Ancient Greece: The Birthplace of Western Individualism
By USHistory.org
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The ancient Greeks worshipped a variety of different gods and goddesses, many of whom remain part of modern-day popular culture. We can learn a lot about ancient Greek society by studying their myths and spiritual systems. This article explains the beliefs of the ancient Greeks, and what it reveals about their culture. As you read, take notes on the influence of Greek mythology in ancient Greece and modern Western culture.


Many of the fundamental elements of Western culture first arose more than 2,000 years ago in ancient Greece.

After conquering the Greeks, the ancient Romans spread Greek ideas throughout their empire, which included much of Europe.

All Things Human

The glorification of the human form and of human accomplishment defined ancient Greek art, philosophy, literature, and religion. Even their gods were created in the image of humans. The Greek gods had human emotions, looked like humans, and behaved more like people than infallible gods.

The Greeks’ emphasis on the individual is one major cornerstone of Western Civilization. Indeed, the spirit of individualism as defined by the Greeks is still alive and well in modern American culture and society.

1. “Western” is a term commonly used to describe things, people, ideas, or ways of life that come from or are associated with the United States, Canada, and the countries of Western, Northern, and Southern Europe.
2. Ancient Rome was a civilization that began on the Italian Peninsula as early as the 8th century BC. Located along the Mediterranean Sea and centered on the city of Rome, it expanded to become one of the largest empires in the ancient world.
3. Infallible (adjective): incapable of being wrong or making a mistake
4. Cornerstone (noun): an important quality or feature on which a particular thing depends
5. Individualism is a social theory favoring freedom of action for individuals over collective or state control.
Gods, Goddesses, and Heroes

The ancient Greeks were polytheistic — that is, they worshipped many gods. Their major gods and goddesses lived at the top of Mount Olympus, the highest mountain in Greece, and myths described their lives and actions. In myths, gods often actively intervened in the day-to-day lives of humans. Greek religion did not have a standard set of morals; there were no Judaic Ten Commandments. Myths were used to help explain the unknown and sometimes teach a lesson.

For example, Zeus, the king of the gods, carried his favorite weapon, the thunderbolt. When it rained and there was thunder and lightning, the ancient Greeks believed that Zeus was venting his anger. Many stories about how the Greek gods behaved and interacted with humans are found in the works of Homer. He created two epic poems: the Iliad, which related the events of the Trojan War, and the Odyssey, which detailed the travels of the hero Odysseus. These two poems were passed down orally over many generations.

A Soap Opera from Hellas

The Greeks created gods in the image of humans; that is, their gods had many human qualities even though they were gods. The gods, heroes, and humans of Greek mythology were flawed. The gods were highly emotional and behaved inconsistently and sometimes immorally.

The gods constantly fought among themselves, behaved irrationally and unfairly, and were often jealous of each other. For example, Zeus, the king of the gods, was rarely faithful to his wife Hera. Hera plotted against Zeus and punished his mistresses.

In addition to Zeus and Hera, there were many other major and minor gods in the Greek religion. At her birth, Athena, the goddess of wisdom, sprang directly from the head of Zeus. Hermes, who had winged feet, was the messenger of the gods and could fly anywhere with great speed. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, was the most beautiful being in the universe. Her brother, Ares, the god of war, was sinister, mean, and disliked. Poseidon ruled the sea from his underwater kingdom, and Apollo rode his chariot across the sky, bringing the sun with him.

Hades was in charge of the dead in the underworld. Almost all people went to Hades after they died whether they were good or bad. To get there, the dead had to cross the river Styx. Charon was the name of the boatman who ferried the souls of the dead across the river Styx to Hades.

Typically, the gods punished those who were bad. For example, Tantalus, who killed his own son and served him to the gods for dinner, was sent to Hades and made forever thirsty and hungry. Although there was a pool of clear, fresh drinking water at his feet, whenever Tantalus bent down to drink, the pool would dry up and disappear.
Likewise, over his head hung the most delicious fruit. However, whenever Tantalus reached for them, a wind would blow them just out of his reach. The English word “tantalize” derives from the name Tantalus.

The chart below features a list that includes some of the most famous gods and goddess in Greek mythology:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>God/Goddess</th>
<th>Important Attributes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zeus</td>
<td>King of the gods, Zeus killed his tyrant father Chronos; he is also the god of thunder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hera</td>
<td>The wife of Zeus and the goddess of fertility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poseidon</td>
<td>The god of the sea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hades</td>
<td>The god of the underworld</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hestia</td>
<td>A little-known goddess, a sister of Zeus, and the goddess of the home and hearth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronos</td>
<td>The leader of the Titans and the father of the Olympians, Chronos ate all of his children except for Zeus, who killed him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demeter</td>
<td>Goddess of the harvest and the mother of Persephone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apollo</td>
<td>God of the sun, music, and art; one of the most versatile gods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artemis</td>
<td>Goddess of the hunt, moon, and childbirth; the sister of Apollo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aphrodite</td>
<td>The goddess of love and the mother of Eros</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ares</td>
<td>The god of War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athena</td>
<td>She sprang full-grown from Zeus's head; she is the Goddess of wisdom; the city of Athens is also named for her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hephaestus</td>
<td>The god of the forge; thrown from the top of Mount Olympus by Zeus, Hephaestus is also crippled; the husband of Aphrodite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hermes</td>
<td>The messenger god; wears a winged helmet and winged sandals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persephone</td>
<td>The daughter of Demeter; Persephone was kidnapped by Hades to be his bride, and because she ate three pomegranate seeds, she is forced to spend three months of the year in Hades (This period of time is known as winter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dionysus</td>
<td>The god of wine and revelry; Dionysus had an enormous following throughout the Greek world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eros</td>
<td>The god of love; often depicted as a young child, Eros uses magical arrows to cause people to fall in love; known to the Romans as Cupid</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. **PART A**: Which of the following best states one of the central ideas of this article? [RI.2]
   
   A. The gods and goddesses of Greek mythology were created to teach humans to satisfy their individual needs.
   
   B. Greek mythology celebrated the greatness of individual human beings, using myths of humans defeating gods and goddesses.
   
   C. Greek mythology reflected how the world and human beings operated, teaching morality along the way.
   
   D. The gods and goddesses of Greek mythology are evil deities that commit horrific acts to teach humans to seek revenge when they are wronged.

2. **PART B**: Which TWO phrases from the text best support the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
   
   A. “The Greek gods had human emotions, looked like humans, and behaved more like people than infallible gods.” (Paragraph 4)
   
   B. “The Greeks' emphasis on the individual is one major cornerstone of Western Civilization.” (Paragraph 5)
   
   C. “In myths, gods often actively intervened in the day-to-day lives of humans.” (Paragraph 6)
   
   D. “Hermes, who had winged feet, was the messenger of the gods and could fly anywhere with great speed.” (Paragraph 10)
   
   E. “Myths were used to help explain the unknown and sometimes teach a lesson.” (Paragraph 6)
   
   F. “Almost all people went to Hades after they died whether they were good or bad.” (Paragraph 11)

3. What connection does the author draw between ancient Greek mythology and modern Western society? Cite evidence from the text in your response. [RI.3]
4. Which of the following is most likely the author’s purpose for including paragraphs 12 and 13 in the text?
   A. to show how Greek mythology has influenced Western language
   B. to highlight the most important moral lesson of Greek mythology
   C. to demonstrate the violent and irrational behavior of Greek gods
   D. to illustrate the human and superhuman traits in Greek mythology
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. What is your interpretation of the punishment of Tantalus, described in paragraphs 12-13? Do you think it indicates the presence of a cruel impulse among the ancient Greeks?

2. The author notes that Greek deities “behaved more like people than infallible gods” (Paragraph 4). What might this suggest about ancient Greek society?

3. Based on the text and your knowledge of historical events, how were the ancient Greeks similar to other polytheistic societies and cultural groups? How were they different?

4. The author notes that the ancient Greeks believed that many natural events of human life could be traced back to the gods; for example, they thought thunderstorms were the result of Zeus “venting his anger” (Paragraph 7). In the context of this article, who's in control: man or nature? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.