

## Lesson 1. Greek Creation Mythology

Although when we think of mythology we think of a collection of stories, there is a beginning to them. Understanding the beginning of the story, the creation of the world, gives us a framework to build upon as we learn about the different myths.

The short answer to how the Greeks viewed the creation of the world is this:

Scary old gods came first; they got stomped down by their kids, who were better looking, younger gods. These gods created humans. Humans and gods fought for supremacy, and the humans won a few rounds but eventually got trounced and became more and more miserable.

Now, the longer answer:

In the beginning, the universe was without form. It was not nothing; there was matter, but it was unorganized, shapeless, mixed up and dark. This was called Chaos.

After Chaos, more divinities, or gods, came into being.

Gaia, the Earth, held up Uranus, the sky. Gaia and Uranus had a bunch of kids. First they had a bunch of monsters including the Cyclops, and then they created the Titans as the second generation. Uranus hated all the Titans and was actually quite ugly about it – but there are only a couple of Titans that you need to remember: first, Oceanus, the god of the sea, and then Cronus, the strongest and best one of all. Gaia was pretty ticked at Uranus for being a jerk, so she helped Cronus overthrow him.

So, let's keep this straight. Cronus is Uranus's son. Cronus became the king (bye-bye Uranus), and married his sister, Rhea – another Titan. It's like a soap opera. This was called the Golden Age because men, who had been made by a Titan named Prometheus, were living in harmony. Everything was hunky dory.

It didn't last, though, because Cronus heard a prophecy that one of his sons would dethrone him, so every time his wife, Rhea, had a baby, he swallowed it. Rhea got a little sick of seeing all of her children swallowed alive, so she tricked Cronus when her sixth child, Zeus, was born; she wrapped up a rock to look like a baby and had Cronus swallow that instead. Zeus rescued his previously swallowed siblings, and all was right with the world.

## World View

The Greek view of the world was a little different than ours. The Greeks believed that the world was flat, but circular, like a paper plate.

At the center of the Universe was Greece.

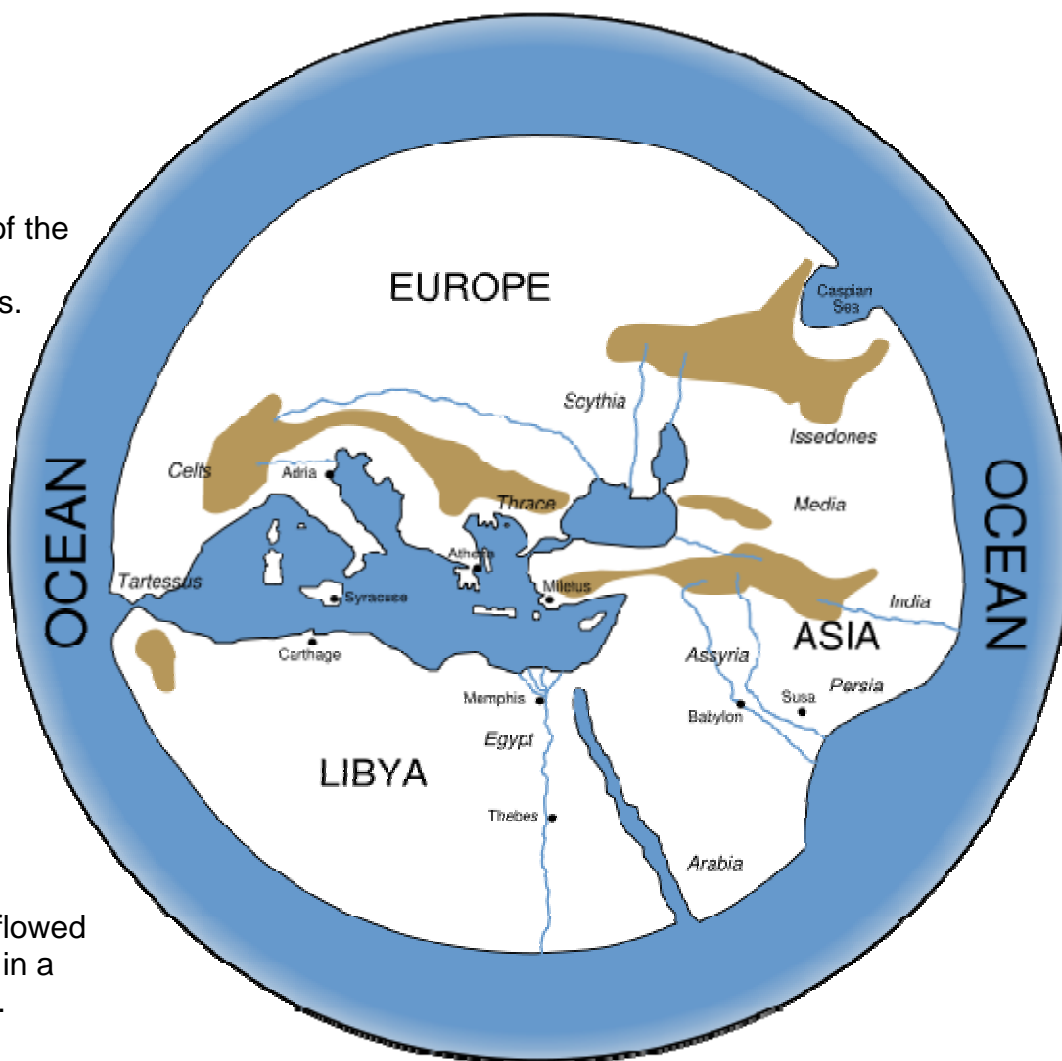
Their world was divided by the Mediterranean, which means "Middle of the Lands" in Latin.

The river Ocean flowed around the world in a clockwise motion.

In the north lived the Hyperboreans – an extremely happy people for whom life was sweet. When the old people became tired of living, they threw themselves into the sea. This was a land of constant vacation where people were said to live for 1,000 years.

In the south lived the Ethiopians. In Greek drama, mention is often made of various gods being in Ethiopia, meaning really far away. So, if I say I parked in Ethiopia this morning, would that mean I'm close to my office or far away? The Ethiopians were said to be on good terms with the gods and liked to entertain them.

To the west were the Elysian Fields. This was the closest the Greeks got to the idea of heaven; only the best and brightest of the dead people got to go there.



## Lesson 2. The Olympian Gods

Use the information you find in this lesson to begin to fill in the gods and goddesses chart at the end of this lesson; you will also need to do your own research to complete it.

Now that you understand the way that the Greeks viewed the beginning of the world, you are ready to learn about the Olympian gods.

First, we have to explore exactly what we mean by “Olympian gods.” Mount Olympus is a real mountain in the north of Greece. Gradually, it became associated less and less with an actual mountain and more with an imaginary place high above the earth. According to the ancient Greeks, the gate to Olympus was made of clouds and it was guarded by four goddesses, the Seasons. Each god had his or her own dwelling place, but Olympus was home base.

There were up to 14 gods considered Olympian gods. Seven of them were Zeus and his siblings, and seven others were children of Zeus. Sometimes only 12 will be listed. The Greeks and Romans shared mythology, so you will find two names for most gods.



### Zeus

Zeus was the king of the hill. He was dominating, powerful and had a soft spot for pretty women. He could be terrifying when angry. His symbols were the thunderbolts, or lightening bolts made for him by the Cyclopes (his uncles); the eagle; and the scepter, or rod. Please copy this information onto your chart.

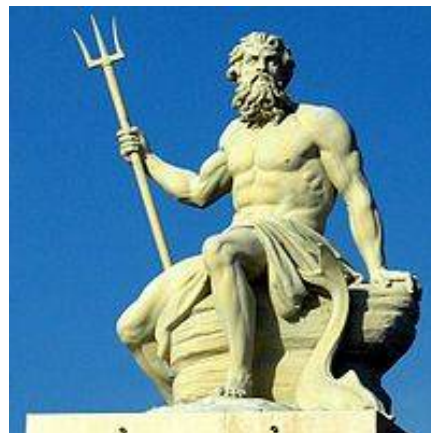
### Hades

Hades, or Pluto, was the god of the underworld and of the dead. He was called the same names by the Romans, but they also sometimes called him Dis or Dis Pater. He was Zeus’s brother and married Persephone after kidnapping her against her will. He was gloomy and frightening.



## Poseidon

Next, we have Poseidon, or Neptune, as the Romans called him. He was Zeus's brother, and he was the god of the sea and also earthquakes. He often is shown with a three-pronged spear called a trident that was made for him by his nephew, Hephaestus, and/or a fish.



## Hera

Our first goddess is Hera. She sits on the right side of Zeus and is his wife. Of course, she's his sister, too, but that's the way it was on Olympus. Hera's Roman name is Juno, and she is the queen of the gods. She is the guardian of marriage and was well-loved by the Greeks; it's kind of sad that she's the goddess of marriage but her own marriage was so bad. She was often jealous of her husband's girlfriends and did mean things to them, even the ones who didn't want anything to do with him, but she could be tender and loving as well. The peacock was her symbol. In fact, the circles in a peacock's tail are said to be the eyes of her 100-eyed servant, Argus.

## Athena

Next is Athena, or Minerva, the daughter who sprang fully formed from the head of Zeus after a major headache. She is the goddess of wisdom and war and also the protector and namesake of the city of Athens. She preferred reason to violence unless she was pushed. She turned Arachne into a spider for bragging that she could spin better than Athena. She was very competitive and is often pictured with her helmet and a spear. She carried Zeus's shield, called the aegis. The owl was her bird. Can you see it in her hand?



## Apollo

Apollo was a twin. His Roman name was the same as his Greek name. He was the god of the sun or light, poetry, music and medicine and was famous for his oracles (wise women to whom he gave his power to predict and interpret the future). He was very proud and also protective of his mother and sister. His symbols were the gold bow and arrows, and he often appears golden and shining. He wears a laurel wreath in memory of Daphne, who didn't want to be his lover and prayed to Mother Earth for help escaping him; she was turned into a laurel tree.



## Artemis

Artemis was Apollo's twin. Her Roman name was Diana, and she was the goddess of hunting, chastity and the moon. She protects women and small children, is fiercely independent and particularly dislikes men. In pictures, she is seen accompanied by three hunting hounds, a bow and a fawn.

## Ares

Ares or, as he is known by his Roman name, Mars, was the god of war. He would fight on both sides, if possible. He was young, strong and handsome, and liked to dress in battle clothes even when he wasn't fighting.



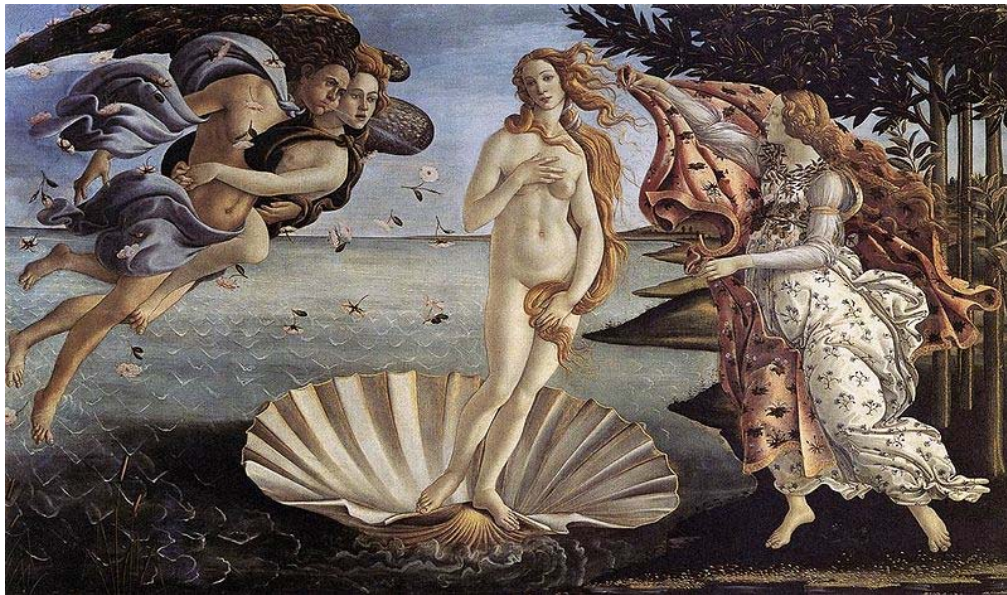
## Hephaestus

Hephaestus, or Vulcan, was born lame and was further crippled when he was thrown from Olympus by his mother, Hera, in a rage. He was the only Olympian with a disability. He was unhappily married to Aphrodite and worked as a blacksmith in the gods' forge.



## Aphrodite

Hephaestus's wife, Aphrodite, whose Roman name was Venus, was the goddess of love and beauty. She was born out of sea foam when the blood of Uranus dropped into the ocean. She was the mother of Eros and was irresistibly charming, fickle, vain and competitive. Her symbol was a cestus, or magic belt, that made everyone fall in love with the wearer; sometimes she would lend it to humans. This is a famous painting of the birth of Venus, or Aphrodite, by Botticelli.



## Hermes

Hermes, or Mercury, was the god of science and invention, but he is best known as the messenger of the gods. He is often pictured with a winged helmet and sandals. He is said to have invented the alphabet, boxing and gymnastics! In this painting by Goltzius, you can see his helmet with wings; he's not wearing his famous sandals, though.

## Hestia

Hestia was Zeus's sister and the goddess and protectress of hearth and home. She is also known by her Roman name, Vesta. She was gentle and kind and was very popular with the Greeks. She didn't have a lot of adventures, so she's rarely pictured in art.





## Demeter

Demeter was the goddess of the crops and the harvest. She is also known as Ceres (Roman) and sometimes Deo. Her symbols include a torch, a crown, a scepter and stalks of grain. She is often portrayed with her daughter, Persephone, who was kidnapped by Hades and taken to the underworld. By the time she was rescued, she'd eaten six pomegranate seeds, so she couldn't escape the underworld entirely. Her mother was so frantic that winter draped the land and no crops would grow. A deal was struck, and Persephone was allowed to return to her mother for half of the year. So each year, when she returns to the underworld, fall comes, then winter – but when she returns to her mother, spring and summer come again.



## Dionysus

Dionysus was the partier of the mountain retreat. He was Zeus's son by another woman, who was driven crazy by Hera and her jealousy. Dionysus went all around teaching people how to make wine and having a good time. Eventually, Hestia gave up her throne for him, and he lived on Olympus. He was the god of wine, of course, and also vegetation.

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Now, use at least two sources in addition to what you read here to fill in your chart completely. Write down the sources you used on the back of the chart.

## Book suggestions

- *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths* by Ingri and Edgar Parin D'Aulaire
- *The Mighty 12: Superheroes of Greek Myths* by Charles Smith
- *Greek Myths and Legends* by Cheryl Evans

If your library doesn't have these, check around Dewey Decimal Number 398.2. That's where Greek mythology is.

## Web references

- <http://greece.mrdonn.org/myths.html>
- <http://www.mythweb.com/>
- <http://mythman.com/>
- <http://www.loggia.com/myth/content.html>
- <http://www.pantheon.org/areas/mythology/europe/greek/articles.html>

## Lesson 5. Putting It All Together

Myths are a way of understanding the world. This lesson has been about Greek mythology, but every culture has myths. Myths define social customs and beliefs, explain natural and psychological phenomena, and provide a way for people to discuss things that cause anxiety.

Mythology is all around us. Here are just a few examples of places we find myths today:

- Days of the week – Wednesday (Woden or Odin – Norse god); Thursday (Thor – Norse god); Friday (Freya – Norse goddess); Saturday (Saturn – Roman god who ruled before Jove)
- Cars – Toyota Avalon and Cressida, Cadillac El Dorado, Honda Odyssey, Mercury
- Shoes – Nike
- Tires – Midas
- Astronomy – constellations like Orion, the Argo, all of the planets and the Pleiades. The Milky Way itself was supposedly the road over which the stars traveled to Jupiter’s palace.
- NASA – the first part of U.S. space program was Project Mercury, named after the messenger of the gods because the project’s purpose was to send a message to the Soviets that America was in the space race. The Gemini Project was next; Gemini is Latin for “twins,” and the project was called this because the capsule held two astronauts. Apollo astronauts rode on Saturn rockets.

Myths also make great stories. They come up in literature all over the place, from really serious stuff like Dante to comic strips. Myths inspire music; actually the word *music* comes from the mythological muses who inspired art of all kinds. Painters like Michelangelo and Botticelli were inspired by myths. Even children’s movies are a good place to look for myths; you will find them everywhere, including *Snow White*, *Star Wars*, and *The Lord of the Rings*.

Can you find at least three examples of mythology connections in the world?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

