

Gods and Goddesses



The ancient Greeks wanted an explanation for the things in nature that they could not control, such as the creation of the world, the rising and setting of the sun, and the changing seasons. They believed many gods controlled the world. Before starting a new task, the Greeks prayed to the gods. If the task was something important, such as a sea voyage or a war, a sacrifice of food or animals was made to the gods. The Greeks also offered sacrifices to the gods when

things went wrong—they believed the gods were angry and that they needed to appease them.

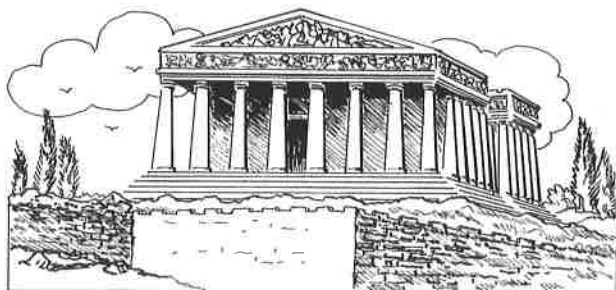
Zeus was the supreme god and reigned over the earth in his home on Mt. Olympus. He made his wife, Hera, jealous by falling in love with many mortal women. His daughter Athena was the goddess of wisdom and war. Zeus' son Apollo was the sun-god; and Apollo's twin sister, Artemis, was the goddess of the moon. Zeus' son Hermes was the messenger of the gods. Hermes could travel down from Olympus to earth and to the seas, ruled by Zeus' brother, Poseidon; and to the underworld of the dead, ruled by Zeus' other brother, Hades. The Greeks believed that gods and goddesses looked human, but were much larger and more powerful.

Greek Gods and Goddesses

When the Europeans we call Greeks migrated south to the Greek peninsula by 2200–2000 B.C., they brought with them a religion consisting of various gods and goddesses. How these deities behaved and interacted with humans had much to do with what was considered important to the Greeks in their religious practices.

According to Greek religion and myth, Greek gods were not far removed or remote. They were directly involved in the lives of human beings. They intervened in human activities, causing or allowing certain events to take place.

They gave help to people they liked and made things difficult for those they did not. Such gods were very human themselves, sometimes acting in keeping with seemingly human emotions.



Thus, it was important to stay on the good side of the gods. People performed ritual sacrifices to the Greek gods as a way of maintaining divine favor. Since Greek religion had few structures and systems, it did not have an organized priesthood. People performed their own carefully defined rituals and often sacrificed at home.

In addition to home-based sacrifice, the Greeks honored their gods by constructing beautiful marble temples which also functioned to show off the wealth of the city-state. Such temples became sites where people offered their wealth by giving gold, jewels, and other valuable items.

In such temples, priests and priestesses carried out rituals and sacrifices, often on behalf of the entire community or city-state. Animal sacrifice was common. Sheep, goats, cattle, and pigs had their throats slashed and their bodies burned, with the priests and others eating the meat.

Not only did the Greek gods act like humans, they were also envisioned as looking like humans. Therefore, the gods were thought of as strong, handsome, beautiful, young, or old.

The pantheon, or group of gods and goddesses, included many interesting deities. Above all gods was Zeus who ruled the heavens. He was often pictured as an older, bearded man, seated on a throne, and holding a lightning bolt. He was married to his sister, Hera, the goddess of women and marriage. Zeus's brother, Poseidon, was the god of the sea. In Greek art, he was usually pictured as Zeus, but carried a trident, or three-pronged fishing spear.

Additional gods and goddesses of the Greeks included Apollo, god of healing and music; Ares, god of war; Hermes, the messenger god; Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty; Demeter and her daughter Persephone, goddesses of fertility; Hephaestus, god of the blacksmith; and Athena, goddess of wisdom.

Athena was the patron goddess of the city of Athens (the city was named for her). The Athenians built a great temple to her and every four years held a special celebration called the Great Panathenaea festival.

The Greeks did not create a religion with a definite code of behavior such as the Hebrews had done with their Ten Commandments. However, Greek citizens were generally to act in a way that did not shame the community.

Review and Write

1. Why do you think the Greeks created their gods to look, act, and feel like humans? What problems may have been created by having gods and goddesses who could sometimes act selfishly?
2. After looking at the list of gods and goddesses noted above, draw some conclusions about what the Greeks held as important for their world.