit or unlit.

Artemis – Diana Twin sister of Apollo. Virginal goddess of the woodlands, hunting, and protector of safe childbirth. She is sometimes also represented as the goddess of the moon. Her attributes are a bow and arrows, javelin or spear, sometimes a crescent moon on her forehead, dogs, and deer.

Ares – Mars The god of war, he was handsome, violent, and unpredictable. He is most often shown as a young man, usually in armor. His attributes are the wolf, the woodpecker, a helmet, shield, sword, and spear. He is often depicted with Aphrodite, demonstrating the conflict between the forces of love and destruction.

Athena – Minerva Goddess of wisdom, technological crafts, and war. She was a daughter of Zeus and was born when she sprang full-grown from her father's head. She is often shown wearing armor and a helmet and carrying a spear. She was the patron of the city of Athens. Her attributes are the owl, the olive branch or tree, and her *aegis*, or goatskin cape.

Poseidon – Neptune God of the sea, earthquakes, and horses. Brother of Zeus and Hades. His attributes are a trident, a fish or dolphin, and *hippocampi* (half horse and half fish) which pulled his chariot.

Hermes – Mercury Messenger of the gods, protector of travelers, merchants, and thieves. His attributes are winged sandals, winged hat, *caduceus*, or herald's staff, and a traveler's cloak.

Dionysus – Bacchus God of wine, theater, and fertility. His attributes are the grape vine, ivy and the *thyrsus*, a wand tipped with a pine cone and wrapped with ivy. Goats, leopards or tigers pulled his chariot. Often depicted with female followers called *maenads* and male satyrs.

Eros – Cupid God of elemental passions, usually love. With his arrows, he could create blind love or hate in his victims. His attributes are wings, a torch, lit or unlit, a bow, arrows and a quiver. Various shown as a young man or as a baby.

Herakles – Hercules Though born a mortal, Herakles achieved the stature of a demi-god. He is famous for his twelve labors, undertaken to assuage his guilt for having inadvertently killed his wife and children. Known to be rash and quick to anger. His attributes are the club and the lion skin.

Theseus Like Heracles, Theseus was the offspring of a god and a mortal. His most famous exploit was the slaying of the Minotaur, the bull-headed monster kept in the Labyrinth by King Minos of Crete, with the help of the local princess Ariadne. Main hero associated with the city of Athens.

Pan The god of shepherds, Pan was half goat and half man. He is identified by his cloven hooves, goat tail, and double reed pipes.

Janus The Roman god of "good beginnings". Associated with the New Year and the month of January. Janus is identified by his double face, looking simultaneously forward and backward. He was the guardian of doorways and public gates.

Medusa One of the Gorgons, fearsome monsters with wings and snakes for hair, who turned any-one who looked upon them to stone. The hero Perseus was able to avoid the Medusa's gaze and kill her by using a shield lent to him by Athena as a mirror.