

## 8 The Gods of Greece and Rome

The notion of 'god' is a complex one. What is meant by 'a god'? In modern English, a distinction of a kind is made between God, gods, spirits, ghosts, and demons, and much Judaeo-Christian influence can be felt. Many of the Indo-European peoples developed a rich tradition of epic, heroic tales in which more or less immortal figures play a role, often behaving very like ordinary mortal humans and becoming involved in human affairs. In the same stories we find a variety of nymphs and dryads that are clearly pantheistic nature spirits. The passage from the anthropomorphic notion of gods to a higher level of vision has already been traced in the development of Greek philosophy. The older stories about anthropomorphic gods very similar to people are reflected clearly in Homer's great epics.

At the same time, many of the stories told about the gods of Greece seem to derive from legends connected with cultic sites, temples and altars, that were frequently found beside sacred wells or groves of trees. These cultic sites often derived from a feeling that nature is full of invisible semi-divine spirits that need to be placated with offerings. The nymphs and naiads of Classical tradition, the elves and goblins of northern Europe, the fairies of Celtic lore all have much in common. Another religious tradition, mentioned in earlier chapters, is the ancient fertility cult of the Earth Mother and her son who dies and rises from the dead. Finally, certain divinities were associated with ecstatic 'mystery' cults in which the god was believed to take possession of his or her devotees; Dionysius is the most familiar example. There may be a link with some form of Shamanism here.

The attitude of the Greeks (and later of the Romans) toward their gods was not as devout and serious as that demanded by Christianity. They were very aware of the grotesque and arbitrary elements found in the myths and tales told about them. This probably only made them more real, since life itself is so often grotesque and arbitrary. It also made them more dangerous, since the gods of Greece are not originally models of justice and love. They can be as vicious and cruel as any tyrant. The change in understanding of the gods found in the Greek tragedies and the philosophers reflects the changes taking place in Greek (especially Athenian) society at the time, where democracy and its laws were seen as the triumph of reason and justice over the dark cruelty of irrational passion.

Hesiod had expressed an essential pattern when he depicted the fundamental processes of the cosmos as Eros and Eris, Love and Strife, union and division. The epic tales about ancient heroes, and the gods who are like them, seem very often to be illustrations of this same pattern. Presiding over all that happens is the relentless passage of Time, and the inevitable pattern of change that goes with it; behind that stands the mysterious dimension known as Destiny, 'that which must happen' and which threatens even the gods.

Very many stories told in Greece are about the attempts of men and gods to avoid Determinism; for the Greek gods are subject to Destiny and have no 'natural' knowledge of what lies in store for them. In this, too, they are very like humans. There are a number of stories about oracles, that at Delphi being the most famous, where gods (mainly Apollo) tell humans the hidden truth about what must happen. The humans then try in vain to outwit Fate, like Oedipus deciding never to return to Corinth so long as his parents are alive, but Destiny is not to be avoided. The famous inscription 'know yourself' at the entrance to the shrine at Delphi was designed to remind people that they were not the masters of their destiny, and that they should therefore be humble.

Most of the gods from the Greek pantheon, and the stories about them (often called 'myths'), were adopted by Rome. Original Roman religion was much less related to myths and tales, it was essentially domestic and civic, with cults offered to spirits of the home, of storeroom and fireplace, (Lares and Penates) as well as to each family's ancestors. Often the Romans had perhaps retained the names of older divinities but not the stories related to them. This would explain why the Romans often had a different name for the Greek gods.

In the following section, a few of the main characteristics of the most familiar gods are indicated. This was never a systematic religion; the same god had different characteristics in different stories or shrines. One attempt to systematize is reflected in the 'Olympian synthesis' found in Hesiod (see the section 'Titans' below) by which several gods are said to be the children of a single father and mother, Kronos and Rhea. The Olympian gods then overthrow their father and take power in an epic war that serves to remind us that the Greek gods were not thought to be almighty or eternal. Immortality could not preserve them from loss of power and ultimate oblivion. The story may in part reflect the process

by which the Indo-European pantheon replaced the gods worshipped in Greece before the Indo-European Greeks arrived; but it is also another example of the way in which the gods' experience of life is no different from than of humans. It is the awareness that the gods too are in the end limited that may explain the part of comic disrespect found in Greek and Roman portrayals of them, culminating in Ovid.

#### Zeus (Father Zeus) (Jupiter, Jove in Latin)

Originally an Indo-European god (cf. Germanic Ziu who gave his name to Tuesday and Roman Ziu pater Jupiter; also found in India). At first a god of the sky, of the power of thunder, he became a heavenly king in the royal age of Mycenae, at which moment various other figures were grouped around him as a royal family and court, located on the Olympos (a pre-Greek word meaning 'mountain'). Homer gave this image such poetic force that the Greeks accepted it just as they were abolishing kingship in their own societies.

Since he very quickly represents the growing monotheistic vision, Zeus is not usually involved in the ordinary things of life, but in the great issues, so that Hesiod puts Dike (personified Justice) at his side, and sees him as the protector of law and morality. Aeschylus gives this its highest expression, making him a god of sublime righteousness and power. The Stoics used his name for the highest power in their system (fire which is reason), otherwise the philosophers tended to reject the name with the aspects of personified deity against which their systems rose.

The myths echoed by Hesiod about the origin of Zeus as the child of Kronos and Rhea, his struggle against them and his fellow-Titans, the victory of the Olympian gods whom Kronos had swallowed, seem to have originated in Asia Minor.

#### Hera (Juno in Latin)

Originally a goddess for married women. As the "wife" of Zeus, she is shown as the mother of Ares, Hebe, Hephaestus etc., and as the furious punisher of her husband's adventures with other females, divine or human. She is the enemy of Troy in Homer, and thus of the Trojan Aeneas in Virgil; but she is shown helping Jason. She was one of the three involved in the Judgement of Paris.

#### Ares (Mars in Latin)

A god associated with the warrior spirit, unpopular and unloved in Greece, the second god in Rome after Jupiter! His character is shown as harsh, lawless, violent. Homer tells a story where he is the lover of Aphrodite, and not very clever, so that the other gods laugh at him when the crippled Hephaestus traps them together in bed with a magic net.

#### Poseidon (Neptune in Latin)

Always associated with earthquakes and the sea, shown in art holding a trident, he is one of the sons of Kronos in Hesiod. He is also associated with horses, he is the father of Pegasus, the winged horse. He is also the father of monsters, including the one-eyed Polyphemus whom Odysseus blinds in the Odyssey, so that Poseidon becomes his great enemy for much of the story.

#### Hephaestus (Vulcan in Latin)

Associated with fire, in Italy directly with volcanoes, in Homer he is shown as a smith, a craftsman and a magician, making Achilles' armour, the furniture in Olympos; he also made Pandora, the first woman, according to Hesiod. He was lame, but was very strong. There is a story of his being

thrown out of heaven, which Milton uses early in *Paradise Lost*. He is shown, allegorically and humorously, as the husband of the beautiful Aphrodite.

#### Aphrodite (Venus in Latin)

The goddess of love, in the sexual sense, associated with beauty and fertility; in art she is shown with majestic beauty in the fifth century, with charm in nude statues of the fourth. She was quickly used by poets to personify the powers of physical attraction, of sex. She is the mother of Aeneas by a human father, but Zeus tells her to keep out of the war. Stories about her marriage or (in Homer) affair with Ares also shows the ironic relationship felt to exist between love and war. She was awarded the prize in the Judgement of Paris. Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* tells the story of her love for Adonis, the beautiful young man killed by a boar. Originally this was probably a fertility myth, for Adon is Semitic for "Lord" (Hebrew "Adonai") and Aphrodite has connections with the Asian goddess Astarte.

#### Eros (Cupid in Latin)

Originally, and until Homer, not a god but a word for passionate desire, usually sexual. He is clearly, from the beginning, an allegorical personification, and this explains why there are many different stories about his birth or origin. Hesiod, looking for a cosmic force, made him powerful over gods and men, dangerous as the one who "loosens the limbs and damages the mind". He is usually associated with Aphrodite. Since the lyric poets were concerned with the psychology of love, they show him as cunning, cruel, the cause of sudden madness; but he is also a most beautiful young man, surrounded by flowers. Sappho calls him "bitter-sweet".

Hesiod's powerful, cosmic Eros appealed to Parmenides and Euripides, preparing the way for the discussion about Eros in Plato's *Symposium*. The Hellenistic poets enjoyed playing with the lighter side of the love-experience; Euripides is the first to mention Eros's bow and arrows, but the later poets develop the picture, at the same time as they diminish his stature to that of a saucy, provocative, playful little boy with arrows of lead and gold. This is the picture that dominates Renaissance poetry, always as a personification of the irrational confusion that "falling in love" brings. Although Eros/love is said to be "blind", this is rather to be seen as a game, the child enjoys being blindfolded.

#### Athena Parthenos (Minerva in Latin)

The patron goddess of Athens from Mycenaean times, so that she is shown wearing armour of Mycenaean form. She is celebrated as the patron of work, of skills, and so of wisdom. She has an owl beside her. In war she is nearly as powerful as Ares, but more committed because of her protective functions. Her temple in Athens on the Acropolis is called the Parthenon (Parthenos means Maiden). She is said in Hesiod to have sprung fully armed from the head of Zeus when Hephaestus split it with an axe.

#### Apollo (Apollo Phoebus in Latin)

Honoured everywhere in Greece, celebrated in the Homeric hymns. Always a prophetic god, especially associated with Delphi, he is shown in art as young and handsome, active in music, archery, medicine, law, justice, truth (so he is even said to be the father of Plato). His love for Cassandra, Priam's daughter, led him to give her the gift of prophecy, but when she then still refused his desires, he gave her the curse of never being believed when she spoke the truth. Someone who warns society of dangers and doom that people do not want to hear about, that person is still called a 'Cassandra'. Apollo is some-times associated with the sun (Helios).

The Delphic Oracle was the most respected religious authority in Greece, but so often spoke with an ambiguous voice, that Apollo too seems a dangerous figure. The shrine at Delphi, at the foot of

Mount Parnassus, was a place of sanctuary, and much treasure was also kept there. It was almost the only meeting-place for all the city-states. The oracles were given by a woman (Pythia) in a state of trance, and interpreted into messages by the priests. People coming with a question were obliged to be “pure”, not only by washing and sacrifice, but in heart, too. As they entered the shrine, they saw the inscriptions “Know thyself” and “Nothing too much”.

#### Artemis (Diana in Latin)

Thought of as the daughter of Leto, with Apollo her brother, and the child of Zeus, she is mainly the goddess of all the wild forests and hills, a huntress, but also dangerous to women, causing them to die suddenly. But she was also a goddess of fertility, especially through the great temple at Ephesus that was her main shrine (Saint Paul had problems there in the Acts of the Apostles), and although she herself was a virgin goddess she helped women at childbirth.

She was often identified with the Titanesses Hecate and Selene, the former the goddess of magic spells and ghosts, the latter the Moon goddess (in Latin Luna). Hence Keats’s “Dian, Queen of Earth, and Heaven, and Hell.” (To Homer).

#### Demeter (Ceres in Latin)

The ancient mother-goddess of the harvests (giving corn for bread). Already in the Homeric Hymn to her, her companion-daughter Kore or Persephone, in Latin Proserpina, has been carried off as bride by Hades, the god of the dead, to his home in the underworld. Since Kore had eaten there, she could no longer escape completely, she therefore spent several months each year hidden beneath the earth. This story was celebrated at Eleusis, where the Mysteries taught very ancient fertility rites.

#### Hades

A son of Kronos, Hades was lord of the Lower World, to whose home the shades of the dead go; he is grim and pitiless. He was often called Pluto(n) (the Rich One) and thus confused with the son of Demeter, Plutus, the source of wealth. This wealth was originally a good harvest of corn, but the link with the underworld in later times extended his power to such things as gold and silver.

The Underworld is visited in classical literature by Odysseus in quest of Tiresias, Orpheus in quest of Euridice, by Heracles in quest of the dog Cerberus, by Aeneas in quest of his father. Virgil’s Aeneid Book 6 gives the most detailed description of the geography of Hell. In the Plain of Asphodel, the ordinary “shades” wander pale. For the chosen few, there are the joys of the Elysian Fields, where they continue to enjoy activities they excelled at in life. Others, enemies of the gods, suffer the torments of Tartarus (falsely transferred to the Christian world-view as Hell). Any soul arriving in Hades is ferried across the river Styx (or Acheron) by the boat-man Charon. A coin was placed in the mouth of a corpse before burial, with which to pay Charon. Those unburied may not pass, their spirits cannot rest. Cerberus the hell-hound is on guard to prevent any return. Phlegethon, the river of fire, flows there too, Cocytus, and Lethe, the river of oblivion, at which souls drink before going for reincarnation.

#### Dionysus

Worshipped in a quite different kind of religion, from Thrace, ecstatic, in which women (maenads) leave home and go dancing and singing through the hills, possessed by the spirit of the god, in a primitive frenzy (orgy) at the height of which they kill a beast or a child and devour it.

Another form, from Phrygia, gives Dionysus the name Bacchus, a god of vegetation, especially of fruit, and so of grapes and of wine. He was a sleep-in-winter, rise-in-springtime god, and in art he is shown surrounded by Satyrs and Sileni (young and old men, active passions, fertility). He was said to have been born from Zeus’ thigh.

In Athens, the festivals of Dionysus (Dionysia) were the occasion for special songs and dances which developed into tragedy, first at the City Dionysia in Spring, to which people came from many parts of Greece, then at the Winter Dionysia, the Lenaea, when only Athenians attended. Dionysia then spread into many towns, giving them the occasion to stage their own dramatic performances.

## Pan

Very familiar because of his flute, the Syrinx (pan-pipes), and his goat-like appearance, Pan became the symbolic wild spirit of uncon-trolled Nature. He was able to inspire “panic” in sheep and humans, a sudden attack of irrational fear that sent them fleeing for no apparent reason. He was said to have appeared to the running Philippides, as he brought news of the Persian arrival from Marathon to Athens.

There is a Christian legend that at the moment Jesus died in Jerusalem, a voice was heard in Greece lamenting “Great Pan is dead.” Since ‘Pan’ also means ‘All’ the name Pan was occasionally applied to Jesus.

## Titans

Hesiod says that before the triumph of the Olympians led by Zeus, there was a race of Titans, the children of Gaea and Uranos, heaven and earth. Gaea emerges from Chaos, produces Uranos before uniting with him. The Titans include Hyperion and Phoebe, whose names are used to indicate sun and moon, as well as Rhea and Kronos, who are brother and sister but unite after Kronos has castrated his father Uranos and taken his place. Kronos was warned that he was fated to be overthrown by one of his children, so he swallowed them as they were born, only Zeus was hidden by his mother. Kronos later was forced to vomit up the others, there was a great war and the Titans were overthrown.

The most famous Titan (or son of Titan) is Prometheus, who seems to be a clever trickster in his actions. He is shown outwitting Zeus about the parts of the animal which men should keep in sacrifice, and the parts they should burn for Zeus (the men got the best meat, the gods got the bones and the fat). His most important action was the gift, or restora-tion, of fire to men. For this, says Aeschylus, he was chained by Zeus to a rock where an eagle ate up his liver for ever. In Aeschylus he becomes the model of defiance, the archetypal romantic hero. In most legends, Hercules rescued him.

Hesiod also tells how Zeus, to punish men for the sacrifice trick, asked Hephaestos to make the first woman, Pandora (= all gifts). Pro-metheus’ brother, not seeing the risk, married her, after which she opened the “Pandora’s box” she had been told not to touch, and all the evils of life flew out into the world, leaving only hope at the bottom.

## Personifications

Greeks, and other Indo-European peoples too, liked to have personifi-cations for all aspects of life. Among the main groups we find:

1) The Fates (in Hesiod named Clotho, Lachesis, Atropos) who spin, then cut, the thread of individual destiny.

2) The Graces who represent the charming qualities required in society. As three young sisters (Euphrosyne, Aglaia, Thalia) they are often re-presented in paintings, standing naked together in harmony.

3) The Furies (The Erinyes or the Eumenides, the ‘kind ones’) who bring punishment on those who harm their family, who murder their own kin, who neglect sacred duties. They are vital in Aeschylus’ Oresteia, where they are shown submitting to Athenian democratic justice, having pursued Orestes as far as Delphi (where those pursued could find shelter).

4) The Muses, from Hesiod onwards are pictured as the spirits of inspiration. He shows them living on Mount Helicon (his home) and bringing the poet theme and voice. On Helicon there was a temple to the Muses, and various springs there are famous for giving poetic inspiration: Hippocrene, Aganippe. Hesiod also gives the names of nine muses, later Roman writers gave them special functions: Calliope (epic), Clio (history), Euterpe (flutes), Melpomene (tragedy), Terpsichore (song and dance), Erato (lyric poetry), Polyhymnia (religious verse), Urania (astronomy), Thalia (comedy).

5) The Winds were personified as gods and worshipped by Greeks and Romans, together with other aspects of nature. Aeolus was the keeper of the Winds in general (whence the “aeolian harp” of Coleridge). Boreas the North wind and Zephyrus the West wind are already personified in Homer and these names are used in English poetry at least from Chaucer onwards.

6) The Dawn (Eos; in Latin Aurora, commonly used in English) is pictured by Homer in famous passages (“rosy fingered Dawn”) as rising from her bed of love, drawing back her curtain, then leaving her lover Tithonus while she drives the sun chariot across the sky. The sun is also personified as Helios, Hyperion, Phoebus.

7) During sleep, Morpheus sends dreams about human figures. Night, too, is personified, as is Sleep itself.

8) Strife (Eris) is the bringer of discord; her most famous act is the origin of the Trojan War. By rolling the golden apple (“apple of discord”) into the midst of the gods at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, Eris provoked the quarrel that was settled by the Judgement of Paris, in thanks for which Aphrodite gave him Helen. Strife was also seen by Hesiod as the fundamental active principal in nature, dividing where Eros brought together.

9) The Horae in Hesiod are personifications of fundamental social ideals: Eunomia (Good Government), Dike (Justice), Eirene (Peace).