Lecture: “Greek and Roman Mythology”

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Class Webpage: <http://profjoe.weebly.com/grecoroman-myth.html>

1. Who are the Greeks?

Using the renaissance fresco “The School of Athens” by Raphael, we will first look at some of the important Greek thinkers:

* 1. Pythagoras: Important contributions to mathematics, music theory, and philosophy of education. He is shown in the picture teaching music theory to children.
  2. Euclid: Father of modern mathematics, his book *Elements* was used to teach mathematics well into the 19th century. His theories of logic and mechanics were also extremely influential.
  3. Heraclitus: A profoundly pessimistic philosopher who held the controversial view that “the only constant is change.” He thought that the actions of mankind were basically useless. His ideas led to the philosophy of the Stoics. He is one of the few figures in the painting who are alone.
  4. Diogenes: Famous for carrying a lamp in the daytime, searching to find “one honest man,” Diogenes’ philosophy pointed to the corruption and hypocrisy of society. He lived in a tub in the marketplace and ate only onions. Founder of the philosophy of Cynicism.
  5. Socrates: Plato's teacher, he was executed (forced to commit suicide) for "corrupting the youth" of the city. There are no published works in his own words. His ideas, especially in the field of ethics, live on in the writings of his students.
  6. Plato: Systematically denies the reality of the material world. His ideas profoundly influenced Western Philosophy and the metaphysics of early Christianity. Shown in the painting with his pupil Aristotle. He is pointing to the sky.
  7. Aristotle: Unlike his teacher, Aristotle is most interested in the real world. His writings cover almost every subject, including physics, metaphysics, poetry, theater, music, logic, rhetoric, linguistics, politics, government, ethics, biology, and zoology. He is shown in the painting pointing at the earth.

1. Why do these brilliant people have such a bizarre religion?
2. What are the stories of the Greek Myths? [Film: Jason and the Argonauts]
3. Where do the Greek Myths come from?

` A. Where do these stories come from?

* + 1. Archeological Evidence: Ancient ceramics and sculpture show that these myths existed long before they were written down. This is called the “oral tradition.”
    2. Earliest writings:
       1. The earliest written sources are found in two epic poems written by a person we call Homer. The titles of these poems are *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey.* These long poems tell the story of the Trojan War.
       2. Another early written source is *Theogony (The Origin of the Gods)* by Hesiod. It tells the story of the beginning of the world and describes the Greek pantheon in detail.
       3. Later poets and playwrights added important changes to the myths in their works. These playwrights include the tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides and the comedian Aristophanes.
       4. Historians, such as Herodotus, travelled around Greece and found alternative versions for the myths.
       5. Later, Roman sources adapted the myths and added their own elements, including new names for the Gods. Zeus for instance, is called Jupiter in the Roman tradition.
  1. What are they about?
     1. The stories of the Greek myths tell about events which actually occurred, so in a sense they are histories.
     2. Early religions. The first known inhabitants of the Greek peninsula were simple farmers, and their animistic religion assigned a deity to every facet of nature. Over time these nature gods took on names and personas.
     3. As later groups moved into the area they added their own deities to the pantheon, each group adding another layer of meaning.
  2. The Three Great Ages of Greek Mythology
     1. The Origins of the Gods: Tells about the creation of the pantheon.
     2. The Age of Gods and Men: Early stories about when men and the gods first met.
     3. The Heroic Age: Tales about the great heroes of Greek history. The gods are much less involved at this time.

1. What is the Greek Religion?

Here is a basic description of the Greek gods.

* 1. The Greek gods are anthropomorphic:
     1. They have the bodies of regular humans, except their bodies are perfect and they were immortal.
     2. They enjoy all of the things that humans enjoy, including eating, drinking, fighting and sex.
     3. They have all of the petty emotions and desires of humans: they are insecure, vengeful, scheming, and, in general, bad people.
  2. The Greek gods are constantly using their power to further their own selfish goals.
  3. The Greek gods care very little for the affairs of mankind unless they have some selfish reason for interfering, such as revenge or lust.
  4. The Greek people spent a lot of time and money trying to keep the gods happy.
     1. They built grand temples in honor of the most important gods.
     2. They gave sacrifices and gifts to the gods in the temples.
     3. They held annual festivals in honor of the gods.

1. What is the Pantheon?

There are eight classes of Greek gods. Note that some gods may fall under more than one category.

* 1. The Protogenoi: The First Born Gods. These gods, unlike the others, had no human form.
     1. Gaia: the earth.
     2. Pontos: the sea
     3. Also: the sky, the night, the day, etc.
  2. The Daimones and Nymphai: The Nature Spirits.
     1. Naiades: fresh-water spirits.
     2. Dryades: forest spirits.
     3. Satyroi: animal loving spirits.
     4. Tritones: sea spirits
  3. The body and mind affecting Daimones.
     1. Hypnos: sleep
     2. Eros: love.
     3. Phobos: fear
     4. Thanatos: death
  4. The Theoi: Gods.
     1. Theoi Ouranioi: The Sky Gods.
        1. Helios: the sun.
        2. Anemoi: the wind.
     2. Theoi Halioi: The Sea Gods.
        1. Triton
        2. Glaukos
     3. Theoi Khthonioi: The Gods of the Underworld.
        1. Persephone
        2. Hekate
     4. Theoi Georgikoi: Agricultural Gods.
        1. Ploutos
     5. Theoi Nomioi: Pastoral Gods.
        1. Pan
     6. Theoi Politicoi: The City Gods.
        1. Hestia
        2. Eunomia
     7. Theoi Olympioi: The Olympian Gods.
     8. Theoi Titanes: The Titan Gods.
        1. Kronos
        2. Prometheus
        3. Themis
     9. Apotheothenai: Men who became Gods.
        1. Heracles
        2. Asklepios
  5. The Olympian Gods:
  6. The Constellations.
  7. Monsters.
     1. Gigantes: Giants.
     2. Drakones: Dragons.
     3. Kentaures: Centaurs.
     4. Kerberos: Cerberos.
     5. Sphinx.
     6. Sirens.
  8. Heroi Hemitheoi: Men worshipped at being “almost gods” because of their heroic deeds and favor with the gods.

1. The Olympian Gods

These are the twelve ruler gods of the Greek pantheon. They became the ruler gods by defeating the Titans.

* 1. The Twelve:
     1. Zeus (Jupiter): King of the Gods. God of the Heaven, the sky, the weather, and fate. Symbols: the eagle and the lightning bolt. Zeus is actually a Titan by birth.
     2. Poseidon (Neptune): King of the Seas. God of rivers, earthquakes, and horses. Symbols: bull and trident. Zeus’s brother.
     3. Hera (Juno): Queen of Heaven. Goddess of the sky, women, marriage. Symbols: cuckoo and pomegranate. Zeus’s wife and sister.
     4. Demeter (Ceres): Goddess of agriculture, bread, and the afterlife. Symbols: pigs, wheat, and the grain sheaf. Zeus’s sister.
     5. Apollon (Apollo): God of music, prophesy, education, and medicine. Symbols: swan and lyre. Zeus’s son with Titanis Leto and Artemis’s twin brother.
     6. Artemis (Diana): Goddess of Hunting and Wild Animals. Symbols: deer and bow and arrow. Zeus’s daughter and Appollon’s twin brother. Virgin goddess.
     7. Athene (Minerva): Goddess of war. Symbols: olive tree and greek helmet. Zeus’s daughter with Titanis Metis. Virgin goddess.
     8. Ares (Mars): God of war and manliness. Symbols: serpent and spear. Son of Zeus and Hera.
     9. Aphrodite (Venus): Goddess of love, beauty, sex, and birth. Symbols: rose and dove. Born from the sea.
     10. Hermes (Mercury): God of farm animals, travel, athletics, language, thievery, good luck, guide of the dead. Symbols: hawk and winged boots. He is the son of Zeus and the nymph Maia. The messenger of the gods.
     11. Hephaistos (Vulcanos): God of metalworking.and fire. Symbols: donkey and hammer. He is the only god with a physical deformity: he is lame. He is the son of Hera with no father.
     12. Hestia (Vesta): Goddess of the home, family, meals, and sacrifices. Symbols: pig and kettle. Zeus’s sister.
  2. The Gods of the Underworld.

Two extra gods can be considered of importance to the Olympian gods:

* + 1. Haides (Pluto): King of the Underworld and death. Symbols: owl and staff.
    2. Persephone (Proserpina): Queen of the Underworld. God of the Afterlife, Spring. Symbols: owl and torches.

1. Where do myths come from?
   1. Scriptural Theory: The myths are themselves scriptures, and the stories are meant to be interpreted as literal truth.
   2. Historical Theory: All of the people in the myths were actual historical personae, with the added embellishments of the stories added on later.
   3. Allegorical Theory: The stories were fictional and meant to be interpreted symbolically and metaphorically.
   4. Physical Theory: The myths arose out of a very primitive worship of nature, with the “characters” (‘time’, for example) taking on human characteristics and forming personalities much later (time becomes Chronos)
   5. Mythography and archeological evidence.
2. What do the myths mean?
   1. Comparative Philology
      1. Collection and classification: The earliest studies of myths gathered stories from many different cultures and attempted to group them by type: for example, many cultures have stories about heroes making long journeys home.
      2. Social Function: Bronislaw Malinowski found that myths serve important social functions, such as the preservation of a cultural memory.
   2. Psychoanalytic Approach
      1. Freud: dream theory and contextualization of relationships. Freud saw in the myths many recurring motifs from his study of the subconscious, such as the son’s sexual objectification of his mother and subsequent desire to kill his father.
   3. Archetypal Approach
      1. Carl Jung: “Collective Unconscious”. Building on the ideas of the myth collectors and categorizers, Jung theorized that all myths had their formation in the subconscious. In this way he attempted to explain why the same stories appear again and again in cultures which could in no way have contact.

**Homework:** Choose one god from the Greek Pantheon and write a short description of him or her. Also, tell why you chose this god. We will discuss your answers in the second class.

Example: “Pan. Pan is the god of wilderness and shepherds. He has a man’s body and the legs of a goat. He is often shown playing the flute. I chose him because I like nature and music.”

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