

DAVID STUTTARD

# GREEK MYTHOLOGY

A Traveler's Guide  
from Mount Olympus to Troy

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Thames & Hudson



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Drawings by Lis Watkins



**Thames & Hudson**

## About the Author

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**David Stuttard** taught Classics for eleven years in Edinburgh, St Andrews and York, and has written numerous books on the Classical world including *A History of Ancient Greece in Fifty Lives*, *The Romans Who Shaped Britain* (with Sam Moorhead), *Power Games: Ritual and Rivalry at the Ancient Greek Olympics* and *The Parthenon: Power and Politics on the Acropolis*. He is the founder of the theatre company Actors of Dionysus and a course tutor at the University of Cambridge.

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*To Mark Grant, Emily Jane Stuttard and Alex Zambellas, whose warm companionship has  
greatly enhanced my own travels in Greece.*

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# Greek Mythology in Context

Greek myths have a universal quality. Populated by characters who are as recognizable today as they were in antiquity, and who frequently find themselves in dire, unenviable situations – the stuff of our own nightmares – they speak to us directly across millennia. Embraced by the Romans and never forgotten even in the Dark Ages, these myths have exercised a profound influence on literature, art, and music since the Renaissance, taking root in continents undiscovered by the ancient Greeks. Today Greek mythology is so embedded in modern culture, including film, television and computer games, that it has become part of the everyday world of many who may otherwise care relatively little for antiquity.

In ancient Greece – even after writing was introduced in the eighth century BC – most people heard the stories of mythology as children from parents, grandparents and nannies. As adults in the Iron Age they thrilled to bards who recited epic poetry at banquets. In Classical times they heard professionals declaim the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* at public festivals, while praise-singers spun legends into paeans celebrating athletes' victories and lyre-players sang love songs rich with memories of a lost heroic world. And in theatres citizen-choruses danced to hymns which celebrated fabled deeds and tragic actors took on the role of heroes. The sheer abundance of opportunities for telling and listening to myths was breathtaking.

Already in Homeric epic (which for the first time wove Greek oral myth into literature) we can witness such situations: in the *Iliad* Achilles sings of the 'famous deeds of men' as he sulks in his tent at Troy; while in the *Odyssey*, the Phaeacian bard Demodocus entertains listeners with tales of not just Troy, but the Olympian gods.

## Heroic Myths

Demodocus' songs reveal two strands of mythology. The first deals with heroes – mortals or semi-mortals – who inhabit and interact with the 'real' world. Archaeology confirms that these myths contain more or less accurate reflections of the late Bronze Age world (c. 1500 – c. 1200 BC). Towns and cities such as Troy, Mycenae, Sparta, Pylos, Calydon and Knossos were thriving in precisely the period when they are imagined as playing an important role in mythology. Since the decipherment of Linear B tablets in the mid-twentieth century we have even discovered that Bronze Age peoples spoke an early form of Greek, and that the place-names of mythology corresponded to those of real settlements. Sadly these tablets were used only for bureaucratic record-keeping, not literature, and give no real evidence even for the names of kings. Hittite tablets from Anatolia, however, do connect names such as Priam and Alexandros with Wilusa, which can reasonably be identified with Troy.

Some myths resonate so closely with the evidence of archaeology that there are those today who passionately believe in their 'historical' accuracy. In antiquity, too, no one doubted that the Trojan War really happened. Historians such as Herodotus and Thucydides accepted it as fact, while from the fifth century BC it assumed even greater significance when it was seen as a precursor of the Greek victory over the Persians. As a result, historical figures such as Xerxes and Alexander the Great made sacrifices at Troy – the one praying to avenge the Trojans' defeat, the other to outvie it.

Prominent Greek (and, later, Roman) families traced their lineage back to heroes of the Trojan War, just as some English people today boast of ancestors who came to Britain with the Normans, and Americans profess connections with the Founding Fathers. Thus Alexander claimed descent from

Achilles (and Heracles), while Julius Caesar and Augustus counted Aeneas and Anchises among the forebears.

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## Creation Myths

Demodocus sang, too, of the gods, and an important body of Greek mythology takes place in a wide cosmic setting. Some myths describe the creation of the universe. Hesiod summarizes them in his short epic poem, *Theogony* ('Birth of the Gods') – a fusion of Greek and Near Eastern traditions. Here the world is born from the void of Chaos, generations of gods vie for supremacy, and sons castrate or otherwise weaken fathers to seize ultimate control. A bewildering array of gods and goddesses populates this early world, many the personifications of abstract concepts such as Vengeance, Lawlessness, Fate and Harmony.

Such creation myths have their roots many millennia before Hesiod in early man's attempts to explain his environment and his place within it, and many of their themes are shared across different cultures. For example, the story of a great flood sent to punish (or annihilate) mankind, whose only survivors, a pious couple, subsequently repopulate the world, appears throughout the Near East, which is common to many of the world's great religions is the patriarchal explanation that a woman (be she Eve or Pandora) caused all human misery.

## Universal Myths

Even myths that at first seem quintessentially Greek contain universal folk-tale motifs as three examples show. The first involves a baby abandoned to die, who returns to claim a throne. Central to the myth of Oedipus, this theme plays an important role too in the tale of the Trojan Paris, as well as that of Pelias and Neleus, respectively king of Iolcus and founder of Pylos. A variation is the story of Perseus, set adrift in a casket with his mother Danaë. In certain circumstances throughout antiquity babies *were* exposed to die, and the motif of a child surviving to grow up and wreak deliberate or accidental vengeance no doubt reflects real fears.

A second example betrays another anxiety, this time about the written word, which for early Greeks must have seemed both magical and sinister. Letters written by rejected women wrongly accuse two mythological characters of rape: Hippolytus, who is killed as a result, and Bellerophon, who lives but is exonerated.

In a third motif an adventurer overcomes adversities and wins the love of a foreign princess. Sometimes (Perseus and Andromeda) the outcome is benign; sometimes (Jason and Medea; Theseus and Ariadne) it is disastrous. Occasionally it turns expectations on their head. Rather than journeying to an unknown land, Oedipus unwittingly returns home to defeat the monstrous Sphinx and claim the hand not of an exotic princess but of his own mother.

## Causation, Local Myths & Variations

There are also aetiological (causation) myths. Many explain specific phenomena, either natural or man-made. One tells how, when Apollo inadvertently killed the beautiful youth Hyacinthus, he caused the letters 'AI AI' (representative of wailing) to appear on the petals of the hyacinth; another recounts how the same god's anger caused crows to have black feathers.

Cities used local myths to proclaim their own status or the origins of rites. Thus Thebes boasted of its foundation by the legendary Cadmus, while Athens claimed that it was so loved by the gods that Poseidon and Athene fought one another to possess it. Elsewhere, mythology was used to bolster sanctuaries such as Delphi, Delos and Eleusis, while hymns performed there heightened ties between worshippers and mythology.

At its peak the Greek world stretched from Spain to India and from the Black Sea to the Nile. ~~common language and shared religious beliefs provided a sense of unity, but travel could be difficult~~ and the world was physically fragmented. So it is not surprising that localized legends and variations of more widespread myths sprang up – made possible not only by a combination of chauvinistic pride and vivid imagination, but by the fact that throughout much of antiquity there was no concept of religious (or mythological) orthodoxy. No one version of a story – even of a god's birth – took precedence over another.

Equally, myths could be reshaped and revised, and new versions coexisted happily with old. Thus the sixth-century BC lyric poet Stesichorus (from Metaurus in South Italy) could write in his *Palinurus* that the Spartan Helen never went to Troy, but instead the gods hid her in Egypt and sent a phantom in her place. A century later the Athenian Euripides used both this and the older, still more common version of the myth interchangeably in his dramas.

## Mythology in Greek Literature & Art

For the Greeks mythology was all-pervasive, richly diverse and constantly developing. For us, however, our knowledge is confined to surviving literature and art (such a small fragment of what was originally produced that we can never be certain how representative it is). The Greeks had their own views about the relationship between mythology and literature. The fifth-century BC historian Herodotus (who was familiar with Egyptian, North African and Near Eastern mythology as well as Greek) wrote:

How each of the gods came into being, whether they existed for all time and what they look like – these are things about which no one knew until yesterday or the day before so to speak, since I imagine that Hesiod and Homer both lived no more than 400 years before my time. It was they who instructed Greeks about the gods' birth, gave gods their names, assigned their honours and skills, and described their appearances.

Herodotus was wrong on several levels. Homer and Hesiod were closer to him in time, the origins of mythology much more distant. But he was correct that it was early epic poets who helped crystallize the details of mythology and the gods. Homer assumes an easy familiarity with a wide range of myths as clear evidence that they were common currency. But there were many other early epic poems, now in fragments of which survive. Some told of the Trojan War, others of Thebes, still others of the adventures of Jason and the Argonauts.

From the seventh century BC, lyric poets such as Sappho from Lesbos, Tyrtaeus and Alcman from Sparta, and the Theban Pindar peppered their verses with mythological allusions, sometimes so obscure that modern readers find them almost incomprehensible. From the sixth century BC mythology provided material for hundreds of tragedies, written and performed in Athens and throughout the Greek world. In the Hellenistic period (following Alexander the Great's death) mythology was studied, developed and transformed at the Library of Alexandria by scholars and poets including Callimachus, whose *Aetia* catalogued causation myths, and Apollonius of Rhodes, whose *Argonautica* was self-consciously modern in its learned references. Prose authors, too, such as the second-century BC Apollodorus, collated and streamlined myths, often tying themselves in knots, while Latin poets such as Vergil and Ovid adopted and adapted Greek mythology to suit their Roman ends.

In the second century AD mythology fascinated the traveller Pausanias. His *Description of Greece* provides useful evidence for local variations, as well as for many now lost artworks that played an important role in the understanding and dissemination of Greek myths. One was the Throne of Apollo

at Amyclae near Sparta, whose sculptures represented myths as diverse as the Calydonian boar hunt and the Judgment of Paris. Another was the Chest of Cypselus in the Temple of Hera at Olympia, perhaps dating to the seventh century BC, its richly carved sides and lid showed scenes from the Trojan War, the Voyage of the *Argo*, the Labours of Heracles, the voyage of Odysseus, the Seven Against Thebes and the adventures of Theseus and Perseus.

## Myths in a Landscape

Sometimes sculptures helped link location with mythology. The east pediment of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia showed preparations for Pelops' chariot race, which was supposed to have begun close by, while the subjects of the west pediment and west metopes (self-contained sculptural blocks) of the Parthenon at Athens were myths set on the Athenian Acropolis. Natural phenomena provided another link. Also on the Athenian Acropolis an olive tree and three grooves in the rock, apparently made by Poseidon's trident, reinforced the reality of Athene and Poseidon's contest. In Magnesia in Asia Minor a cliff shaped like a weeping woman was identified with Niobe, turned to stone, still mourning her children slain by Artemis and Apollo. At Delphi another rock, positioned at what for the Greeks was the centre of the earth, was venerated as the stone Cronus swallowed in mistake for his son, Zeus.

For many, the very landscape was alive with myths and mythical creatures. Dryads lived in oak trees, oreads in mountain caves and nereids in ocean waves. Breezes, pasturelands and meadows, fountains, springs and rivers, all had their resident spirits. In many places, too, mythology and landscape were inextricably linked – the boar hunt to the wooded glens of Calydon, the birth of Aphrodite to the sparkling sea at Cyprus or the slaying of the Minotaur to the palace at Knossos.

## A Traveler's Guide

Greek landscapes shaped Greek myth, which in turn influenced Greek history. So, to try to link myth and history with their associated sites, this book takes readers on a journey through the Greek mainland, as well as to some of the Aegean islands and sites in Turkey which once were Greek. All these locations are accessible today, and visitors may use this book as a companion. For armchair travellers the brief evocations that begin each chapter are intended to capture something of their modern atmosphere.

Travel is instructive, but not essential, for Greek mythology still thrives wherever there are receptive minds, as a poem first published by the present author's Humanity professor, Robert Ogilvie, makes clear:

When I was one, in Shillingstone,  
June afternoon you spent  
In reading Homer. Twenty now  
Homer I read in Ghent.

From Ghent to Shillingstone is far.  
It's twenty years away.  
But clear-seen Ithaca is near.  
I'll meet you there today.

# Mount Olympus: Dion & the Home of the Gods

**They say that Mount Olympus is the everlasting home, immutable, of the immortal gods. Gales cannot shake it, nor rainstorms drench it, and no snow clouds come near; but, rather, the high air opens out, serene and cloudless, bathed in the purest light. Here every day for all eternity the blessed gods lead lives of happiness.**

**Homer, *Odyssey*, 6.41f.**



On the fertile plain between the sea and Mount Olympus, Dion thrums with life. Tall clumps of trees oak, ash and poplar, cypress, plane and agnus castus – chitter with the busyness of birds that flit between the branches with a sudden chirr of wings before alighting on a cluster of bamboo. Doves murmur in the tree-tops. Distant crows abrade the air. Iridescent dragonflies hover over the flat surface of the lake or dance around the pillars of a sunken temple, where water flows clear over weathered stones and tortoises loll, lazy in the sun. Straight paved streets stride off with an initial confidence, only to be overcome by lush vegetation, distracted by wild roses and entangled in a sea

asphodel. Elsewhere, anemones and poppies stud the rippling meadows as they flow towards the theatre. ~~And rising up behind the ranks of benches – so close and yet remote, at once forbidding and~~ apparently benign, its high peaks crowned with clouds, its slopes already burgeoning with grapes – Mount Olympus, the legendary dwelling place of Greece's gods.

## In the Beginning

For the Greeks, Mount Olympus was the ultimate seat of power. The gods whose home it was controlled the earth and skies, and all that lived there. Theirs was an extended ruling family, often beset by arguments and egos, sometimes capricious, sometimes fiercely loyal, but always jealous of their own authority and merciless against any who opposed it.

But the Olympians did not always rule the cosmos. Nor was there always a cosmos to rule. At first there was only Chaos, a yawning void, infinite and empty, a lifeless place of endless darkness. Hesiod described the process of creation:

In the beginning came Chaos; next full-bosomed Gaia [Earth], an ever-safe foundation for all the deathless gods, who live on snowy Mount Olympus; and misty Tartarus in the bowels of the broad-pathed earth; and Eros [Desire], the most beautiful of all the deathless gods, who loosens limbs, seducing even the most clever minds and spirits of both gods and men.

Now that there was form and animating spirit, other entities quickly came into being. From Chaos came Night (Nyx) and Day; from Earth came 'Ouranus, star-speckled sky, her equal, that he might cover her entirely'. Earth, too, was evolving. Hesiod tells how:

She gave rise to long mountain chains, the lovely home of Nymphs, who dwell high in the mountains' wooded glens. With no recourse to pleasant lovemaking, she bore Pontus with its rolling waves – the barren sea. But afterwards she lay in love with Ouranus and so gave birth to Ocean with deep-drifting currents.

The fundamental cosmic form was now in place, imagined by early Greeks as a flat disc-shaped earth surrounded by the freshwater stream of Ocean. Beneath lay Tartarus or Hades, the Underworld soon to be home to the dead, while above stretched Ouranus, the sky.

## The Birth of the Titans

Impregnated by Ouranus' rains, Earth gave birth to a succession of primal beings, called Titans ('Stretchers' or 'Strainers'). Some, personifications of abstract ideas such as Themis ('Divine Tradition') and Mnemosyne ('Memory'), would play an important role in Greek religious thought. Others, such as Rhea, brought forth future generations; still others were ferocious and malformed creatures. Such were the Cyclopes: 'Arrogant and boastful ... who gave Zeus thunder and forged his lightning-bolt. In all else they were like gods, but they had just one eye set in the middle of their foreheads. And so they called them Cyclopes ['Round-Eyed']...'. But deadliest of all was Cronus 'the twisted mind, his father's bitterest enemy'.

But none of the children of Ouranus and Gaia had seen the light of day. No sooner were they born than Ouranus secreted them beneath the earth. So many offspring were returned into her womb, that Gaia stretched and strained in agony. At last in desperation she forged a sickle of the strongest stone and demanded which of her sons would help her. Only Cronus volunteered. Placing the sickle in his hands, Gaia instructed him to wait till nightfall, when Ouranus covered her, intent on making love. Hesiod imagined Cronus reaching out his left hand, 'holding in his right the saw-toothed sickle, which

he eagerly sliced off his father's genitals and flung them far behind him'. From the gouts of blood were born the Giants and the avenging Furies, while from the genitals themselves, which splashed in the sea, came Aphrodite, goddess of sex and love, who in time was washed ashore near Paphos on her favoured island, Cyprus.

Now other gods appeared. Night gave birth to terrors: Old Age and Famine; Wars and Killing; Quarrels, Falsehoods, Blame; unerring Nemesis, who punishes wrongdoers; the ruthless Fates, 'who at birth assign both good and bad to mortals, who hunt down the transgressions of both gods and men'; goddesses whose anger never stills until they wreak a dreadful justice on the criminal'.

Some of Pontus' children were more benign: his firstborn was Nereus (sometimes called 'The Old Man of the Sea'), whose daughters, the Nereids, could calm the 'sea-swell on the misty sea and soothe the screaming winds'. But others were truly terrifying: Briareus with a hundred hands; the Harpies ['Snatchers'], bird-women who conveyed dead souls of heroes down to Hades; Echidna, half 'fair-cheeked girl', half blotchy, bloated snake; the Sphinx, the Hydra, the Chimaera, creatures who would plague the earth until heroic mortals killed them. Streams and rivers bubbled up. The breezes blew. Helios, the sun, came into being, and the moon, Selene. And the first Dawn broke.

## The Coming of the Olympian Gods

Amid this welter of creation, Cronus forced himself incessantly on his sister Rhea. She bore five children – three daughters (Hestia, Demeter and Hera) and two sons (Hades and Poseidon). But as soon as each was born, Cronus ate them. For it was prophesied that his own son would overthrow him. Advised by her parents Ouranus and Gaia, Rhea, pregnant for a sixth time, fled to Crete. Here on a mountain top (identified in antiquity with both Mount Ida and Mount Dicte) she bore a son and hid him in a deep cave, around whose mouth she set Curetes, armoured youths, to mask the baby's cries by clashing spears against their shields. Then she wrapped a stone in swaddling clothes and presented it to Cronus as his child. Without a glance, he gulped it down.

Gods quickly grow to adulthood, so it was not long before the boy left Crete and came disguised into his father's court to serve as cupbearer. With cunning guile he made the old god violently drunk. Retching, Cronus vomited first the swaddled stone, then each of his five (mercifully undigested) children. Only now did he realize the truth. Even he could not trick fate. His sixth child – Zeus – had come to topple him.



The gods (with Themis in her chariot drawn by lions) fight the giants on the north frieze of the late sixth- / early fifth-century BC Siphnian Treasury, Delphi.

Battle was joined. On Cronus' side were the Titans, with Atlas as their general. Against them stood Zeus, his five siblings and the Cyclopes, whom Cronus had imprisoned deep in Tartarus, but Zeus had since set free. Only after ten years did Zeus prevail. Most of the Titans were consigned to Tartarus, though some say Cronus, pardoned, was allowed to rule the blessed dead in the Elysian Fields.

But the Titans had powerful cousins – twenty-four Earth-born Giants – and in time they sought vengeance. As the Giants tore up mountains, piling Mount Pelion on top of nearby Ossa in an attempt to scale Olympus, another war engulfed the cosmos. It was only with the help of Heracles that the gods defeated their gross rivals. No more attempts were made to overthrow them.

## The Olympian Gods

In popular Greek imagination there were twelve gods and goddesses specifically associated with Olympus, each living in a palace of their own built on bronze foundations in the high mountain valleys. For the most part they were imagined in human form – which prompted the late sixth- / early fifth-century BC philosopher Xenophanes to observe: 'If oxen, horses or lions had hands, with which they could draw and work as men do, horses would draw gods like horses, and oxen like oxen, and each would make their bodies like their own.'

The gods possessed human emotions and their hierarchy reflected that of Bronze Age Greece – with an autocratic king, a queen, lords, princes and princesses; but they were as far removed from mankind as the most powerful mortal ruler from his lowest slave. There were other differences, too. Most crucially the gods were immortal. *Ichor* (divine blood) pulsed through their veins. They dined exclusively on *ambrosia* (literally, 'not mortal [food]'), washed down with *nectar* ('deathly [drink]'). And they could assume whatever shape they liked – bird or animal, man or woman – travelling



effortlessly across the earth, interacting with humankind for good or ill.

In the imagination Olympus, too, could assume different forms. Mostly it was the mountain northeast Greece, but at other times it was something altogether more remote and less substantial. In the *Iliad*, Homer pictures Hera harnessing her chariot and driving with Athene to find Zeus on a journey that appears to take them from this more ethereal realm to the physical mountain.



Raising her veil, Hera turns towards Zeus on the frieze from Athens' fifth-century BC Parthenon.

Quickly Hera flicked her lash across the horses, and the gates of heaven opened of their own accord, groaning on their hinges. The Horae ['Hours'] are their gate-keepers, and to them are entrusted the mighty heavens and Olympus, for they decide whether to release the rolling clouds or close them in. So, through these gates they urged their horses, which responded to the goad, and they found Zeus, the son of Cronus, sitting on his own, far from the other gods, on the peak of the many-ridged Olympus.

On Olympus the gods are often envisaged in assembly or banqueting. Perhaps the most stunning representation of this divine assembly appears on the Parthenon frieze (inspired by a frieze on the earlier Siphnian Treasury at Delphi). On it, Hera receives news from her divine messenger Iris, who

beside her, seated on a throne, her husband looks on in majesty. He is Zeus, the undisputed ruler of the gods.

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## Zeus

Drawing lots with his brothers, Hades and Poseidon, to see who should rule each of creation's three zones – the land (together with the heavens); the sea; and the Underworld (or Hades) – Zeus won the earth and sky. Enthroned on the ridge of Mount Olympus, which is today called Stefani, and holding in his right hand a golden sceptre, he ruled both gods and men. A passage from the *Iliad*, said to have inspired his celebrated statue at Olympia, describes the sheer power of his presence: 'Zeus, the son of Cronus, spoke, and he inclined his head with his dark brows, and the mighty king's hair, anointed with ambrosial oil, fell forward from his immortal head. And great Olympus trembled.' As well it might. For the great sky-god was armed with an all-powerful weapon, the lightning bolt, whose blast wreaked total devastation. Some imagined that the lightning bolt was Zeus' true essence – pure blazing blinding energy, concealed and contained within his (safer) anthropomorphic form.



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With an eagle perching on his left hand, Zeus wields his thunderbolt. (Attic red figure vase, c. 470–460 BC.)

All gods had avatars. Zeus' was the eagle, his special messenger, which could soar so effortlessly.

and so resplendently. The fifth-century BC lyric poet Bacchylides encapsulates the bond between god and bird:

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Lightning-fast on tawny wings, the eagle, confident in its immeasurable strength, cleaves the vast unfathomable sky – the messenger of Zeus, the thunder-god, whose rule is wide. And all the little birds, shrill-chattering, scatter in terror. The high peaked mountains cannot check him nor the pounding storm-waves of the tireless sea, but on outstretched wings he soars across the vastness of the earth, his feathers gently ruffled in the western breeze. And all men see him.

## Zeus, Hera & Their Children

Once established as the king of the newly victorious Olympians, Zeus (following Cronus' example) pursued his own sister Hera and, after seducing her near Argos, made her his wife. But although celebrated on Olympus, theirs was not a marriage made in heaven. Zeus' serial philandering wounded Hera deeply. Indeed, she was not the only god to find his rule at times intolerable. Homer tells how Hera and the other gods once tied Zeus up, and it was only when the sea-nymph Thetis summoned Briareus, whose hundred hands made light work of even complicated knots, that he was freed. Zeus' wrath was terrible. He enslaved Poseidon and Apollo for their part in the conspiracy, forcing them to build the walls of Troy, and took his revenge on Hera. In the *Iliad* Zeus reminds her:

Do you not recall how you were hung from a great height, with an anvil suspended from each ankle, and I fastened golden handcuffs to your wrists, unbreakable. And you hung there in the misty air, and far and wide across Olympus the gods were angered. But they could not free you.

Only when the gods swore a great oath never again to rebel against him did Zeus set Hera free.

Of their three children, only their daughter, Hebe ('Youth'), was entirely undemanding. One son, Ares, was the god of war, of whom (in the *Iliad*) Zeus declares: 'I hate you more than any of the gods on Mount Olympus. Conflict is your chief delight – and war and violence. You have the harsh inflexibility of your mother Hera, which I cannot bear. Indeed, I can only just control her by my words.'

Their other son, Hephaestus, was (to his parents at least) even more troublesome. When he was born lame, Hera considered him so unattractive that she flung him from the peaks of Mount Olympus far out to sea. Two sea-nymphs, Thetis and Eurynome, rescued him and brought him up, in return for which Hephaestus made them 'beautiful bronze goods, brooches, spiral arm-bands, cups and chairs' there in their hollow cave, while the roaring stream of Ocean gushed, foaming, by'. In time, Hera discovered her lost son and, appreciating his potential, reinstated him on Mount Olympus, put him to work on enhancing her jewelry collection and gave him Aphrodite as his wife. In another version of the myth Hephaestus took revenge by constructing a throne, which clamped Hera tight and held her captive. Only thanks to Dionysus' persuasive words and wine did Hephaestus set his mother free.

Zeus was even less enamoured of his son. Once, when Hephaestus took Hera's side, Zeus seized him by the foot and again threw him off the mountain. The *Iliad* describes Hephaestus falling for a whole day before crashing to earth on Lemnos. But he was reprieved. Homer imagined him working in his smithy on Olympus, assisted by golden automata formed like beautiful young women, with 'sense, mind, voice and strength', creating wheeled tripods, which could move of their own volition. (Later authors placed Hephaestus' forge in Sicily, beneath Mount Etna.) Despite his skill, Hephaestus was a figure of fun. The gods laughed 'merrily' not only as they watched him hobbling around the banqueting hall, but when they discovered that his brother Ares had cuckolded him.

Despite their feisty relationship, Zeus was susceptible to Hera's blandishments. Indeed, I

magically extended their wedding night on Samos to last three hundred years, and Homer describes how Hera, having dressed alluringly in her bedchamber on Mount Olympus, later seduced Zeus on a mountaintop near Troy:

He took Hera in his arms, and beneath them from the earth rose fresh young grasses and clover, jewelled with dew, and crocuses and hyacinths so plentiful and soft that they cushioned them from the hard earth. And they lay down together, and a golden cloud – it was sublime – rolled over them and drops of dew dripped down.

## Deucalion & Dion's Altar to Zeus

On earth long generations passed – a Golden Age, free from disease, when the fields brought forth crops without the need for farming, and a Silver Age of bitter arguments. An Age of Bronze followed when human beings were first created, but they were soon found to be degenerate. One of the number, Lycaeus, either sacrificed his son to Zeus on an Arcadian mountaintop or served him to the god in a barbaric banquet. Repelled, Zeus turned Lycaeus into a wolf, incinerated his fifty lawless sons, and resolved to destroy the human race.

So Zeus amassed the inky storm clouds and rain fell in torrents. The great plains of Greece were inundated and the rivers roared. Mankind was drowning, but the Titan Prometheus was not prepared to see his mortal son, Deucalion, die. He advised him to build a chest, fill it with food and embark with Pyrrha, his wife, Pandora's daughter. The chest bobbed safely on the rising water until Deucalion and Pyrrha were the only mortals left alive. When Zeus saw them, his anger melted. Both were pious. Neither must be destroyed. So after nine days and nights the waters abated, and on the peak of Mount Parnassus the chest came to land. On Zeus' advice, the two survivors picked stones from the mountainside and threw them over their shoulders. From Deucalion's sprang men, from Pyrrha women, and so a nobler human race was born. In time Deucalion and Pyrrha had children. One of the daughters, Thyia, bore a son to Zeus: Macednos, from whom Macedonia was named.

In thanks for their salvation Deucalion erected an altar to Zeus at Dion in the shadow of Mount Olympus – the first altar of the new age. In Classical and Hellenistic times it marked out Dion as a site of special sanctity. Indeed, 'Dios' is the possessive case of 'Zeus'. Dion quite literally belongs to Zeus.

## The Muses

Other divinities, too, lived on Mount Olympus, most notably the Muses, daughters of Zeus by the Titan Mnemosyne. One of their homes was on the mountain's northern flanks, in Pieria, near Dion. Pausanias says that originally there were three Muses, though by Hellenistic times their number had expanded to nine, and specific roles were assigned to each. Thus Calliope became the muse of epic poetry, Clio of history, Terpsichore of dance and so on.

The Muses, too, were swift to punish rivals. When Hera persuaded the winged Sirens to compete with them in song, the Muses tore out the Sirens' feathers and crowned their own heads with them. Another time, the nine mortal daughters of Pieros (king of Pieria) challenged the Muses to a contest. When the Muses sang all creation held its breath in wonder; but when the mortal girls performed vainly, darkness cloaked the world. Triumphant, the Muses changed them into birds as punishment. Another musician, an accomplished Thracian lyre-player Thamyris, issued his own challenge: if he defeated them in song the Muses must let him sleep with each of them in turn. He lost. The Muses blinded him and removed his musicality.

Hesiod claimed to have experienced a more benign encounter with the Muses on Mount Helicon.

near Thebes, where they commanded him to sing of the birth of the gods (in his poem *Theogony*). Pindar describes them:

delighting the great spirit of their father Zeus on Mount Olympus, singing in harmony of things that are and things that still shall be and things that came before. Their sweet voice pours untiring from their lips, and the house of father Zeus the thunderer smiles, filled with the Muses' voice, as fragrant as a lily, and the snowy peaks of Mount Olympus echo back, and the palaces of the immortals.

The Muses' inspiration was invaluable. It was only thanks to them that poets could speak with authority and confidence about the gods and heroes of the distant past.

The Muses appear at many of the great communal events of Greek mythology. Accompanied by Apollo on his lyre, they sing and dance at the weddings of Cadmus and Harmonia in Thebes, and Peleus and Thetis on Mount Pelion. They regularly perform at funerals, too, most memorably at the funeral of Achilles mourning Achilles in the *Iliad*, while in a tantalizing fragment from Pindar's *Dirges*:

They lulled to rest the corpses of their sons. The first sighed her lament for Linus; the second sang the song of grief for Hymenaeus, whom Fate despatched when first he lay in wedlock; and the third performed her threnody for Ialmenus, whose strength was drained when he was stricken by a merciless disease. But for Orpheus of the golden sword...

## Orpheus

Orpheus was born near Dion in Pimpleia, a village with which he kept close ties throughout his life. His mother was Calliope, the eldest of the Muses. Some said his father was Apollo, others that it was King Oeagrus, the son of Pieros (whose daughters were punished by the Muses). Orpheus' musical and musicianship was legendary. The fifth-century BC poet Timotheus tells that he introduced the lyre to Pieria, where his playing was so fine and his voice so sweet that (in Euripides' words): 'Deep in the deep forest folds of Olympus, Orpheus magicked the trees with his music, magicked the wild forest beasts with his music.' Everything that heard him followed him: trees, boulders, animals. Even mountain streams changed their course so they could listen to his singing; and in the Thracian land of the Cicones the wood nymph Eurydice ('Wide Justice') fell in love with him. Enraptured, the two were married. But soon disaster struck. While Eurydice was picking flowers and weaving garlands with her fellow nymphs, she disturbed a sleeping snake. It bit her on the ankle and within moments she was dead. Grief stricken, Orpheus sang such heart-rending laments that all nature mourned with him. At last, when they could bear his anguish no longer, the Muses suggested to Orpheus that he should travel to the Underworld and beg Hades to return Eurydice to life.

Setting fear aside, Orpheus descended deep beneath the earth until he met the savage guard-dog of Hades, the three-headed Cerberus. Softly Orpheus soothed it with a gentle lullaby; and soon he was standing in the presence of King Hades. Here he sang his tearful elegy, pouring out his love for his lost wife, begging Hades to restore her to life – she had been so young. His music touched the hardest heart. The ghosts of criminals condemned to everlasting tortures swooned to hear it; the icy hearts of the savage Furies melted; and even Hades was moved to compassion. He agreed to Orpheus' request. On one condition – that on the way home he must go ahead, not looking round until both reached the upper earth. As Orpheus walked on, he heard Eurydice's light footsteps close behind him. At last faint sunlight could be seen. But now Orpheus stopped and listened. Nothing. How could he be certain that Eurydice was following? Impulsively, he looked round. And there she was, a sad smile on her lips, and (true to Hades' orders) she turned and left him. And the darkness engulfed her.

For Orpheus life was meaningless. All he could do was sing of his lost Eurydice. But still his music was irresistible. Everywhere he went, women fell in love with him. At last at Dion – crazed with desire – they clawed and tore at him hysterically, until their passion faded and they found that they had ripped him limb from limb. Some said that Orpheus was rent apart not from desire, but because he worshipped Apollo and neglected Dionysus. So, Dionysus jealously unleashed his maenads (his female followers), who attacked Orpheus at sunrise on a mountaintop. Still others told that Orpheus was killed by Zeus' thunderbolt.

The Muses collected his remains and performed the last rites over them at Dion. A few miles from the city on the road towards Olympus, Pausanias saw a pillar topped by a stone urn, which (local legend said) contained Orpheus' bones. Pausanias wrote, too, that at Dion the women who killed Orpheus ran to the River Helicon to wash off his blood. But as they neared, the river in revulsion sank into the ground so that it might not be complicit in the murder. Today, where it sank, there is a small idyllic lake. Only Orpheus' head survived his mutilation. Still singing, it was carried by the waves to Lesbos where it was buried with great veneration. The Muses took Orpheus' lyre to Mount Olympus, where the gods transformed it into a constellation.



Still clutching his lyre, Orpheus is attacked by frenzied female devotees, one wielding a spit, the other a rock. (Attic red figure vase, c. 640 BC.)

In antiquity, a collection of hymns and teachings attributed to Orpheus formed the basis of a mystical religion (Orphism), whose adherents believed in the survival and transmigration of the soul after death.

## Dion & Olympus in History & Today

Imbued with great sanctity, the peaks of Olympus were probably taboo throughout antiquity. We hear of no attempts to scale them. As for Dion, as one of the most sacred sites in the kingdom of Macedonia, it rose to prominence under its ruler Archelaus I in the late fifth century BC. A century before, to compete at the Olympic Games, Alexander I of Macedon had been forced to prove his Greek credentials by claiming descent from Heracles and the kings of Argos. Now, Archelaus turned Dion into a sanctuary as fine as any in the Greek world. He erected a temple to Zeus, a stadium and theatre, and established the 'Olympia', a festival of athletics and drama sacred to Zeus and the Muses. Here may have been performed the (lost) *Archelaus* by Euripides (who as an old man joined the king's court). His *Bacchae* and *Iphigenia in Aulis* were perhaps intended for Dion's theatre, too.



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