

Greek Mythology

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Contents

1	overview	2
2	cosmogony: from chaos to the olympians	2
2.1	the primordials	2
2.2	the castration of ouranos	2
2.3	kronos and the swallowed children	3
2.4	the titanomachy	3
3	the twelve olympians	3
4	the underworld	4
4.1	geography	4
4.2	hades and persephone	4
4.3	judgment of the dead	4
5	the hero cycles	5
5.1	heracles and the twelve labours	5
5.2	theseus	5
5.3	perseus	6
5.4	jason and the argonauts	6
5.5	atalanta	6
6	the epic cycle: troy and the homecomings	6
6.1	the judgment of paris	6
6.2	the war at troy	7
6.3	the homecomings	7
7	myth as religion: how the greeks practised	7
7.1	sacrifice	7
7.2	oracles: delphi	7
7.3	mystery cults	8
7.4	the panhellenic games	8
8	tragedy and the reuse of myth	8
8.1	the house of atreus	8
8.2	oedipus	8
9	sources	9

1 overview

greek mythology is not a scripture. there is no canonical text, no founding prophet, no council that fixed the stories — only a sprawling, self-contradicting body of tales told and retold for over a thousand years, from bronze-age hymns to roman verse. the myths were the connective tissue of greek life: they explained the cosmos, named the gods you sacrificed to, decorated the temple you walked past, and supplied the plots of the plays you watched at a state festival. to read them as mere fairy tales is to miss that a greek farmer, athlete, sailor and playwright all lived *inside* this material.

*the greeks had no word for
“religion” as a separate sphere
— cult and story and civic life
were one fabric*

this page is a working reference: the genealogy of the gods, the olympian family, the underworld, the great hero cycles, the trojan war and its aftermath, and — because it matters most and is most often skipped — how the greeks actually practised all this.

2 cosmogony: from chaos to the olympians

the source text is hesiod’s *theogony* (c. 700 bce), a poem of roughly a thousand lines that organises hundreds of divine births into a single family tree. its deep structure is a three-generation succession myth: sky god overthrown by titan, titan overthrown by olympian, each transfer of power won by violence and secured by cunning.

2.1 the primordials

in the beginning, hesiod says, there was *chaos* — not disorder in the modern sense, but a yawning gap, an opening. from and after chaos come the first beings, unpartnered and elemental:

*the greek word khaos is related
to “chasm” — emptiness rather
than mess*

- **gaia** — earth, the broad-breasted, the fixed foundation of everything.
- **tartaros** — the pit beneath the earth, as far below hades as sky is above ground.
- **eros** — desire, the force that will drive all subsequent generation.
- **erebos** and **nyx** — darkness and night, who between them produce day and brightness.

gaia then bears, by herself, **ouranos** — the sky — “equal to herself, to cover her on every side.” earth and sky mate, and the second generation begins.

2.2 the castration of ouranos

gaia and ouranos produce the twelve **titans**, the three one-eyed **cyclopes**, and the three **hundred-handers**. but ouranos hates his children and stuffs them back into gaia’s body as they are born. groaning under the pressure, gaia forges a sickle of adamant and asks her sons for a volunteer. only the youngest titan, **kronos**, “crooked-counselled,” accepts.

when ouranos next comes to lie with gaia, kronos reaches out from ambush and castrates his father with the sickle. the blood that falls on the earth breeds the **erinyes** (the furies), the giants, and the ash-tree nymphs; the severed member, thrown into the sea, gathers foam — *aphros* — from which **aphrodite** rises off the coast of cyprus. sky is separated from earth, the world has room to happen in, and kronos rules.

*hesiod’s etymology: aphrodite
the foam-born — older than the
olympians and never quite
subject to them*

2.3 kronos and the swallowed children

kronos learns from gaia and ouranos that he too is fated to fall to his own son, so he improves on his father's method: he swallows each child whole as **rheia** bears them — hestia, demeter, hera, hades, poseidon. pregnant with the sixth, rheia hides on crete and delivers **zeus** in secret, handing kronos a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes, which he gulps down unexamined.

zeus grows up hidden, then forces kronos to vomit up his siblings (the stone comes up first — hesiod says it was set up at delphi as a marker). the stage is set for open war.

2.4 the titanomachy

the war between the olympians and the titans lasts ten full years and shakes the cosmos. the turning point is strategic, not muscular: on gaia's advice zeus frees the cyclopes and the hundred-handers from tartaros, where kronos had kept them chained. the cyclopes forge the thunderbolt and give it to zeus; the hundred-handers, hurling three hundred rocks at a volley, break the titan line. the defeated titans are bound in tartaros behind bronze doors, with the hundred-handers as their jailers.

zeus then faces one last challenger — **typhon**, a hundred-headed serpentine monster borne by gaia — and buries him under the thunderbolt. the succession anxiety is resolved cleverly rather than violently: warned that his first consort **metis** (wisdom) would bear a son greater than his father, zeus swallows her whole. the child already conceived, **athena**, is born instead from zeus's own head, fully armed. the cycle of overthrow ends because zeus literally internalises cunning.

power is then divided by lot: zeus takes the sky, poseidon the sea, hades the underworld; earth and olympus are common ground.

the succession pattern — sky god deposed by younger god — has close parallels in hittite and babylonian myth; the greeks inherited a near-eastern template

3 the twelve olympians

the canonical family portrait. “twelve” was a fixed cultic number but the membership wobbles at the edges: hestia, the hearth goddess, is sometimes counted and sometimes said to have yielded her seat to dionysos; hades, though a first-generation olympian sibling, keeps no throne on the mountain.

greek name	roman name	domain	symbols
zeus	jupiter	sky, thunder, kingship, guests, oaths	thunderbolt, eagle, oak
hera	juno	marriage, women, queenship	peacock, diadem, cow
poseidon	neptune	sea, earthquakes, horses	trident, horse, dolphin
demeter	ceres	grain, agriculture, fertility	wheat sheaf, torch, poppy
athena	minerva	wisdom, strategic war, crafts	owl, olive tree, aegis
apollo	apollo	prophecy, music, healing, plague, sun	lyre, laurel, bow, tripod
artemis	diana	hunt, wilderness, childbirth, the moon	bow, deer, cypress
ares	mars	war as slaughter and rage	spear, helmet, vulture, dog
aphrodite	venus	love, beauty, desire	dove, myrtle, scallop shell
hephaistos	vulcan	fire, the forge, craftsmanship	hammer, anvil, tongs
hermes	mercury	travel, trade, thieves, messages, souls	winged sandals, caduceus, lyre
dionysos	bacchus	wine, ecstasy, theatre, liberation	thyrsos, ivy, leopard, mask

a few threads worth pulling:

- **athena and ares** split war between them — she is the disciplined phalanx and the fortified city, he is the screaming bloodlust the greeks distrusted. in the *iliad* zeus tells ares he is the most hateful of all the gods to him.

- **apollo** is the most greek of gods — prophecy, purification, the lyre, the maxim “know thyself” carved at his delphic temple — yet he fights *for* troy in the epic.
- **hermes** is the boundary-crosser: the only olympian who moves freely between olympus, earth and hades, which is why he escorts the dead (“psychopompos”) and why lucky finds were called *hermaia*.
- **dionysos** is a late arrival in the reckoning of the poets but present already in bronze-age linear b tablets — the god of wine and the mask, whose festivals gave athens its theatre.

both dionysos and his mother's name semele appear on mycenaean tablets from c. 1250 bce — “late arrival” is a myth about the myth

4 the underworld

4.1 geography

the house of hades lies beneath the earth or beyond the western stream of ocean — greek geography of the dead is deliberately vague, but its rivers are firmly named:

river	meaning	role
styx	hatred, the abhorred	the boundary river; gods swear binding oaths by it
acheron	woe	the crossing where charon ferries the dead
kokytos	lamentation	tributary of wailing that feeds the acheron
phlegethon	burning	a river of fire circling the prison of tartaros
lethe	forgetfulness	the dead drink and lose all memory of life

the newly dead are ferried across by **charon**, who takes an obol as fare — hence the coin placed in the mouth of the corpse at burial. the gate is kept by **kerberos**, the three-headed hound who fawns on those entering and devours those who try to leave.

4.2 hades and persephone

hades — “the unseen one,” politely called plouton, “the wealthy,” since all things come from under the earth — rules the dead but is not death itself (that is thanatos) and not a devil: he is a grim, just, almost bureaucratic king who rarely leaves his realm. his single great myth is his marriage. with zeus’s connivance he seizes **persephone**, daughter of demeter, as she gathers flowers, and carries her below. demeter in her grief withholds the harvest until humanity is near starving and the gods are starved of sacrifice; zeus relents and orders persephone returned — but she has eaten pomegranate seeds in the underworld, and whoever eats in the house of hades belongs to it. the compromise: part of the year below with her husband, part above with her mother. the myth carries the agricultural year and, through the eleusinian mysteries, the greeks’ most serious hope about death.

the story is told at full length in the homeric hymn to demeter — the founding text of eleusis

4.3 judgment of the dead

three judges — **minos**, **rhadamanthys** and **aiakos**, all sons of zeus and just kings in life — assign the dead their places. the ordinary shadowy majority drift in the meadows of asphodel; the great sinners are staked out in tartaros as object lessons (tantalos forever reaching for receding fruit and water, sisyphos forever rolling his stone, ixion on his wheel, the danaids filling leaking jars); the blessed few go to **elysium**, the isles of the blest, where rhadamanthys presides and the earth bears fruit three times a year. it is worth saying that in homer even heroes fare badly: the shade of achilles tells odysseus he would rather be a landless labourer among the living than king over all the dead.

5 the hero cycles

between the gods and ordinary men stand the heroes — usually semi-divine, always mortal, worshipped after death at their tombs. the great cycles were localised: heracles belongs to all greece, theseus to athens, perseus to argos, the argonauts to thessaly.

5.1 heracles and the twelve labours

heracles, son of zeus and alkmene, is hounded from the cradle by hera (he strangles her serpents in his crib). driven mad by her, he kills his own wife and children, and the delphic oracle sentences him to serve his cowardly cousin eurystheus, who devises the labours:

1. strangle the **nemean lion**, whose hide no weapon pierces — he wears the pelt ever after.
2. kill the **lernaean hydra**, cauterising each neck-stump so the heads cannot regrow.
3. capture alive the golden-horned **keryneian hind**, sacred to artemis.
4. capture alive the **erymanthian boar**.
5. clean the **stables of augeias** in a day — by diverting two rivers through them.
6. drive off the **stymphalian birds** with a bronze rattle and the bow.
7. capture the **cretan bull**.
8. steal the man-eating **mares of diomedes**.
9. fetch the **war-belt of hippolyte**, queen of the amazons.
10. rustle the **cattle of geryon**, a triple-bodied giant at the world's western edge.
11. fetch the **apples of the hesperides** — holding up the sky while atlas fetches them.
12. drag **kerberos** up from hades, unarmed, and return him.

the pattern of the sequence is centrifugal: the early labours are peloponnesian pest-control, the later ones reach the ends of the earth and finally death itself. heracles dies in agony from a poisoned robe, but his pyre on mount oita burns away the mortal part; he alone of the heroes is taken up to olympus, married to hebe, and worshipped as a full god.

5.2 theseus

theseus is athens' answer to heracles, a hero rebuilt in the image of the city: lifting his father's sword and sandals from under a rock, clearing the isthmus road of brigands (each killed by his own method — prokrustes fitted to his own bed), and above all sailing to crete as one of the fourteen youths owed to king minos. there, with the thread given him by the king's daughter **ariadne**, he enters the labyrinth, kills the **minotaur**, and finds his way back out. he abandons ariadne on naxos (where dionysos claims her) and forgets to change his black sail for a white one — so his father aigeus, watching from the cliffs, leaps to his death in the sea that takes his

cult practice noticed the ambiguity — herodotus reports greeks sacrificing to heracles both as a god and as a dead hero

name. theseus becomes king and, in the athenian version, the inventor of the unified state; classical athenians treated him as practically a historical founder.

5.3 perseus

perseus, born of zeus and danae in a shower of gold, is sent by a scheming king to fetch the head of **medusa**, the one mortal gorgon, whose gaze turns men to stone. the gods equip him properly — hermes' winged sandals, hades' cap of invisibility, a mirror-bright shield from athena — and he takes the head by watching medusa's reflection rather than the thing itself. from the gorgon's severed neck springs **pegasos**, the winged horse. flying home he rescues **andromeda**, chained to a rock for her mother's boast, petrifies his enemies with the head, and hands it to athena, who sets it on her aegis. an old oracle is quietly fulfilled when a discus he throws at games strikes and kills his grandfather.

5.4 jason and the argonauts

jason arrives in iolkos with one sandal, as an oracle warned, and is packed off by the usurper pelias to fetch the **golden fleece** from kolchis at the black sea's far end. the voyage of the **argo** gathers the panhellenic all-star crew — heracles, orpheus, the dioskouroi, atalanta in some versions — past the clashing rocks and other trials. at kolchis the fleece is won not by force but because the king's daughter, the sorceress **medea**, falls in love with jason and betrays her father: she drugs the guardian serpent and flees with him, buying time by scattering the dismembered body of her own brother in the argo's wake. the sequel is the darkest ending any hero receives — when jason later discards medea for a corinthian princess, she burns the bride with a poisoned crown and kills her own children by jason, escaping in the chariot of her grandfather the sun. euripides' *medea* made this the definitive version.

5.5 atalanta

atalanta is the female counter-figure the cycles otherwise lack: exposed at birth because her father wanted a son, suckled by a bear, raised as a huntress and sworn to artemis. she draws first blood in the great **calydonian boar hunt** — meleager, smitten, awards her the hide, and the quarrel over that prize kills him. forced by her rediscovered father to marry, she sets the terms: a suitor must beat her in a footrace, and the losers die. **hippomenes** wins with aphrodite's three golden apples, dropped one by one for atalanta to stoop for — a race won by exploiting the runner's one covetous instinct. the couple later profane a sanctuary and are turned into lions.

6 the epic cycle: troy and the homecomings

6.1 the judgment of paris

the trojan war begins at a wedding. all the gods are invited to the marriage of peleus and thetis (the future parents of achilles) except **eris**, strife, who tosses among the guests a golden apple inscribed "for the fairest." hera, athena and aphrodite each claim it, and zeus — far too shrewd to decide — delegates the judgment to a trojan shepherd-prince, **paris**. each goddess offers a bribe: hera dominion over asia, athena victory in war, aphrodite the most beautiful woman in the world. paris chooses aphrodite, and his prize is **helen** — who is already married to menelaos, king of sparta.

helen's former suitors had all sworn an oath to defend her marriage — which is how one elopement mobilised all of greece

6.2 the war at troy

paris carries helen to troy; menelaos' brother **agamemnon** leads a thousand ships after her. the war lasts ten years, and homer's *iliad* covers only a few weeks of the tenth — the wrath of **achilles**, who withdraws from the fighting when agamemnon confiscates his prize-woman briseis, returns only after his beloved **patroklos** is killed wearing his armour, slays the trojan champion **hektor** in revenge, drags the corpse behind his chariot, and finally — in the poem's astonishing last movement — gives the body back to hektor's aged father priam, the two enemies weeping together over what the war has cost them. the *iliad* ends with hektor's funeral, not with victory.

the rest of the story lay in the now-lost poems of the epic cycle: achilles killed at the scaean gate by paris' arrow, guided by apollo, in his one vulnerable spot; the city finally taken not by force but by **odysseus'** wooden horse, left as a false offering and hauled inside the walls by the trojans themselves. the sack is remembered in the tradition as an atrocity — priam butchered at the altar, hektor's infant son thrown from the walls, cassandra dragged from athena's statue — and the gods take note.

6.3 the homecomings

the victors' returns (the *nostoi*) are the war's moral audit. agamemnon reaches home in a day and is murdered in his bath. odysseus takes ten years: the lotus-eaters, the cyclops polyphemos (blinded, he prays to his father poseidon, and that curse powers the whole poem), circe who turns men to pigs, the descent to the dead, the sirens heard from the mast, scylla and charybdis, the fatal cattle of the sun, seven years detained by kalypso. he lands on ithaka alone, disguised as a beggar in his own house, where a hundred suitors court his wife **penelope** — who has been unweaving by night the shroud she weaves by day. the bow only odysseus can string identifies him; the suitors are slaughtered in the locked hall; and penelope tests him one last time with the secret of their bed, built around a living olive tree. the *odyssey* is the *iliad's* counterweight: cunning against force, homecoming against glory, a poem that ends in a rebuilt marriage rather than a funeral.

7 myth as religion: how the greeks practised

the myths were not the religion; they were the stories attached to it. actual greek piety was a matter of doing, not believing — no creed, no church, no sacred book, but an unbroken web of ritual obligations to gods who were dangerous to neglect.

7.1 sacrifice

the central act was animal sacrifice, *thysia*: a procession to the altar (outside the temple — temples housed the statue, not the congregation), barley grains thrown, the victim's throat cut, the thigh-bones wrapped in fat and burned for the god, the meat roasted and eaten by the worshippers. the myths even explain the uneven split: at mekone, **prometheus** tricked zeus into choosing the bones dressed in appetising fat, leaving the meat for men — and zeus's revenge for that trick and the stolen fire was **pandora**, the first woman, with her jar of evils. sacrifice was the hinge of civic life: every assembly, treaty, battle and festival began with it.

hesiod tells the mekone story twice — sacrifice was important enough to need a charter myth

7.2 oracles: delphi

for decisions — colonise where? make war? cure this plague? — greeks consulted oracles, and above all **delphi**, apollo's sanctuary in the cliffs of parnassos, seat of the **pythia**. seated on the tripod over a cleft in the earth, the priestess answered

in the god's voice, her responses famously open to interpretation: croesus of lydia was told that if he crossed the halys river he would destroy a great empire, and did — his own. states kept treasuries at delphi, and the oracle sanctioned nearly every colonial foundation of the archaic age; it was the closest thing the scattered greek world had to a shared authority. the site was held to be the very centre of the earth, marked by the *omphalos* stone where zeus's two eagles met.

7.3 mystery cults

alongside the public cults ran the mysteries — closed rites promising initiates a better lot after death. the greatest were at **eleusis**, near athens, sacred to demeter and persephone: initiates walked the sacred way from athens, fasted, drank the barley drink, and witnessed things in the hall of initiation that it was death to reveal — a secrecy so well kept that we still do not know what was shown. the homeric hymn to demeter says plainly: happy is the one who has seen these things; the uninitiated has no share in the good below the darkness. orphic and dionysiac initiations made parallel promises, with tiny gold tablets buried with the dead giving directions through the underworld — drink from the pool of memory, not of lethe.

7.4 the panhellenic games

athletics was worship. the four great festival games — **olympia** (zeus), **delphi** (apollo), **nemea** (zeus) and **isthmia** (poseidon) — were religious occasions under sacred truce, and their only prizes were crowns of leaves: olive, laurel, wild celery, pine. the olympic games' traditional foundation date of 776 bce became the spine of greek chronology. victory was the nearest a living man came to heroism — pindar's victory odes routinely set the athlete beside the heroes of myth, and a handful of athletes actually received hero-cult after death.

8 tragedy and the reuse of myth

fifth-century athenian tragedy took the inherited stories and pressure-tested them in front of the assembled citizen body at the festival of dionysos. the playwrights almost never invented plots; they reweighted known ones.

8.1 the house of atreus

the curse runs four generations. **tantalos** serves his son pelops to the gods as a test. **atreus**, feuding with his brother thyestes, feeds him his own children at a reconciliation banquet. atreus' son **agamemnon** sacrifices his daughter iphigeneia to raise a wind for troy; his wife **klytaimnestra** nurses that grievance for ten years and axes him in his bath on the day of his return. their son **orestes** is then commanded by apollo to avenge his father — which means killing his mother — and is driven mad by the furies for doing it. aischylos' *oresteia* (458 bce) resolves the regress in the only place it could end: a courtroom. athena establishes the homicide court on the areopagos at athens, the jury splits evenly, athena casts the deciding vote for acquittal, and the furies are persuaded to become the “kindly ones” (*eumenides*) of the city. vendetta is transmuted into law — myth used to found the civic order watching the play.

8.2 oedipus

sophokles' *oedipus tyrannos* is the machine built from the oldest oracle-plot: laios of thebes is told his son will kill him, so the baby is exposed with pinned ankles; rescued and raised in corinth, **oedipus** hears the oracle that he will kill his father

and marry his mother, and flees the wrong parents. at a crossroads he kills a stranger in a right-of-way quarrel; he answers the riddle of the sphinx and is rewarded with thebes' vacant throne and its widowed queen. the play itself is pure investigation: a plague demands the discovery of laios' killer, oedipus vows to find him, and every step of the inquiry — conducted with relentless intelligence — closes the circle on himself. jokasta hangs herself; oedipus puts out his own eyes with her brooch-pins. the horror is not that the oracle compelled him but that every free, reasonable choice he made was the mechanism of its fulfilment.

aristotle's poetics treats this play as the model tragedy — recognition and reversal arriving in the same instant

9 sources

what we call “greek mythology” is a synthesis from texts of very different dates and aims; it pays to know which is which.

- **hesiod** (c. 700 bce) — the *theogony* is the nearest thing to a systematic account of the gods' origins; *works and days* adds prometheus, pandora and the five races of man. a boiotian farmer's voice, addressed by the muses themselves on mount helikon.
- **homer** (8th century bce) — the *iliad* and *odyssey* are the oldest and greatest greek texts, but they are epics, not handbooks: they assume the myths rather than explain them, and they fixed forever the personalities of the gods — quarrelsome, partisan, terrifyingly human.
- **the homeric hymns** (7th-6th centuries bce) — thirty-three hexameter hymns, not by homer, each honouring one god. the long hymns to demeter, apollo, hermes and aphrodite are the best narrative sources for those gods' cults and characters.
- **the tragedians** (5th century bce) — aischylos, sophokles and euripides survive in thirty-three plays; for many myths (medea's infanticide, the oresteia's ending) their versions displaced all others.
- **apollodorus** — the *bibliothēke* (“library”), a prose handbook of the 1st-2nd century ce wrongly attributed to an earlier scholar. dry, dense and complete: genealogies from chaos to the death of odysseus. much of what “everyone knows” about the myths is really apollodorus.
- **ovid** (43 bce - 17 ce) — the *metamorphoses*, a latin epic of some 250 transformation tales, witty, cynical and gorgeous. medieval and renaissance europe read its greek myth almost entirely through ovid — roman names, roman sensibility — which is why jupiter and venus feel more familiar than zeus and aphrodite.

hence the table of roman names above — most of the western artistic tradition runs through ovid rather than through any greek text

read hesiod for structure, homer for the gods alive, the hymns for cult, the tragedians for what the myths could be made to mean, apollodorus for coverage, and ovid for the afterlife of the whole tradition.